Galen Peterson

The Life of King David
Part 3

Jonathan's Covenant and Saul's Jealousy

1 Samuel 18:1-9

v 1-2 As soon as David finishes speaking with Saul, a profound spiritual and emotional bond forms between David and Jonathan, Saul's eldest son. Jonathan loves David "as his own soul."

Previously, David was a part-time court musician who routinely traveled back and forth to Bethlehem to tend Jesse's sheep (1 Samuel 17:15). Saul officially takes David into his permanent service that day, no longer allowing him to return home to his father's house. This verse marks the permanent end of David's life as a simple shepherd boy. He is now fully integrated into the political and military pressure cooker of the royal court.

v 3-4 Jonathan makes a formal covenant with David. The Hebrew phrase is literally *karat berit* – "cut a covenant." In the biblical world, cutting a covenant typically involved distinct, highly symbolic actions. We see several of these compressed into the interaction between Jonathan and David:

- To seal this bond, Jonathan strips himself of his royal robe, armor, sword, bow, and belt, and gives them all to David. By giving him his robe, Jonathan is effectively saying, "What is mine is now yours." He is sharing his identity, standing, and privileges.
- By handing over his sword, bow, and belt, Jonathan binds his security to David's. It signifies a vow: "Your enemies are now my enemies, and my strength will be used to protect you."
- Though not detailed in these verses, covenants traditionally involved a shared sacrificial meal or the cutting of animals in half, symbolizing an oath of accountability: "May what happened to these animals happen to me if I break this promise." Later, in chapter 20, Jonathan demonstrates his own willingness to stand by David in front of Saul by literally putting his own body on the line to absorb the king's wrath when he hurled a spear at his own son to kill him.

Jonathan is the crown prince and natural heir to Saul's throne. By handing David his prestigious possessions, Jonathan is visually and practically transferring his royal status to David. He recognizes God's hand on David early on and willingly steps aside, later telling David, "You shall be king over Israel, and I shall be next to you" (1 Sam. 23:17).[1]

This contrasts sharply with Saul, who spends the rest of his life violently fighting to keep his dynasty alive.

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[1] The concept of covenant in 1 Samuel 18 acts as a crucial legal anchor for the rest of David's life and the future of Israel. Years later, after Saul and Jonathan are killed, David becomes king. Culturally, a new king would execute the entire family of the previous dynasty to eliminate rivals. However, because of this exact covenant, David actively seeks out Jonathan's surviving crippled son, Mephibosheth, restores his land, and invites him to eat at the king's table permanently (2 Samuel 9).

v 5 David achieves high success wherever Saul sends him. Recognizing his military competence and leadership, Saul places David in charge of the men of war. This promotion pleases both the general public and Saul's existing officers.

v 6-7 As the army returns home from the slaughter of the Philistine, women from all the towns of Israel come out to meet King Saul with singing, dancing, tambourines, and musical instruments. Their celebratory refrain is: "Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

This specific lyric becomes a recurring "anthem" attached to David's reputation, tracking his fame and the threat he poses to foreign nations. When David later flees from Saul and tries to hide in the Philistine city of Gath, the servants of King Achish instantly recognize him by quoting this exact song (1 Samuel 21:11, 29:5). It shows that his fame crossed enemy lines.

v 8-9 The women's song infuriates Saul. He reasons bitterly that if they credit David with ten thousands and him with only thousands, the only thing left for David to take is the kingdom itself.

Saul's paranoia hits a bullseye here because of a previous confrontation with the prophet Samuel. In 1 Samuel 15:28, after Saul disobeyed God regarding the Amalekites, Samuel told him, "Adonai has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you." Saul didn't know for sure yet that David was secretly anointed by Samuel in chapter 16, but the women's song triggers his realization that David is likely that "better neighbor."

From this exact day forward, Saul watches David with a suspicious, jealous eye.

1 Samuel 18:10-19

v 10-11 The very next day, most English translations describe an evil spirit coming upon Saul again. As we saw previously in chapter 16, the Hebrew adjective *ra* can also refer to something that is "harmful, distressing, calamitous, or sorrowful." In that regard, the term can refer to the spirit's *function* (bringing misery or acting as an instrument of judgment) rather than its moral character. In this case, the spirit forcefully overcomes Saul, causing him to rave or "prophesy" wildly inside his house. David serves Saul by playing the lyre,[2] just as he had done previously. While holding a spear, Saul suddenly hurls it twice, aiming to pin David to the wall. Both times, David manages to evade the weapon and escape.

David was originally hired at court specifically to soothe this spiritual affliction with his music. Now, the very worship music that once brought Saul peace triggers his demonic rage because of his unchecked envy.

