

Between A Rock And A Hard Choice

1 Samuel 20 August 4, 2024

Have you ever found yourself in a no-win situation? The most famous, of course, is the Kobayashi Maru - an exercise given to Starfleet Academy cadets so they can experience fear in the face of certain death. Not sure how effective that is since everyone knows they're not actually going to die.

There are other no-win scenarios in the real world. For example, a Cornelian dilemma is when no matter *what* a person chooses, it will be detrimental to themselves or someone near them.¹

Maybe you're in what looks like a no-win situation, spiritually. Some circumstance, some choice, some relationship where it *seems* like you can't do what's right because it might not work out?

More generally, looking at the society around us, it's easy to think, "Ok, God has given me these principles and these values and these commands to trust in and live by, but if I do, I'm going to lose everything to this Godless culture."

When we have thoughts like that we should look to the examples the Lord has for us in His word.

1 Samuel 20 is a story of desperation. David is wracked by fear, worried that God won't keep His promises. Saul is plagued by paranoia, in full rebellion against God's will. The nation was in a precarious and dangerous position.

In the middle we have Jonathan, Saul's oldest son *and* David's closest friend. That seems like a no-win situation. Which side should he choose? *Any* choice he made would come with serious consequences. Neither party was really doing what they should, but Jonathan had loyalty to both.

But *because* he was Godly and faithful, and because he allowed his faith to dictate his actions, we will see the power of God working through his life and he is able to do the impossible - to fulfill his duty and navigate a no-win situation, helping to stabilize the nation along the way.

1 Samuel 20:1 - David fled from Naioth in Ramah and came to Jonathan and asked, "What have I done? What did I do wrong? How have I sinned against your father so that he wants to take my life?"

David was the hero of Israel. He was an army commander. He was also Saul's son-in-law. God announced He was going to give the throne to David because Saul rejected the word of the Lord. Because Saul was jealous of David and angry at God, he tried to kill David, but was unsuccessful time and time again. He tried all sorts of schemes, none of them worked because God intervened.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelian_dilemma

At the end of chapter 19, Saul sent 4 volleys of agents to go get David in Ramah, but each time when they got there, the Spirit of God came upon them and they started prophesying. It's one of the more comical miracles of the Old Testament. Don't say God doesn't like to have fun!

Despite God's faithfulness, David was afraid and he convinced himself that *eventually* God would let him down. So, he comes to Jonathan to plead his case and get some help.

1 Samuel 20:2 - ²Jonathan said to him, "No, you won't die. Listen, my father doesn't do anything, great or small, without telling me. So why would he hide this matter from me? This can't be true."

Jonathan wasn't right about his dad but he was *absolutely* right about David. He *wasn't* going to die. There were times Jonathan spoke prophetically, but he's not having a vision here. He just *believed* what God promised and he accepted God's will even though it was going to cost him. *Jonathan* is the crown prince. He should have the throne after Saul. But in chapter 18, Jonathan met with David and gave him his robe, his military tunic, his sword, his bow, and his belt. He knew what God had decreed and so he renounced his claim to the throne. He trusted God's way.

Jonathan was more concerned with his *spirituality* than his *success*. When we see him in 1 Samuel, he always has this mindset: What does *God* want? How can I be part of what *God* is doing?

1 Samuel 20:3 - ³But David said, "Your father certainly knows that I have found favor with you. He has said, 'Jonathan must not know of this, or else he will be grieved.' " David also swore, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you yourself live, there is but a step between me and death."

David was wrong again. There wasn't a *step* between him and death, there was a *Savior* between him and death. And the Savior used Jonathan as a shield for David in his time of need.

1 Samuel 20:4 - ⁴Jonathan said to David, "Whatever you say, I will do for you."

David came frantic and desperate. There's indication in the language that he really didn't speak to Jonathan like a friend.² But, in this moment of stress, Jonathan was full of faith in God. And God used him personally to minister to David. Jonathan didn't say, "Look, this really isn't my problem." He had a heart of compassion. He thought of himself humbly, as a servant. And God used him.

