

# David—the man after God’s own heart

John Mitchell

## 5. The two princesses

**A**LTHOUGH SAUL was not yet inclined to promote David to a princely position via marriage to one of his daughters, he was nevertheless so impressed by both the bravery and the outstanding abilities of this young man that he decided, in the form of a command, to have him at court alongside his own son Jonathan. And thus began a relationship between these two that for mutual respect and friendship is unequalled anywhere in Scripture. It surpassed the relationship between a man and a woman, because it was not sexual, being not of the flesh but of the spirit. Its results in the life of Jonathan, the older man, will be seen as the story unfolds in the stark contrast between his behaviour and that of Saul.

Until this point, Saul does not appear to have recognised young David as the man after God’s own heart, destined, according to Samuel’s prophecy, to replace him as king. He was merely a brave warrior and leader of men, useful to him in the constant forays that were needed to keep the Philistines at bay. With Jonathan, things were different; for, whilst remaining loyal, and a good son to his errant father, he recognised that the Spirit of the Lord had come upon David. In deference to this he went so far as to invest him with his distinctive robe, and to give him his own sword, bow and girdle that he had worn and used in his famous victory over the Philistine garrison at Michmash.

### Tricky circumstances

Meanwhile, David, recognising his own delicate position, obeyed implicitly the king’s commands as Saul promoted him and set him over the men of war. In his attitude towards Saul, David was anticipating the way the Apostle Paul urged all believers to serve their masters, whether good or bad, as they would serve the Lord. David’s wise behaviour led to his advancement “in the sight

of all the people, and also in the sight of Saul’s servants” (1 Sam. 18:5, AV).<sup>1</sup> Herein lay a growing problem for the king, because David, as a result of his prowess in battle with the Philistines, was rapidly becoming a national hero.

Matters came to a head when both the king and David were particularly successful in a joint engagement with the Philistines that prompted an outpouring of rejoicing on their return. The women came out of all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and tambourines, and lutes. And as they danced they sang,

“Saul has slain his thousands,  
and David his tens of thousands.”

When he heard it, Saul’s brow darkened. He became very angry; the refrain galled him. It was a turning point in the relationship between him and David from which it never recovered. So this upstart, he realised, was the one of whom Samuel had prophesied! “They have credited David with tens of thousands;” he thought, “but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?” From that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David.

### Deteriorating relationships

The very next day, while Saul was mulling over what had happened, he suffered a recurrence of that injurious spirit from the Lord that caused him to express his general bitterness prophetically, and he required the presence of David playing on the harp to allay it. This time, however, the remedy did not work; rather was the malady made worse by the attendance of the very man who was the

---

1. The narrative closely follows the account in 1 Samuel 18 and 19. Quotations from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

culprit in Saul's eyes. So the spirit in Saul changed from merely sullen to murderous, and he suddenly hurled at David the small spear that he customarily held in his hand as the sign of his authority, saying to himself as he did so, "I'll pin David to the wall." But David saw it coming, and moved out of the way. Then, it appears, he actually went on playing for the king, on either that or another occasion, as if nothing had happened; and it was only when Saul launched the missile a second time—and missed once more—that David finally withdrew.

By this time Saul was becoming increasingly afraid of David because the Lord was with him, and he sent him away from court and gave him command over a thousand men to carry on the campaign against the Philistines. But that only made things worse from Saul's point of view, because David, in everything that he did, met only with success, and all Israel and Judah loved him the more for it.

So Saul tried another stratagem. He suddenly recalled his vow to give whoever fought with Goliath the hand in marriage of one of his princesses. Now was the opportunity to offer it to David and thereby expose him to mortal danger in battle against the Philistines. Saul said to David, "Here is my elder daughter Merab. I will give her to you in marriage; only serve me bravely and fight the battles of the LORD." To himself, however, the old hypocrite said, "I will not raise a hand against him. Let the Philistines do that!"

### **An unspoken love story?**

No intimation is given in Scripture as to the feelings of Merab, or indeed of David, in the proposal, no doubt on the basis that princesses in those days were little more than chattels handy for the service of the state. Certainly David was wary of it, irrespective of his feelings towards the princess. "Who am I," he said to Saul, "and what is my family or my father's clan in Israel, that I should become the king's son-in-law?" Thus far, then, Saul's stratagem had failed. And poor Merab, whatever her merits or demerits, was given instead to Adriel of Meholah, to whom she bore five sons, all of whom died as a result of one of Saul's later acts of folly (2 Sam. 21:8,9).