What we don't see happening in the text is David throwing the spear back at Saul. This highlights David's extraordinary restraint and patience. He has already been anointed the future king, yet he refuses to help God's plan by doing away with the current king, as many earthly rulers have done.

This establishes David's life-long refusal to "touch the Lord's anointed." On two

[2] As in 1 Samuel 16:23, where the word *kinnor* is better translated as the handheld triangular lyre, not a harp.

separate, future occasions, David will have the perfect opportunity to execute Saul in his sleep, in the cave at En Gedi (1 Sam. 24) and in the wilderness of Ziph (1 Sam. 26). Both times, David restrains his men, trusting God to remove Saul in His own timing.

v 12-13 Saul grows increasingly afraid of David because he recognizes that the Lord is actively with David but has completely abandoned Saul. To get David out of his sight, Saul removes him from his personal court and demotes him to a field commander over a thousand soldiers. David accepts this shift and begins leading the troops out to battle.

v 14-16 Despite the displacement, David behaves wisely and finds overwhelming success in every military campaign because the Lord is with him. Watching David prosper only deepens Saul's dread and awe. Meanwhile, David's leadership on the front lines causes all of Israel and Judah to love him.

v 17 Saul pivots to a subtle, political trap. He offers his eldest daughter, Merab, to David in marriage. This offer seems to connect to the bounty and rewards that Saul publicly promised to anyone who could defeat Goliath. But now he changes the terms with the condition that David must serve him bravely by fighting "the battles of the Lord". Privately, Saul reveals his true motive: he intends to avoid killing David himself and instead let the Philistines do it for him.

This is a chilling instance of irony in the life of David. Decades later, David will find himself trapped in his own web of sin after committing adultery with Bathsheba. To eliminate her husband, Uriah the Hittite, David will deploy the exact same cowardly tactic he learned from Saul. David writes a letter to his general saying, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting...that he may be struck down, and die" (2 Sam. 11:15). Saul's battlefield trap becomes the blueprint for David's greatest moral failure.

v 18 David responds with deep humility, questioning who he or his family is to merit becoming the king's son-in-law.

v 19 Because Merab was Saul's firstborn daughter, marrying her would have given David the highest possible social elevation. It would have legally formalized David's status as a son-in-law to the king and positioned him prominently within the royal line of succession.

When the designated wedding day arrives, Saul breaks his promise and abruptly gives Merab away to be married to Adriel the Meholathite instead. This act was a calculated political move:

- It was intended to deny David the royal legitimacy that his victory over Goliath should have secured.
- It served as an insult designed to humiliate David publicly to and diminish his standing among the people.
- Instead of honoring a vow to a shepherd boy, Saul used his oldest daughter to secure a wealthy financial and political alliance. [3]

[3] Adriel was the son of Barzillai, a wealthy family from the prosperous agricultural region of Abel-Meholah (situated on the borderlands between the tribal territories of Issachar and Manasseh) to secure a lucrative political alliance with a powerful land-owning family.

1 Samuel 18:20-25

v 20 Saul's younger daughter, Michal, falls deeply in love with David. Her love for David will later become a major plot point when Saul's plots turn explicitly violent in the next chapter.[4] When the palace attendants report this development to Saul, the news pleases him immensely.

v 21 In a healthy family, a father would be happy that his daughter found love with a national hero. However, Saul's pleasure is purely predatory. Having just failed to use his eldest daughter, Merab, as a trap, Saul immediately weaponizes Michal's genuine affection. He resolves to give Michal to David, explicitly reasoning that her love will become a trap to ensure the Philistines kill him. Saul approaches David a second time, offering him another chance to become his son-in-law.

v 22 Saul commands his palace servants to secretively brief David, telling him that the king and all his courtiers delight in him, so he should accept the marriage.

v 23 David responds with characteristic humility, questioning how a poor man from an insignificant family could ever marry into royalty. David's objection that he is a poor man *(ish rash)* connects directly to the standard practice of the ancient Near Eastern *mohar* (bride-price), a substantial financial payment given by the groom to the bride's father. Because David is a simple shepherd's son, he lacks the financial capital to purchase a royal bride.

v 24-25 The servants report David's hesitation back to Saul. Saul instructs them to give David a specific message: the king desires no financial dowry, but rather 100 Philistine foreskins as vengeance upon the royal enemies.[5]

Demanding foreskins was the only foolproof way to guarantee that the men David killed were specifically Philistines, preventing David from taking a shortcut to win the princess. This is the core of Saul's trap. Saul did not actually care about the foreskins; he chose a task that made close-quarters, hand-to-hand combat unavoidable. Saul reasoned that even if David survived the first twenty or thirty fights, the sheer mathematical probability of fighting 100 warriors meant the Philistines would eventually kill him.