1 Samuel 20:5-8 - ⁵So David told him, "Look, tomorrow is the New Moon, and I'm supposed to sit down and eat with the king. Instead, let me go, and I'll hide in the countryside for the next two nights. ⁶If your father misses me at all, say, 'David urgently requested my permission to go quickly to his hometown, Bethlehem, for an annual sacrifice there involving the whole clan.' ⁷If he says, 'Good,' then your servant is safe, but if he becomes angry, you will know he has evil intentions. ⁸Deal kindly with your servant, for you have brought me

² Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

into a covenant with you before the Lord. If I have done anything wrong, then kill me yourself; why take me to your father?"

David was a great tactician, but his tactics would lead him into one of the darkest periods of his spiritual life. But we see, in this moment, he doesn't appeal to God for help. Instead ends with this manipulative and overly dramatic ultimatum: *Kill me yourself!* David's faith was faltering which led to him scrambling.

Despite the pressure and the manipulation Jonathan's faith is active. Now, walking by faith is going to put him right in the *path* of danger, but we'll see Jonathan is safe in the hands of God.

1 Samuel 20:9-11 - ⁹"No!" Jonathan responded. "If I ever find out my father has evil intentions against you, wouldn't I tell you about it?" ¹⁰So David asked Jonathan, "Who will tell me if your father answers you harshly?" ¹¹He answered David, "Come on, let's go out to the countryside." So both of them went out to the countryside.

Jonathan says, "Come with me." He wasn't afraid to be seen with David. He wasn't afraid to spend time with him. This is the man who is going to take *your* crown, *your* throne, and *your* position. But Jonathan did not allow jealousy to grow in his heart.

As Christians, we're called to lend our strength to help brothers and sisters who are weak among us. We're to personally encourage one another and build each other up,³ not tear people down.

1 Samuel 20:12-16 - ¹²"By the Lord, the God of Israel, I will sound out my father by this time tomorrow or the next day. If I find out that he is favorable toward you, will I not send for you and tell you? ¹³If my father intends to bring evil on you, may the Lord punish Jonathan and do so severely if I do not tell you and send you away so you may leave safely. May the Lord be with you, just as he was with my father. ¹⁴If I continue to live, show me kindness from the Lord, but if I die, ¹⁵don't ever withdraw your kindness from my household—not even when the Lord cuts off every one of David's enemies from the face of the earth." ¹⁶Then Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, "May the Lord hold David's enemies accountable." ¹⁷Jonathan once again swore to David in his love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself.

Jonathan believes God's promises. He takes up David's cause as his own. He trusts his future *not* to his own strength but to God's mercy. Why? Because of *love*. *Not* just a brotherly love. *Not* just a friend's love. *Not* a self-serving love. *Not* love that waits for the other person to do the right thing first. This is *God's* love. We know it as *agape*, but that's a New Testament word. The Old Testament speaks about God's *hesed* love. Jonathan uses that term twice here where we read "kindness."

³ 1 Thessalonians 5:11

Hesed is a covenant commitment of loyalty, compassion, and grace.⁴ Jonathan wasn't doing this because he and David were buddies, but because he made a covenant of active loyalty with him. His mindset was bigger than the here and now. Look at how he talks about their future. He says, "I may not even be around for the fulfillment of these things. But, if I'm still alive, show me mercy. Show my family mercy."

Jonathan had the *most* to gain from David's death. And he had the most to lose if David survived. But he surrendered his life into the plan of God because he believed that God knew best.

1 Samuel 20:18-24a - ¹⁸ Then Jonathan said to him, "Tomorrow is the New Moon; you'll be missed because your seat will be empty. ¹⁹ The following day hurry down and go to the place where you hid on the day this incident began and stay beside the rock Ezel. ²⁰ I will shoot three arrows beside it as if I'm aiming at a target. ²¹ Then I will send a servant and say, 'Go and find the arrows!' Now, if I expressly say to the servant, 'Look, the arrows are on this side of you—get them,' then come, because as the Lord lives, it is safe for you and there is no problem. ²² But if I say this to the youth, 'Look, the arrows are beyond you!' then go, for the Lord is sending you away. ²³ As for the matter you and I have spoken about, the Lord will be a witness between you and me forever." ²⁴ So David hid in the countryside.

