

# Jonathan: Born *for* Greatness



SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week’s Study:** *1 Sam. 14:6–13, 24–46; 1 Samuel 18; 1 Samuel 19; 31:1–7; 2 Sam. 1:5–12; 2 Kings 6:8–17.*

**Memory Text:** “Jonathan said to his armor bearer, ‘Come on, let’s go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised men. Perhaps the Lord will intervene for us. Nothing can prevent the Lord from delivering, whether by many or by a few’ ” (*1 Samuel 14:6, NET*).

By all accounts, Jonathan should have been a spoiled, greedy, and selfish young man who believed that, as the child of privilege, everything was owed him. And why not? He was the oldest son of the first king of Israel. He was popular and well-loved by his people. He was an excellent public speaker and a top soldier and military leader. By the world’s standards, he had it all. He was born for “greatness.”

Heaven, though, uses a different measure for what’s great—and Jonathan, interestingly enough, was one of the few who was willing to turn his back on what the world sees as great and, instead, seek a different kind of “greatness”—God’s kind.

In the life of Jonathan, we learn to evaluate our lives through heaven’s eyes. What makes a life great? What makes it worthwhile? What are the important things in this world, and what aren’t?

Jonathan’s story helps answer these questions for us. It also tells us that if we choose, we, too, can be great in the eyes of God—regardless of where we were born, who our parents are, and how much wealth and talent we have.

*\*Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 23.*

## The High Office of Friendship

Friendship is unlike most other relationships, which often are legally regulated and controlled. In many cultures parents choose marriage partners for their children. Of course, none of us gets to choose our parents, siblings, and wider family relations.

However, we can choose our friends. Friendship crosses all frontiers. Friendship can influence other relationships, as well. Song of Solomon 5:16 shows us the role of friendship in a marriage relationship. True friendship is a completely voluntary relationship, which perhaps is why it is so binding. It does not involve meeting the letter of the law but focuses, rather, on giving ourselves.

**First** Samuel 18:1 describes the friendship between Jonathan and David. It says that “the soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as himself” (*NASB*). What characteristics of friendship are highlighted in Exodus 33:11; Job 16:20, 21; Proverbs 17:17; 27:9; Ecclesiastes 4:10; and John 15:13–15?

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Most of us would expect a mother to be prepared to die in order to save her child’s life or a man to protect his family at whatever cost to himself. These strong relationships are admirable, normal, and a reflection of God’s love for us. But this is an instinct that we share with many animal species.

Friendship is much more than instinct. True friendship must be nurtured by communication. Friends are there to help in all the challenges of life, not just to share the “fun” times. We can shape our friends’ present life and future through wise counsel, encouragement, and prayer for them. Jonathan shows these characteristics in his friendship with David. In 1 Samuel 20, Jonathan shows that friendship involves more than just talk; a friend is ready to give practical help, even at great personal risk. Jonathan often interceded for David with his father, King Saul (*1 Sam. 19:4*). Jonathan took the time and the trouble to find David when he was a fugitive and to encourage him in the Lord (*1 Sam. 23:16*).

**Have you ever betrayed a friend? Have you ever been betrayed by a friend? What lessons have you learned? What character traits do you need to change in you in order to be a better friend?**

## The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Samuel 1:6*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Recognize what God honors as great in Jonathan's style of servant leadership.

**Feel:** Cherish those attitudes of fidelity and friendship that Jonathan showed both his untrustworthy father, Saul, and the young man, David, who was anointed to take his throne.

**Do:** Practice servant leadership, whatever humiliation and challenges we may be called to suffer in the process.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Servant Leadership**

**A** Jonathan was a brave, capable, and God-fearing leader; yet, God chose a supporting role for him. How did Jonathan respond to God's assignment? What about Jonathan's response is great in God's eyes?

**II. Feel: Loyal Son and Friend**

**A** Jonathan supported both a failing father and a friend who was destined to rise to a greatness that Jonathan could not share. How would we feel under these circumstances? Despite these challenges, how did Jonathan demonstrate his unselfish love to God, father, and friend?

**III. Do: Suffering Servant**

**A** Christ is the greatest example of Suffering Servant. What circumstances might we face in which we are called to suffer as Jonathan and Christ suffered, giving our lives as a sacrifice on God's altar?

