

Christian Friendship

1 Samuel 20:30–42, Acts 20:36–21:16

Yesterday, Jeff showed us photos of a friend of his that he has known since high school, who came to visit him recently. The last time he saw that particular friend, he was an eager, bright-eyed college student; now, he is a middle-aged, mature pastor. How wonderful to have friendships that go back decades—Christian men and women who know us well and stick with us through both thick and thin.

1 Samuel 20 gives us a window into the special friendship between Jonathan and David. Jonathan, you might remember, was the son of King Saul, the first king of Israel. As his son, Jonathan was the presumptive heir to the throne. David, on the other hand, was a commoner, the youngest son of a simple shepherd, Jesse the Bethlehemite. With God’s help David had spectacularly defeated the champion Goliath in battle, and in so doing gained the admiration of all Israel. He also became a threat to King Saul, who became insanely jealous of David and threatened to destroy the young man who had defended the homeland, rather than relinquish his own political power. When Jonathan learned this, he secretly met David at a prearranged place and urged him to run for his life, as Saul was bent on hunting down and killing David. The two friends kissed one another on both cheeks in Middle-Eastern fashion and embraced for the last time. Jonathan said to David, “Go in peace, forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD, saying, The LORD be between me and thee, and between my seed and thy seed forever.” Jonathan and David were loyal, devoted friends. Holy Scripture tells us that Jonathan loved David “as he loved his own soul”—that is, as he loved himself. The friendship between Jonathan and David is a poignant example of what it means to love our neighbor as ourself.

Our New Testament text, too, shows the value of Christian friends. Our reading began at the close of the apostle Paul’s address to the elders of the church in Ephesus. These were men with whom Paul had worked closely for three years. Presumably, Paul had personally examined and ordained some of these men. He was confident that they possessed the necessary qualifications for the ministry—a sincere concern for the welfare of God’s people, godly character, theological competence, and an ability to teach. As a group these elders had ministered together, endeavoring to plant biblical churches in Ephesus and its environs. Their mutual friendship was tested in the crucible of bringing the gospel to bear upon all the problems that arose in seeking to establish a church. After their meeting, the group knelt down together to pray, no doubt asking God’s blessing on Paul’s travels, as well as upon the continuation and flourishing of gospel outreach in establishing the church of Jesus Christ in Ephesus and beyond. As the group finished praying, the realization that they might never meet again in this life

dawned upon them. Full of emotion, they wept freely and fell on each other's necks and kissed one another, then accompanied the apostle to the ship.

Chapter 21 begins with a brief summary of Paul's voyage from the Aegean sea, across the Mediterranean and on to Tyre in Phoenicia. Paul was no doubt traveling with a small group of fellow missionaries, including Luke the physician (note the transition from "they" in the concluding verse of chapter 20 to "we" in chapter 21).

Upon landing in Tyre, the missionaries went ashore, and what did they do first? The "[found] disciples"—Christian brethren! A disciple is a learner; clearly, the disciples that they found were disciples of *Christ*. How did they find them? We are not told exactly. They had no internet. Possibly they asked the merchants who came out to meet the ship if they knew any Christians in the city. Or maybe they saw a sign advertising that such and such a building was where Christians held their weekly meetings. In any case, the group found some disciples and decided to stay and fellowship among them. No doubt Paul was invited to preach. We are not told explicitly that the missionary team stayed in the home of Christians, but that seems likely, given Middle-Easterners' love of hospitality. We can imagine that as the men shared meals with local families, they took the opportunity to bring them up to date on the progress of the gospel in Europe and Asia Minor.

When I was a little boy, my parents frequently invited visiting missionaries to our home for dinner after speaking at meetings. Often, the missionaries would show color slides of their work after dinner. My sisters and I would set up chairs in the living room, while I helped to set up the slide projector and screen. I loved seeing slides and hearing stories of gospel work in the Congo, Ecuador, the Amazon jungle or other exotic places, and was always disappointed when the slide show came to an end. My sisters and I were allowed to stay up later on such nights because our parents thought it was important for us to hear the missionaries.

