

Catch the Fire – Jonathan’s Story

**The Promise**

I remember the day I heard about him. David, I mean. The shepherd boy who would be king someday, although I didn’t know it then. The story was impressive if it was true. I hadn’t actually met him yet but let me tell you what it was like from my point of view. Here I am the son of the first King of Israel, Saul. My father was chosen by God and anointed as prince over Israel by Samuel. The people who had made him king had been impressed by his stature. They had described him a man who ‘from his shoulders upwards was higher than any of the people.’ My father was an impressive height, I must admit that myself. He was very hero like. If he had been born in your time, he would have worn a cape. Fearless and heroic, my father was not afraid when he defeated the Ammonites, and never thought twice about going into battle and fighting for the territories when God was on our side. After that first battle it was another year before he became king. He had 3000 of the best men and he had given me an army of 1000 to fight and protect Israel. It was strange how it all began. His father had sent him out to find the donkeys and he sought out the prophet Samuel to help him. As we were from the least of all the tribes, Benjamin, this was quite the unexpected twist in all of our lives to become royalty. From donkey farmers to royalty, it just goes to show God really can use anyone. Our people, the Israelites I mean, never had a royal family before, there was no palace, no training, not the way you have today with a clear line of succession, privilege, and titles. We were hands on and I as Saul’s son had to learn fast.

I would stand beside my dad day in and day out watching each manoeuvre learning the politics, the etiquette, the strategies needed to be king and yet I am just a farmer turned soldier fighting to keep our land and our territories. I am thankful that God was on our side and no matter what we faced as a nation He was in control. The confidence we had… that was of course before God rejected my father as king. Dad knew he was supposed to destroy all the Amalekites. That meant every man, woman, child, and animal. But he allowed Agag to live along with all the best animals, dad only destroyed what was worthless. That was not God’s instruction and so here we are facing the Philistines, and we are not so confident now that God regrets making my father king.

I remember that day very clearly, it was just like yesterday and the day before. We had been up against the Philistines before and won but this time was different. In fact, this stalemate has been going on for a while, forty days in fact. We were camped in the Valley of Elah and the enemy had camped at the Ephes Dammim just between Sokoh and Azekah. They were on one hill, and we were on the other ready for battle.

The Philistines had sent out their champion to challenge us to send out ours every day. If we took up this challenge, the winner of the fight would win the battle for the whole nation. This was simple enough; we would send out our best fighter and we could all be home by teatime. The problem was Goliath. Yes, my father stood out from the crowd. His great stature was what had got him noticed by the people of Israel but Goliath well he took it to another level. He was 3 metres tall, bigger than any man we had ever seen. Just the size of him had our best warriors quaking in their boots. I always thought I was brave, a great warrior myself who knew God was on our side. I must be honest, due to the bad decisions my father had made, losing the favour of God and the intimidation of the great mountain, who was Goliath before me, even my courage failed me.

Goliath was taunting our men, confident and arrogant, knowing his huge presence could not be ignored, my father was in his tent strategizing. We had no solution to this stand-off. Goliath had come out from his tent every morning for the last 40 days and no one had met the challenge. Day after day, the mocking of our men for not even trying to fight him, had added insult to injury and we now needed a miracle to recover from this embarrassment.

As the story goes David’s brothers were some of our fiercest warriors. The oldest was Eliab, then Abinadab and finally Shammah. They had left their father Jessie to come and serve Saul and Israel as soldiers. Brave men considering they were shepherds. Jessie who was getting on in years had sent David, his youngest son, with food for them. Grain, I believe he sent, oh, and 10 loaves and 10 cheeses for the commander to distribute. Everyone did their bit. David had arrived just as the host had begun the morning war cry. He was young, a shepherd boy and didn’t understand the situation. When the war cry went up and Goliath came out and began jeering at our men, David, who was either brave or stupid, said he would fight him.