**B** How do we respond in both attitude and deed to the position of service God has called us to?

► **Summary:** By taking a supporting role with both his father and best friend, even to the point of suffering his father's fate in battle, Jonathan demonstrated the unselfish, loving devotion of a servant leader.

## A Great Victory

Israel lives in a moment of extreme crisis. The Philistines have assembled to fight Israel with chariots and soldiers that seem to be as numerous as the grains of sand on the seashore. The Israelite army is numerically inferior and very poorly equipped. Only Saul and Jonathan are said to have had iron swords or spears, for the Philistines tightly controlled the blacksmith industry. Indeed, all Israelites had to have their tools fixed or sharpened by Philistine blacksmiths (*1 Sam. 13:19–22*). Can you imagine the motley Israelite militia, equipped with sticks, axes, and slings, facing a vast Philistine army with state-of-the-art weaponry? No wonder Saul’s army had a record desertion rate.

**Think** about the true balance of power in our battles if we are surrendered to the Lord (*see 2 Kings 6:8–17*). What hope can we take from that account for ourselves?

Jonathan is not intimidated by what others think. He does not lament the lack of faith and trust in Israel. Instead, he determines to do something about it. Jonathan is not out to save the day, but rather, he knows that God is so much bigger than the problem Israel faces. Jonathan does not see himself as a type of savior or hero. He knows that God can save by any means He chooses, and so Jonathan makes himself available to God. God chooses to use Jonathan and his armor bearer; an incredible victory follows.

**What** are the steps that Jonathan undertakes before climbing up to the enemy outpost? *1 Sam. 14:6–13*.

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Sometimes the line between faith and presumption can seem very fine. Jonathan does not depend on his own impressions exclusively. He consults with another God-fearing person and shares with him his plans and ideas. Jonathan understands that God is not limited, and so he does not try to manipulate Him. Jonathan is willing to stay or go as God will reveal through the sign that he proposes. Finally, when Jonathan gets the go-ahead, he does not hesitate but immediately engages himself in the challenge.

**What are your own personal battles? How can you learn to trust God in these situations? How can you learn to trust God even when things don’t work out as you had hoped or prayed?**

## *Learning Cycle*

### ► **STEP 1—Motivate**

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** In the Christian life, faithfulness trumps “finishing first.”

**Just for Teachers:** Emphasize that we are called to seek a standard of greatness that may not match the world’s expectations, one that may not seem like greatness at all by worldly standards. We even may have to reject those standards explicitly, facing persecution and ridicule.

“Nice guys finish last.” “Greed is good.” These are just two of the maxims that have seemed to guide our thinking as society has grown less Christian and more Darwinian. The worst thing you can call someone is a “loser.” Yes, we penalize cheating. Or more precisely, we penalize getting caught cheating. Sometimes we vilify winners who are too odd and unpleasant. But we really hate and punish failure, which can be defined as “failure to grab all you can.”

So in light of this, what do we call someone who is born into royalty, has intelligence, good looks, talent, charisma, leadership qualities, military genius, and an indisputable title to the throne (if that person should choose to claim it)? Clearly one of life’s winners, someone you would want to know. Maybe some of it might just rub off on you, or perhaps you could at least get some valuable “access” or “face time.”

But wait! What do you call that person if he or she is so honest and pure that he or she angers his or her ruthless, slightly unstable father and has to hide in the woods with a shepherd? And what if this person acknowledges, too, that this shepherd is really the one with the right to the throne?

Sounds like the plot twists in a pulp-fiction adventure novel? No. It’s the story of King Saul’s son, Jonathan, and his best friend, David—the future king, and the one through whom the Messianic line was founded.

**Discuss With the Class:** Most of the time we would agree that one has a right to achieve as much as he or she can in the world. But as Christians, we implicitly recognize that this isn’t the highest value. How can we recognize when God is calling us to something else?

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## Parent-Child Relationship

**Read 1 Samuel 19:1–7.** How would you describe the relationship between Jonathan and Saul? What kind of conflict does Jonathan face between loyalty to his own father and loyalty to a friend?