"The Lord will be a witness." He knew the Lord was watching. He knew the Lord was with them. In the moment, David felt forsaken and alone. But Jonathan told him, "No, God is *still* in charge. He is *still* accomplishing His plan and He will *not* let your life fall through the cracks."

1 Samuel 20:24b-25 - At the New Moon, the king sat down to eat the meal. ²⁵ He sat at his usual place on the seat by the wall. Jonathan sat facing him and Abner took his place beside Saul, but David's place was empty.

Have you ever had a *really* uncomfortable meal with someone? Imagine the pressure of this dinner. There are the 4 seats. Jonathan is across the table, *facing* Saul. David's seat is empty. But Jonathan is *unafraid*. He does not hide or cower. He faces his father with confidence and courage, *not* because he plans to fight him, but because he knows the Lord is *with* him.

1 Samuel 20:26-27 - ²⁶ Saul did not say anything that day because he thought, "Something unexpected has happened; he must be ceremonially unclean—yes, that's it, he is unclean." ²⁷ However, the day after the New Moon, the second day, David's place was still empty, and Saul asked his son Jonathan, "Why didn't Jesse's son come to the meal either yesterday or today?"

The *first* day was a holy day and Saul knew that David was a devout follower of the Law. But the *second* day was *not* a holy day. You could eat that meal even if you were ceremonially unclean.⁵

⁴ *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*. Vol. 3.

⁵ Robert Bergen *The New American Commentary Volume 7: 1, 2 Samuel*

1 Samuel 20:28-29 - ²⁸ Jonathan answered, “David asked for my permission to go to Bethlehem. ²⁹ He said, ‘Please let me go because our clan is holding a sacrifice in the town, and my brother has told me to be there. So now, if I have found favor with you, let me go so I can see my brothers.’ That’s why he didn’t come to the king’s table.”

Was it wrong for Jonathan to tell this lie? Robert Bergen writes, “Jonathan *would* have to tell his father a lie, but not one that would violate either the letter or spirit of the Torah, since its purpose was to preserve innocent life.”⁶ The plan succeeded in revealing Saul’s true plans for David.

1 Samuel 20:30-31 - ³⁰ Then Saul became angry with Jonathan and shouted, “You son of a perverse and rebellious woman! Don’t I know that you are siding with Jesse’s son to your own shame and to the disgrace of your mother? ³¹ Every day Jesse’s son lives on earth you and your kingship are not secure. Now send for him and bring him to me—he must die!”

In his rage, Saul tried to use “three powerful motivators: shame, guilt, and greed.”⁷ He dangles the throne in front of Jonathan. How could he possibly choose to derail his own future? Well, Jonathan’s identity wasn’t tied to wealth, power, or earthly success. He life was about God’s will.

But this is a moment of decision. Saul says, “Bring David to me.” The Christian life is a life of decisions. There are many days when we’re able to just exist and live a regular life. But all of us will necessarily be brought to moments where choices must be made. Choices to either trust God or trust ourselves. Choices to do what is convenient in the short term or to do what is eternally right. Choices to follow the commands of God or to compromise with a raging world.

In those moments of choice we can step back and see that the world’s offer is not genuine. In this moment, Saul has no love for his son. In fact, he won’t even *call* him his son. He won’t use his name. This is all pressure to reject God’s will and instead try to gain something temporal.

1 Samuel 20:32-33 - ³² Jonathan answered his father back, “Why is he to be killed? What has he done?” ³³ Then Saul threw his spear at Jonathan to kill him, so he knew that his father was determined to kill David.

One commentator writes, “Since Saul’s son had chosen to identify himself with David, he must be treated like David.”⁸

When we walk by faith, we should expect to be treated the way Christ was treated. Jesus promised us, “You will be hated by everyone because of My name.”⁹

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⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Luke 21:17

Jonathan did not shrink. He boldly spoke the truth. He challenged Saul's wickedness with *words*. He didn't throw the spear back. He didn't rally troops to depose the king. He knew God was already accomplishing that plan and he was in step with what God was doing.