1 Samuel 18:26-30

v 26 When the palace servants deliver Saul's terms, the proposition of winning the princess through military combat pleases David greatly. Before the designated time limit expires, David prepares his men to march.

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[4] Saul eventually sends assassins to David's house to execute him. Michal chooses her husband over her father, executing a daring escape plan where she lets David down through a window and places a household idol in his bed to deceive Saul's guards (1 Samuel 19:11–17).

[5] In ancient warfare, commanders required physical proof of enemy casualties. Soldiers frequently brought back body parts—such as hands, heads, or ears—to count the dead and claim rewards. The Philistines were unique in the region because they did not practice circumcision. That is reflected throughout the Books of Samuel, where the Israelites routinely refer to their primary rivals with the derogatory slur "the uncircumcised Philistines" (David uses this exact phrase against Goliath in 1 Samuel 17:26).

v 27 David completely upends Saul's calculations. Instead of being intimidated, he takes the challenge as an opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty and military prowess. In a stunning display of overperformance, David does not just bring back 100 foreskins—David and his soldiers go out and slaughter 200 Philistine men. David then brings back the foreskins and presents them to the king in full count to ensure he legally secures his place as the king's son-in-law. Left with no political alternative, Saul surrenders his daughter Michal to David in marriage, while cementing David's status as a legendary warrior.

Ironically, by trying to use the Philistines to kill David, Saul accidentally creates his own worst nightmare: he turns David into an elite, unstoppable frontline commander who systematically dismantles the Philistine army, paving the way for David to eventually secure the entire kingdom.

v 28-29 Saul watches these events unfold and realizes with absolute certainty that the Lord is actively protecting David, and that his own daughter Michal deeply loves him. This realization is a massive psychological blow to Saul. He intended for Michal to be a snare to David, but instead, she becomes a shield for David against her own father.

At this point, Saul has lost total emotional control over his own household. His oldest son, Jonathan, loves David as his own soul; his younger daughter, Michal, loves David as her husband; and his own palace servants secretly admire him. Saul is entirely isolated in his own palace, surrounded by people who are captivated by the future king. This realization fills Saul with an even greater, permanent dread.

From that day forward, Saul remains David's lifelong enemy. He stops trying to kill David through subtle, hidden traps and, instead, shifts to open, state-sponsored warfare. Saul will repeatedly deploy the national army of Israel to hunt David across the Judean wilderness like an animal, completely neglecting his actual duty to protect the nation from foreign invaders because he is entirely consumed by his hatred for David.

v 30 Whenever the Philistine commanders march out to battle, David achieves far greater tactical success against them than any of Saul's other high-ranking officers. As a direct result, David's name becomes highly esteemed throughout the entire nation.

Psalm 11

v 1 David declares that the Lord is his ultimate sanctuary. He then turns to his well-meaning advisors and asks why they keep telling him to flee like a bird to the safety of the mountains.

In 1 Samuel 18, Saul sent David out onto the dangerous front lines, hoping the Philistines would kill him. David's friends likely told him to run away from this toxic court. But David refused to panic, choosing to stay and dutifully serve the king because he trusted God's protection.

v 2-3 The counselors warn David that the wicked are secretly stringing their bows and aiming their arrows from the shadows to shoot the upright. They ask a devastating question: "If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

This mirrors Saul's secretive palace maneuvering. Saul does not attack David openly yet; instead, he schemes "secretly" (vv. 22-25) to trap David with a deadly bride-price. The "foundations" of Israelite society—justice, the word of the king, and the sanctity of

marriage—are crumbling under Saul's corrupt leadership.

v 4-5 David counters his fearful advisors by looking up. He reminds them that Adonai is still in His holy temple, reigning on His heavenly throne. God's eyes closely examine everyone, testing both the righteous and the wicked, and He completely hates those who love violence.

While Saul panicked on his earthly throne, terrified of losing his kingdom, David rested in the knowledge that God's throne is unshakeable. Saul's violent spear-throwing exposed him as the violent man whom God opposes, while David's trials were simply refining his faith.

v 6-7 David declares that God will rain down judgment upon the wicked. Conversely, because the Lord is righteous and loves justice, the upright will be rewarded by beholding His face.

This serves as a prophetic roadmap for the rest of the narrative. Saul's schemes backfire entirely, ultimately leading to his ruin on the battlefield. David, who kept his hands clean and refused to retaliate against Saul, is continually elevated until he inherits the kingdom.