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Exactly what type of father Saul was when Jonathan was a child we do not know, but we do know that in later life Saul was not someone to look up to. Saul was very selfish, moody, jealous, irrational, and at times neurotic. Jonathan, however, gives evidence in his life and relationship to his father of a practical application of the command given in Exodus 20:12, which tells us to honor our parents.

**Read 1 Samuel 14:24–46.** How could Jonathan, had he wanted, used this incident as an excuse to stop honoring his father? Have not people turned on their own parents for less? What does this tell us about the kind of person Jonathan was?

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Honoring our parents means a lot more than an occasional card or gift. Jonathan stands by his father in his time of crisis; he stands by him, too, despite what his father wanted to do to him.

We, too, honor our parents when we stand by them in times of crisis, such as illness or the loss of a job. We have a biblical obligation to support our parents emotionally and also materially (*see 1 Tim. 5:8*). Honoring our parents is not a subjective, passive activity. Jonathan demonstrates that this often involves giving respectful yet sound advice. Honoring our parents does not mean suspending our own judgment or defending our parents' errors, nor blindly following or condoning evil. It does mean, though, that we have special obligations to them, regardless of the kind of people they might be.

**Following the example of Jonathan, what practical things can you do to improve your relationship with your parents, siblings, or other family members, especially if they are not believers?**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED► **STEP 2—Explore****Bible Commentary****I. “Nothing Can Prevent the Lord From Delivering . . .”** (Review 1 Samuel 14:1–13 with your class.)

Today we hear a lot about genetics and environment as they shape and influence human behavior. Nature or nurture? By either measure, Jonathan was doomed. Saul was indecisive—except when he made the wrong decision, as in 1 Samuel 13:8–12. He took credit for others’ accomplishments, as when he “allowed” people to think that the attack on the garrison at Gibeah was his (1 Sam. 13:4). He blamed others for his failures with a facility not seen since the early chapters of Genesis (*vs. 11*). And he later showed himself to have what would be recognized today as a mental illness caused by severe biochemical imbalances.

Jonathan easily could have followed his father’s example. What choice did he have, after all? The same choice we all have. The choice to rely on God rather than himself and to rely on God to make up for the shortcomings we may have inherited from a fallen nature or from flawed nurture.

**Consider This:** Given that Saul really was not competent to be king, why do you think God would not have chosen to pass the kingship on to Jonathan, who clearly was competent and displayed the qualities necessary for kingship?

**II. Attack on Gibeah** (Review 1 Samuel 14:1–14 with your class.)

In this chapter, we once again see Jonathan taking the initiative. The author obviously wants us to know that this took place without Saul’s knowledge or that of anyone else in his camp (*vss. 1, 3*).

Why? Perhaps Saul and the other Israelites weren’t really ready to commit themselves to the “national liberation struggle.” We can see a hint of that point of view in 1 Samuel 13:4, in which it is said that the attack on the garrison made Israel an abomination—literally, “a stench”—to the Philistines, whereas before they had been a harmless object of Philistine aggression. At first, Israel’s reaction to the attack was adulation. It quickly became naked fear when it became clear there were plenty of Philistines left.

Also, Jonathan’s mission could have seemed legitimately foolhardy.

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## Taking Second Place

One of the main trends in current society is to blame one's parents for most (if not all) problems in life. To be sure, some folk do carry a lot of heavy emotional baggage from their parents. We can't deny that fact.

However, it seems that the past decades have seen an incredible increase in this unfortunate tendency. We blame not only our parents but sometimes siblings, teachers, circumstances—anything or anyone else in order to avoid taking responsibility for our own circumstances.

Though we all are subjected to, and even victims of, circumstances beyond our control, Jonathan's life shows us that we can work through them, at least to some degree. Jonathan would have had a right to blame his father for most of his troubles. If Saul had been faithful, then Jonathan would have had the throne. Jonathan chooses not to play the blame game, though. Jonathan has a good sense of self-worth. Instead of letting himself become bitter and resentful, he trusts that God knows best, and so Jonathan chooses to do what he can with what he has. It probably was not easy for Jonathan to maintain this faith and trust in God when he realized that God had chosen David, rather than him, to become the next king.

**Describe** Jonathan's reaction to the fact that David will be king in his stead. What does this tell us about Jonathan? *1 Sam. 23:17.* Contrast his attitude to those displayed in *Isaiah 14:13, 14;* *1 Kings 1:5;* and *Mark 10:35–37.* What is the difference?