His brothers were angry at his insolence, but my dad got to hear about it and sent for David. I was told that dad, after listening to David’s confident arguments tried to get him to see that he was only a boy and Goliath a seasoned warrior. But David, well he was having none of it. David was trying to convince my father that he was the man for the job. With some bravado story about fighting a lion and a bear and winning. He had convinced my dad somehow and so he agreed to let him fight. I suppose after 40 days dad had become desperate, or did he see something in David that allowed him to hope for victory. I don’t know but he wasn’t going to allow this child to face this giant without help. He offered David his armour which did not fit. His sword which was too heavy. With great boldness, David did it his way, with no protection and five carefully selected stones for his sling shot.

Ooh Goliath was mad. He was so insulted. After all of the intimidation tactics and all the jeering we had the nerve to send out a boy to do a warrior’s job. I believe it was quite the sight. By the time I had got there it was all over. The giant was on the ground his head cut off and we had won the battle without losing one soldier. It wasn’t until dad told me the whole story that I realized that David had actually killed him with one stone and a slingshot. I remember thinking this story will go down in history as a legend or myth, and if I hadn’t seen the head of Goliath for myself, I certainly would not have believed it. I mean no disrespect I know what a great man he became but David was a scrawny teenager. Good looking, I suppose, well that’s what my sister Michel tells me. My goodness she had a real notion of him, I used to tease her about it.

Anyway, when dad told me the story, well… I knew that we would hit it off. I remember feeling a deep connection to this man who I hadn’t even met yet. His faith in God who delivered him from the lion and the bear and now the giant was captivating me. But when we met, instantly we shared a profound connection. We became brothers immediately and remained bonded as brothers until the day I died.

That day, the day we met, I took the robe I was wearing and honoured David by placing it on him. I gave him my armour, my sword, my bow, and belt. My father honoured him also by setting him in charge of the men of war and he was successful wherever he went and whatever he did. Our friendship was well known, and my father approved of it until he became jealous of David. Saul was not jealous of our relationship; no Saul was jealous of David’s success. You see as time moved on, David’s popularity was increasing and his successes in battle and the stories that were being told throughout the territories were making him famous. Much more famous that my father, and he was the king.

David’s fame made living with dad impossible at times. I mean he was well established as king; we were now living in the palace and there was no doubt in anyone’s mind that he oversaw all aspects of rule in Israel. Even so, he would become enraged with jealousy, and nothing could console him. His moods made it hard to live with him, he was so unpredictable. I remember once when David was playing his lyre, which, was, by the way, another thing that David did so well, my dad threw a javelin at him in bad temper. Not once but twice. It wasn’t that my father was jealous of him making this beautiful music. No, it was because God had favoured David and rejected him. The music, well, it was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Strangely that had never been the case before. When David played it was only the music that would soothe the enraged spirit that rose in dad, so we didn’t think to hide the weapons from him. Just to clarify, dad was jealous yes, but he was also conflicted as he liked David, respected him and if truth be told, he was in awe of him. When jealousy clashed with the reality of who David truly was, a man favoured by God, fear began to drive dad and a darkness overwhelmed him that drove him to see David as his enemy. I observed many times the distress and anguish of my father relieved instantly on the summoning of David to play for him. It was as though whatever evil spirit that had come over him could only be relieved by the presence of God’s gift to David. The only antidote to the darkness dad lived in was the music played by David and now it enraged him more.

David, well, even after being attacked he continued to love my father, as a loyal son-in-law would, but unfortunately my dad did not see him that way. Dad saw him as a threat and instead of rejoicing in this loyalty and friendship he approached David with distrust and suspicion. Jealously is a horrible affliction it builds a wall between people that obstructs true relationship. From my observations of David and my father, their complicated relationship was fuelled by this negative influence. David proved his loyalty and love and respect for my father time and time again with no likelihood of success. Yet he never hesitated to serve him and love him. Never allowing my dad's behaviour to change how he behaved towards him, must have been hard for David. This was fortunate for dad because David could have killed him, I am sure of it on more than one occasion. Thankfully in this battle of his mind, my dad did not become a casualty of war at the hand of his son-in-law. David remained devoted even when dad finally drove him into hiding.