But a new way of enabling Saul to pursue his tactics with David came when he learned that Michal, another of his daughters, had fallen in love with the young warrior. Pleased, and unscrupulous as ever, the king decided to give

her to him "so that she may be a snare to him and so that the hand of the Philistines may be against him." Saul said to David, "Now you have a second opportunity to become my son-in-law," and he ordered his attendants to speak to David to express the case privately, saying, "Look, the king is pleased with you, and his attendants all like you; now become his son-in-law." David, however, again pleaded his inferior status for such an honour. "Do you think it is a small matter to become the king's son-in-law? I am only a poor man and little known."

When the attendants reported David's reply to Saul, he told them, "Say to David, 'The king wants no other price for the bride than a hundred Philistine foreskins, to take revenge on his enemies.'" It was the same old plan to have David killed in close-quarter fighting, but this time within a set period to increase the danger and tempt him to foolhardiness. Nevertheless David had now had second thoughts on the prospect of becoming Saul's son-in-law—which seems to suggest that Michal's sentiments were being reciprocated, and that David had fallen in love with her.

### **Willing to pay the price**

Cheerfully, then, he set off on the gruesome task required of him, accompanied by a seasoned group of warriors of his own. To the modern reader, the whole business of the bride-price required and the manner of obtaining it is distasteful and barbaric, but the enterprise has to be seen against the practice of giving no quarter by either side in the recurrent battles between Israel and Philistia. All David had to do was to pick a fight on his own terms in the borderland area, in much the same way that Jonathan had done at Michmash, and then exact from the dead the proof that Saul required. How David manoeuvred the fight we are not told, but the upshot was that he arrived back safely within the allotted time and with twice the price required to claim his princess.

His success, however, came at its own price, for when Saul realised afresh that the Lord was with David, and that the daughter through whom he had hoped to destroy David was all the more enamoured of him, he was more afraid of him than ever. There could be no cosy family relationship between father-in-law Saul and son-in-law David, only constantly recurring hatred for the remainder of the king's life. David's continuing success in the field whenever the Philistines ventured forth to attack only added to the king's determination to destroy him.

## 6. Jonathan's dilemma

JONATHAN, noble son of an ignoble father, occupies a poignant place in David's story. He is an example of one born into expectations that he is neither desirous nor destined to fulfil. A prince who would never be king; a brave man who could never be ruthless; an equivocal person, showing loyalty to his unworthy father even unto death whilst loving David and recognising and supporting him in his Divine ordination to be king—Jonathan is exceptional in his unquestioning acceptance of the will of God.

Many commentators have wondered how it was that Jonathan became convinced so early in David's career of the destiny that God had marked out for him. Had Jesse's family leaked details of Samuel's anointing of David? The behaviour and attitudes of David's brothers after the anointing hardly support that idea, even if the family understood its import. And as for the inhabitants of Bethlehem, had they known and understood it, fear of the consequences should they reveal it would have been a powerful deterrent.

What appears to have convinced Jonathan that David's destiny would cut across his own was first that, according to Samuel, there could be no dynastic future for the house of Saul; and, secondly, the clear evidence that the Lord was with David. In token of that recognition he had handed over his princely garment and accoutrements to David early in their relationship. Thereafter he, like David, waited upon God's good time for the transition that would inevitably come.

Not so Saul, who constantly tried to bypass the declared will of God by destroying David. Hardly had David settled down to life close to the royal palace at Gibeah with his new princess than Saul told his son Jonathan and all his servants to kill him. Horrified, Jonathan warned David, "My father Saul is looking for a chance to kill you. Be on your guard tomorrow morning; go into hiding and stay there. I will go out and stand with my father in the field where you are. I'll speak to him about you and will tell you what I find out."

### Loyalty under trial

Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul, and urged him to do him no harm: "... he has not wronged you, and what he has done has benefited you greatly. He took his life in his hands when he killed the Philistine. The LORD won a great victory for all Israel, and you saw it and were glad.