When we have our identity secure in God, we are able to face rejection or criticism without being devastated or losing our sense of self-worth. A big part of having our own identity secure in God involves our experience and relationship with Him. Jonathan had already had a dramatic personal experience with God in his victory over the Philistines in 1 Samuel 14.

The later story of David's family is marked by rebellions and internal strife. Absalom and Adonijah both seek to usurp the throne from their father, David. They are unwilling to allow God to choose the new king. Jonathan's attitude stands in total contrast to this "I" spirit. He is willing to take second place. He tries to inspire harmony and reconciliation between his father and his friend David (*1 Sam. 19:4*). He truly stands as an example of a servant leader prepared to take second or even third place.

**Use Jonathan as an example to determine what you can do when you don't get the job, position, or respect you feel that you are entitled to. How can you control feelings of rejection, envy, and hate?**



Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Jonathan was not only a member of the royal family; he was possibly the most able general in the Israelite army.

So, how do we know that Jonathan was not merely impulsive and reckless? First, Jonathan placed his confidence in God, not his military skills. In fact, he was ready to give up and walk away (*1 Sam. 14:9, 10*) if it was clear that the Lord was not with him. When it became clear that the Lord was with him, he and his armor bearer proved able to do what an entire army was afraid even to talk about.

**Consider This:** The story told in 1 Samuel 13 and 14 suggests that Saul and the other Israelites were ambivalent about challenging the status quo. They were afraid of being a “stench” to the Philistines.

How often are we satisfied with the status quo in our spiritual lives? Is our Christianity the kind that doesn’t challenge or make other people uncomfortable? Does it ever motivate us to confront our own fears or preferences? In a culture in which Christianity often is synonymous with “niceness,” are we terrified that other people might dislike us for living our Christianity?

### III. “As His Own Soul . . .” (*Review 1 Samuel 18:1 with your class.*)

God’s love for us and vice versa is a form of friendship. First, it is voluntary. There is no reason that God is required to love us. As a bilateral relationship, it requires nurturing and communication, at least on our part. Our friendship with God—at least in its ideal state—presupposes a commonality of interests and goals. We ask and seek for His will to be done, as seen in the Lord’s Prayer. Conversely, God tries to fulfill our sanctified goals and desires. We speak of Christ being in us—or of ourselves as being in Christ, just as David and Jonathan are described as being of one soul. The difference is that human friendship always can fall to human weaknesses. But God’s friendship never leaves us.

**Consider This:** How has God built the need for friendship and companionship into the human condition?

## ► STEP 3—Apply

### Thought Questions:

- 1 Jonathan definitely satisfied worldly criteria for greatness. He was born

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## When Life Isn't Fair

**Read** 1 Samuel 31:1–7 and 2 Samuel 1:5–12. What kind of end did Jonathan have? How do we understand this?

Most of us have been taught that good always wins in the end and that we reap what we sow. We often take this further and believe that a good person should have a good, long life and that a bad person can expect a troubled, short life. And while we know that good will win over evil in the end when Jesus comes again, the reality of the matter is that good people do not always get good in this life and that bad people do not always get bad. Sometimes we even are punished for doing the right thing. God does often step in and miraculously save and protect His children, but this is not always the case.

**Who** are some Bible characters who, though faithful, did not get what they deserved? *Gen. 39:10–20, Job 1, 2.*

Jonathan had been a true and faithful friend to David. He was a negotiator and tried his best to bring peace between David and Saul. Jonathan was not proud and was willing to give up his right to the throne. He was just as willing to accept David as king. He was also a good son. God had used Jonathan before to put a whole army on the run, and now the Israelite army once again faced the Philistines. Perhaps Jonathan wondered if God would once again perform a miracle to save Israel. Jonathan would fall that day on the battlefield (*1 Sam. 31:2*).

Like John the Baptist, Jonathan is an example of those who do not get what they seem to deserve now. They often suffer, lose positions of honor for the sake of Christ, and sometimes even fall at their post of duty. However insignificant or even useless their lives and sacrifices may appear, they are nonetheless key players in God's plans. They are motivated and sustained by Jesus' love and presence. They are born for greatness—not necessarily the kind of greatness that the world understands or portrays but a greatness that goes way beyond our human concepts and expectations.