We are told in verse 7 that the missionary team moved on to Ptolemais, a Phoenician seaport city. Again, they meet some "brethren" and stayed with them for one day. Then they traveled on to Caesarea and stayed in the home of Philip the evangelist, one of the original seven deacons. This time, Paul and his companions stayed "many days."

Finally, we are told that the team traveled to their destination and stayed with a disciple named Mnason. Originally from Cyprus, he was an "early" or "old" disciple, meaning that he had become a Christian in the beginning of the formation of the church in Jerusalem.¹ But do not miss the obvious fact that in Paul's travels on his return journey to Jerusalem he encountered many friends both old and new. Let us make four observations about Christian friendships, first,

1. There is a special bond between Christian friends.

¹ Easton's Bible Dictionary, "Mnason" (Logos Bible Software)

There is an instant bond, a kindredness of spirit, when we meet another Christian, a true disciple of Christ. The Bible teaches that all men by nature are dead in trespasses and sins, alienated from the life of God, running from the Father of lights, pursuing their own pursuits, living for self and for pleasure. Apart from the regenerating work of God's Holy Spirit, men, women, boys and girls are idolaters, worshiping false gods, not the true God, and are on their way to hell. Man is incurably religious. It is not a matter of some people being religious and others not being religious. *All* humans are religious; they are either worshipers of the true God, who is life, or of false gods, ultimately leading to spiritual and eternal death. Paul speaks of those "whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things" (Phil. 3:19). What an apt description of men and women, boys and girls, who are not followers of the Lord Jesus Christ! Their god is "their *belly*": they live for self, for whatever gives them pleasure, rather than for the living God who created us and invites us to live all of life to his glory, promising us eternal life in union with him—perfect spiritual blessedness and eternal joy. Men by nature are "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God" (2 Tim. 3:4); if you live for the pleasures of this life rather than the God who gave you life, then you are an idolater. You are choosing momentary satisfaction—"the pleasures of sin for a season"—over the true God who gave his own Son that we might have eternal life forever. The words of Ephesians 4:18 are a perfect description of you: "having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart." You do not understand spiritual realities; you are alienated from him who is the way, the truth and the life; you are spiritually ignorant; your heart is blinded; you think that there is joy and fulfillment apart from the God who created you and gave you life.

But when you are born again, you will have an appetite for the things of the Lord. Your mind is awakened to spiritual realities. You know that you were made for the purpose of having a relationship with the God of heaven. You have a new love—him who is the lover of your soul. You have a new purpose, and that is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. The joy of the Lord is your strength. You want to worship God and present your body as a living sacrifice to him who is your highest good. You find yourself drawn to other Christians. You might be from different backgrounds, but now you are worshipers of Christ. It is Christ who unites you. There is a special bond—a spiritual bond—between followers of Christ. As Paul and his missionary team traveled from city to city, they instinctively sought the fellowship of other Christians. These are the people that they chose as friends. What is a friend? The dictionary gives a useful definition: a

person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection.² A Christian friend is a brother in Christ. We might be from different families, different countries, different cultures, we might have different life experiences, but if we have Christ, there is a kindredness of spirit. It is *Christ* who unites us; what we have in common is *Christ!* When we love Christ, we love his people. We identify as Christians. We want to surround ourselves with Christians. We want to worship together as Christians. We want to sing the praises of Christ as Christians. There is a special bond between Christian friends. Secondly, we see that

2. Christian friends welcome one another into their lives and homes.

When Paul, Luke and their team traveled, they had to find places to spend the night. God himself made us that way; as humans, we can't keep moving indefinitely; we need to sleep, we need to rest and refresh. Sleep is a gift: "It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he *giveth* his beloved sleep" (Ps. 127:2). We read of Jacob, on the run from his brother Esau, stopping beside the road and spending the night, arranging stones for a pillow and lying down on the ground to sleep. But how much nicer to have a comfortable place to stay! When we travel, we might go to a hotel or motel, or stay with relatives. But what if those options are not available? In Bible times people valued opportunities to show hospitality. In fact, one of the Bible words for hospitality means literally *love of strangers*.³ Jesus commends faithful disciples with the words, "I was a stranger, and ye took me in" (Matt. 25:35). Inasmuch as we have shown hospitality unto one of the least of our Christian brethren, we have done it unto Christ himself. He doesn't forget, but remembers our hospitality on the day of judgment.