Why then would you do wrong to an innocent man like David by killing him for no reason?"

By this righteous justification of David, Jonathan gained a reprieve for him which Saul confirmed on oath: "As surely as the LORD lives, David will not be put to death"—which was bound to be true in the long run because of David's protection by the One in Whose Name the oath had been sworn! But in the heart of the king who uttered it, the oath meant merely, "Not yet."

Fortuitously, a resumption of hostilities with the Philistines then intervened, and this gave David another opportunity to show how successful he could be in warfare on behalf of Israel. He and his men struck the Philistines with such force that they were routed. When he returned home, however, it was to find Saul in another of his fits of depression, perhaps triggered by David's success in the field. So, once again, David, in his alter ego as the sweet psalmist of Israel, was called upon to play before the king. The scene replicated an earlier occasion when Saul sat, spear in hand, a few feet away playing his harp; and it ended in the same way. Once more the king suddenly launched his spear, intending to pin David to the wall; but David, agile as ever, dodged it, fled the room and made for home.

### In deadly earnest

This time, however, Saul was deadly serious. He was determined to be rid of this menace to his kingship once and for all. He sent men to watch over David's house with the intention of moving in for the kill the following morning. But somehow or other Saul's daughter Michal, now David's wife, either spotted what was going on or was informed of it, and she warned him, "If you don't run for your life tonight, tomorrow you'll be killed." She let him down through a window, and he fled and escaped. Then Michal took teraphim<sup>2</sup> (a household god in human form), covered the head with a goatskin cap such as were worn by

---

2. One suggestion is that the idol belonged to Saul, who had adopted it as a household god after his rejection by the Lord, and that God then used it through Michal to facilitate David's escape. Such family idols are said to have been popular with women who wished to preserve their ancestral rights, hence Rachel's theft of Laban's "gods" (Gen. 31:30).

sleepers or individuals, and, laying the image in the bed, covered it with a mantle.

It was a ruse sufficient to deceive Saul's servants when they came to collect David in the morning. "He is ill," said Michal, pointing to the prone figure with its head barely showing; whereupon they, not wishing to arrest a sick man, reported back to Saul without him. But Saul, thoroughly determined this time, exploded, "Bring him up to me in his bed so that I may kill him."

Frustrated and disappointed when he learned the truth of the matter, Saul rounded on his daughter: "Why did you deceive me like this and send my enemy away so that he escaped?" Michal, however, had prepared her answer and covered her action with the excuse, "He said to me, 'Let me get away. Why should I kill you?'"

### **Safety with Samuel**

Meanwhile, David had gone to Ramah, a few miles away, and found refuge in the home of Samuel the prophet, to whom he recounted all that Saul had done to him. Samuel, understanding the king's temper and ruthlessness, felt it prudent they should move at once to Naioth, the collegiate dwelling of the school for the prophets which he ran. It was a wise move, for, when word came to Saul that David was in Naioth of Ramah, men were dispatched to capture him. What Saul had overlooked with his usual insensitivity, however, was that the prophets, when in solemn conclave

along with Samuel, were under the influence and protection of the Holy Spirit. And when his men arrived to arrest David, they were confronted by a group of prophets prophesying, with Samuel standing there as their leader. So great was the power that had fallen on the assembly that Saul's men had to join in their devotions, and were thereby rendered powerless of themselves.

When the men returned to Saul and told him what had taken place, he added obtuseness to ignorance by sending a second arresting party, and, when it failed for the same reason, yet a third—and all to no avail. It is the mark of a foolish man that he must persist in his foolishness (Prov. 27:22). Yet that is exactly what Saul did when he then decided to go himself to Samuel and arrest David. Once more the Almighty intervened, so that His Spirit came upon the king, who began to prophesy long before he reached the college, where, in total subservience and humiliation, he took off his outer garments and lay down unclothed for the rest of that day and all the next night, prophesying before Samuel. The incident, when it became known, created such a stir that people began to say, either incredulously or in derision, "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

By these interventions, Saul was finally turned from his present folly and David was given time to escape and return to Gibeah, where he went to consult with his friend Jonathan about what to do next.

(To be continued)