So much happens that doesn't, from our perspective, make sense or seem fair. The promise, however, is that one day all things will be made right, and we will have answers to what now seems so unfathomable.

**Read** 1 Corinthians 4:5, 13:12, Romans 8:28, and Revelation 21:4. What hope can you draw from these passages as we face difficult questions, not just for Bible characters but perhaps for ourselves, in the struggles and trials that, at least for now, do not always have happy endings?

*Learning Cycle* CONTINUED

to royalty, he had charisma and leadership ability, and he had the personal character and integrity that made others want to trust him and follow him. But not everyone with these qualities lives up to his or her potential in God's eyes. What do you think distinguished Jonathan in God's point of view?

**2** Jonathan was one of the relatively few Old Testament figures who lived an exemplary life and yet met the most ignominious end. Why would this happen? How did his choices impact his future? Discuss the reasons for your answer. How do you think he would have been viewed if he had taken another course of action that might have led to a different result? Keep in mind that this most likely would have meant abandoning Saul to his fate.

**Application Question:**

One of the most distinctive characteristics of Jonathan was his humility, even though he had every reason to be conceited. Early on, he attributed his military successes to God, not his own prowess, although certainly his prowess had something to do with it. He did what he could to help David survive, even though he knew that David's survival meant he could never become king. And he ultimately put his loyalty to his profoundly underserving father above life itself. How does this humility exemplify the ideal attitude we should have toward Christ, who is infinitely more deserving than either David or Saul?

**► STEP 4—Create**

**Just for Teachers:** The following activity is meant to emphasize the qualities of true greatness—greatness as God measures it—rather than the qualities that make a person “celebrated” in the human scale of values.

**Activity:** Bring posters or photos of well-known personalities from the news, entertainment, or sports. Put them on the walls before class members begin to walk in.

If possible, avoid commenting on the pictures. Go through the initial part of your class as usual.

When time comes to get into the activity, point to one of the photos or posters and ask why that given individual is so well known. Next, why might people admire him or her? Finally, what is genuinely good about these qualities, and what is not? How would these qualities be manifested in a godly context?

Alternatively, to do this exercise without pictures, ask class members to name famous persons they admire. Then ask them the questions listed above.

**Further Study:** “On the record of those who through self-abnegation have entered into the fellowship of Christ’s sufferings, stand—one in the Old Testament and one in the New—the names of Jonathan and of John the Baptist.

“Jonathan, by birth heir to the throne, yet knowing himself set aside by the divine decree; to his rival the most tender and faithful of friends, shielding David’s life at the peril of his own; steadfast at his father’s side through the dark days of his declining power, and at his side falling at the last—the name of Jonathan is treasured in heaven, and it stands on earth a witness to the existence and the power of unselfish love.

“John the Baptist, at his appearance as the Messiah’s herald, stirred the nation. From place to place his steps were followed by vast throngs of people of every rank and station. But when the One came to whom he had borne witness, all was changed. The crowds followed Jesus, and John’s work seemed fast closing. Yet there was no wavering of his faith. ‘He must increase,’ he said, ‘but I must decrease.’ John 3:30.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, pp. 156, 157.

### Discussion Questions:

- ① How do we differentiate between faith and presumption? When and how do we go about asking for signs in order to know God’s will for us?
- ② Some cultures promote passiveness as a virtue, while others see it as something negative. Jonathan was willing to take second place. Is this the same as being passive? Should a Christian be passive? If so, when? If not, why not?
- ③ How can you explain to a non-Christian friend the benefits of being a Christian if he or she sees that you too get sick, lose your job, or suffer the loss of loved ones?
- ④ Discuss the life of Jonathan in the light of Hebrews 11:32–40. What can you take away from those texts that perhaps could help you in situations that, at least from your perspective now, have dismal outcomes?
- ⑤ How does, for instance, a woman who had been sexually molested by her father show honor to him? What about physically abusive parents? How are we to respond to the command to honor them?
- ⑥ What are things that the world deems “great” that God doesn’t? What are things that God deems great that the world doesn’t? How can we know the difference between these two ideas of “greatness”?