Admittedly, we Westerners are fearful of strangers. There is so much hatred and cruelty in the world. Politicians stir up envy and strife and division for political advantage. We are naturally afraid of the unknown. We worry about inviting total strangers into our homes. There are some people that we instinctively distrust from the get-go; it is not a good idea to invite such into our homes. We may have young children and naturally want to protect them. A single mother might feel especially vulnerable. On the other hand, an intact family with a physically-fit man in the home can take in strangers more safely.

The Bible teaches us to "be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another ... serving the Lord ... distributing to the needs of the saints, *given to hospitality*" (Rom. 12:10–13). The phrase "given to hospitality" is literally "*pursuing* hospitality"—not just putting it down somewhere at the bottom of our "hope-to-do-someday-if-there's-nothing-more-important-to-do" list, but making it a real priority. It is the same word used by Paul

² *New Oxford American Dictionary* (MacOS)

³ Strong's Enhanced Dictionary, φιλοξενία (Logos Bible Software)

when he wrote, “I *persecuted* the church of God” (1 Cor. 15:9). Before he became a Christian, Paul (then known as Saul of Tarsus) was single-minded in his pursuit of Christians. He wanted to arrest them, jail them, execute them; he wanted to stamp out Christianity; it wasn’t number three or four or eleven or fifteen on his list of priorities, it was number one! When Paul says that the Christian ought to “pursue” hospitality, he means that it ought to be right up there at the top of our priorities.

All Christians need to learn to show the gift of hospitality. If we have never practiced hospitality before, we should take baby steps, inviting folks from the church or other Christian friends over for coffee or a meal, or maybe a backyard barbecue. Perhaps two families can go together to offer hospitality, one offering the space, the other bringing food; there is safety in numbers. We should not take unnecessary risks; on the other hand, we should not allow ourselves to become prisoners of fear such that we go through life never offering hospitality. Certainly we can pray for grace and discernment. We must be “wise as serpents, and harmless as doves” (Matt. 10:16). We should follow the example of Paul and show hospitality to fellow Christians as God gives us opportunity. Many of these will become friends—some will become close, lifetime friends.

As we welcome one another into our lives and homes, one of our focuses will be prayer. Notice the reference to prayer in our text today: “When he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all” (Acts 20:36). The Merriam-Webster dictionary gives the following definition of prayer: “to address God with adoration, confession, supplication or thanksgiving.”⁴ Rearranging the last two elements yields the handy acronym ACTS—Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. Too many of our prayers are selfish in nature: “Give me, give me, give me.” Let our prayers include liberal amounts of adoration, confession and thanksgiving, as well as supplication—asking God to supply our needs. He promises to do that: “My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). But let us adore him too: “God, I adore you, I honor you, I glorify you, I worship you, I long for you; you are my all-in-all, the longing of my heart; I cannot live without you.”

As Paul and his traveling companions enjoyed fellowship with a great variety of Christian friends on their return from the third missionary journey, they shared life experiences together, they encouraged one another from God’s word, they cast their burdens on the Lord, they prayed for God’s blessing upon his church, and they gave wise counsel to each other. We read in chapter 21:4 that the disciples in Tyre “told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem.” Note the definite article: “*the* Spirit.” The words “through *the* Spirit” clearly refer to the Holy Spirit

⁴ Adapted from Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pray>

of God—another of the frequent references to the Holy Spirit that are found in the book of Acts.