1 Samuel 20:34 - ³⁴ He got up from the table fiercely angry and did not eat any food that second day of the New Moon, for he was grieved because of his father's shameful behavior toward David.

The thing Jonathan was *most* upset about was not that he was almost killed by his own dad (again), but that his father was acting shamefully toward the Lord's anointed. What an amazing perspective Jonathan had! On his life. On what really mattered. On what should and shouldn't be done. It was all informed by his faith and trust in the Lord - his confidence that God's way is best.

1 Samuel 20:35-42 - ³⁵ In the morning Jonathan went out to the countryside for the appointed meeting with David. A young servant was with him. ³⁶ He said to the servant, "Run and find the arrows I'm shooting." As the servant ran, Jonathan shot an arrow beyond him. ³⁷ He came to the location of the arrow that Jonathan had shot, but Jonathan called to him and said, "The arrow is beyond you, isn't it?" ³⁸ Then Jonathan called to him, "Hurry up and don't stop!" Jonathan's servant picked up the arrow and returned to his master. ³⁹ He did not know anything; only Jonathan and David knew the arrangement. ⁴⁰ Then Jonathan gave his equipment to the servant who was with him and said, "Go, take it back to the city." ⁴¹ When the servant had gone, David got up from the south side of the stone Ezel, fell facedown to the ground, and paid homage three times. Then he and Jonathan kissed each other and wept with each other, though David wept more. ⁴² Jonathan then said to David, "Go in the assurance the two of us pledged in the name of the Lord when we said, 'The Lord will be a witness between you and me and between my offspring and your offspring forever.' " Then David left, and Jonathan went into the city.

Jonathan followed through on his promise. Once again, he invoked God as a witness. David runs off to escape the danger. But what does Jonathan do? He goes *back into the city!* Back to Saul, who had just tried to kill him. Why didn't he simply go with David? Because God had called Jonathan to stand beside his father. And so he returns in faith. This is amazing! He didn't have to.

Jonathan navigated this no-win situation. He was used by God to minister to *both* David *and* Saul like light in the dark. Like salt, he preserved life and held back the spread of evil.

It cost him a lot. But throughout Jonathan's story we see that he was fine with that because he knew this wasn't about a fight between his father and his friend. It wasn't about who gets to sit on an earthly throne for a few years. This was about walking with God, being used by God, and trusting that God knew what He was doing.

We live in a culture that is trying hard to make you hate people. Some group, some opponent. We're supposed to see them as unforgivable. Irredeemable. Worthless. Enemies to be destroyed.

But that's not the Christian calling. We're supposed to stand against certain ideologies and philosophies - the doctrines of demons. But Jonathan's example here is a reminder that the Christian calling is to follow Jesus and be in whatever position He places you. Jonathan didn't live in the mindset that he's either team David or team Saul. He acknowledged that God was bringing Saul down and raising David up. But Jonathan was really just on team Jehovah. And *that's* why he was able to navigate this no-win situation with integrity and effectiveness. That's why he could say, "David is going to be the next king," but then go back to Saul's court and give his life in defense of his father. That's what God asked of Jonathan. That was the unique position God placed him in.

That's how Daniel was able to be *friends* with Nebuchadnezzar. Or Manaen could be a close friend of Herod the tetrarch. Because God places His people not to destroy others but to minister to them.

God's desire is to reconcile and to sustain and to redeem. That doesn't mean He would overlook Saul's evil. But it means He would send people like Jonathan into these situations to be light, to be salt, to rise above the anger and the manipulations and the worldly perspectives and instead work *grace*. Grace is loving kindness to the undeserving. Saul did an unforgivable thing when he tried to kill his son. But there's Jonathan, back in place Monday morning.

Are you in a no-win situation? Do you feel like we're in a lose-lose culture? That's a great place to be if you're willing to walk like Jonathan. Because your life can become a conduit of world-saving grace. You can be the salty solution to a no-win situation.