Paul himself had said in the last chapter, “See, now I go bound *in the spirit* to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me” (Acts 20:22–23). Our translators chose to use the small “s” in the translation “in the spirit,” but the same definite article is used. So here we have a bit of a conundrum. How can the Holy Spirit be encouraging Paul to go up to Jerusalem, while at the same time telling Paul through his friends in Tyre *not* to go up to Jerusalem? Calvin addresses this question: “How the brethren can dissuade him by the Spirit from doing that which Paul did testify he doth by the secret motion of the same Spirit? Is the Spirit contrary to himself, that he doth now loose Paul whom he held bound inwardly? I answer, that there be divers gifts of the Spirit The Lord showed to these brethren, of whom Luke maketh mention, what should come to pass; yet, nevertheless, they know not what is expedient, and what Paul’s calling doth require, because the measure of their gift doth not reach so far. And the Lord would have his servant admonished of purpose, partly, that through long meditation, he might be better furnished and prepared to suffer whatsoever should come.”⁵

But this was not the only warning. As the missionary team stayed in Caesarea, we read that “a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. When he had come to us, he took Paul’s belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, “So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.” ’ Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, ‘What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’ ”

What is going on here? On the one hand, the Spirit is moving in the heart of Paul to go to Jerusalem to bear witness for Christ there. On the other hand, the Spirit is powerfully warning him that it will not be easy, that he is going to be arrested and lose his liberty. But Paul says that he is “ready not only to be *bound*, but also to *die* at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” There is a lesson for us here. All of us who follow Christ should be so zealous for his glory that we would be willing to suffer unjust imprisonment and even death, that he might be magnified. As Paul would later write, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). Paul’s friends recognized that God alone is Lord of the believer’s conscience. They had warned him, but his conscience was obligated to

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, Acts 21:4 (Logos Bible Software)

God alone. We have seen that Christian friends welcome one another into their lives and homes. But there is one last point that I would like to make this morning, and it is this:

3. Christian friends worship the ultimate Friend.

We have been talking about Christian friendship this morning. All of us need good Christian friends. We should seek to have good Christian friends. But we cannot overlook the fact that “there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother” (Prov. 18:24). Jesus is “a friend of publicans and sinners” (Matt. 11:19), and he tells his disciples, “Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you” (John 15:14). The word for “friend” is very intimate; it is literally *lover* (φίλος)! Jesus says, “Ye are my friends” (φίλοι). It is akin to the French *ami*, *amie*, which derives from the Latin *amo*, *I love* (also the root of the Spanish *amigo*). The English words *lover* and *friend* come from different Anglo-Saxon roots,⁶ veiling the connection, but Jesus’ expression “Ye are my friends” is very much akin to the idea “Ye are my lovers”! This should not be taken in a sexual way but indicates the closeness of the relationship between Christ and his people. He tells us, “Greater *love* hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my *friends*, if ye do whatsoever I command you.” This was not limited to the apostles only but applies to all who put their trust in him. If you belong to Jesus, if you confess him before men and endeavor to obey him, then according to this text, you are a friend of Christ and a brother or sister to those who confess him. What an honor, that the Lord of the universe calls us “friends”! He calls us friends, not because we deserve it, but out of his sheer mercy. In the words of the hymnwriter,

“Jesus! what a Friend for sinners! Jesus! lover of my soul; friends may fail me, foes assail me, he, my Savior, makes me whole. Hallelujah! what a Savior! Hallelujah! what a Friend! Saving, helping, keeping, loving, he is with me to the end.”⁷

If you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ, he is your *friend*—the lover of your soul. He will be with you forever and will never abandon you. This is your only comfort in life and in death. Cling to him. Seek his face. He is your portion, your highest good, and your friend. Look to Jesus! Amen.

⁶ *Friend* comes from Old English *frēond*; *love* comes from Old English *lufu*, both of Germanic origin.

⁷ J. Wilbur Chapman, “Jesus! What a Friend for Sinners!” (1830) (*Trinity Psalter Hymnal* #456)