He was the same with me. Trust was the driving force behind the brotherly relationship that David and I had. David was clearly blessed by God in all that he did and so in turn were we, and when I say we, I mean all of Israel. The fear that dad felt that God was on the side of David was not a fear that I even contemplated. I didn’t pick a side. You see God had withdrawn his spirt from my father, but not from me and not from Israel. I loved the Lord and continued to serve Him and trust him as David did. We trusted God first to lead us and guide us only then were we able to trust each other. David and I had the same purpose as we served God, the king and Israel, working together we were stronger for it.

I remember David coming to me once to talk to me about one of dad’s moods. He was worried that dad had plans to kill him. We were all living in the palace by this time and he and Michal were married. Marrying my sister had connected our families by law and this bound us together even more. Michal would tease us about the bromance that we had going on. I would agree we spent a lot of time together. She would say that David only married her to spend more time with me. It was all good fun, but our friendship did mean that I was able to enjoy the company of my sister too. There is nothing worse that growing up as a close-knit family of brothers and sisters together and then drifting apart as your adult life takes shape. I get it, we all have to grow up but who hasn’t reminisced as an adult about the carefree days of childhood. It was good for David too that Michal and I were so close. We were able to join forces in defending and helping David. If you can imagine falling in love and marrying someone that your parents or your siblings disapproved of. You know that feeling of family gatherings being tense. Or maybe, they just aren’t invited which puts you in a terrible position of having to choose a side. I am sure you have been to that party; you know the one. It’s the awkwardness, whether it was family or not, you’ve been there, were two people don’t get on and there is always an undercurrent, there is always an atmosphere. Well now imagine that on an extreme scale, when the undercurrent becomes a threat to the one you love. That their life is now in danger because the in-law is powerful, with great authority and is unstable. That was how my sister had to live. Always on edge, always trying to be a peace maker. Always having to justify why she loves him, always trying to be one step ahead to make sure that she was able to warn David when dad was in a bad mood. Loving dad, loving her brothers and sisters, and loving her husband was not easy for Michal, she was suffering as though it was some sort of crime. She never knew if her love for David would cause her exile, maybe, even death. As I have said before dad had quite the temper and between the two of us David at least had a chance to run and hide. Of course, many people would have put this down to sheer chance or luck because his life was in danger many times. We understood that the right relative or the right servant strategically placed could save David from dad’s wrath. But this understanding was all with hindsight, at the time we were just so glad of God’s provision in it all. The right person, in the right place, at the right time could only have been coordinated by God I think we can agree that it is difficult to predict the actions of someone who is manic.

Going back to the story, David was right dad’s mood meant he wanted to kill him again. While Michal warned David and he went on the run I tried to convince dad that David was a good man and that it would be sinful to raise his hand towards him. He couldn’t hear me.

There was a time when he would listen to reason. But that was in the beginning long before David came along. I remember the day I was in the firing line. I had dared to disagree with the great Saul. We were sitting on the outskirts of Gilbeah and dad was sitting under the pomegranate tree in Migron. I had decided to go and do a little bit of recon and take my armour bearer with me. We had gone over to the Philistines garrison, and we knew that God was with us guiding us. I knew that God could save us either with a big army or with a small team and I was right. With just the two of us we managed to kill 20 of them and we gained half an acre of land in the process. The Philistines must have been confused because they believed that the Israelites were coming out of hiding and they began to scatter in fear. It certainly must have looked like that for the Hebrews who had chosen to live amongst the Philistines had changed sides and joined Israel that day and began to fight for us. To a Philistine it must have looked like we were everywhere and had spies within. Dad after realising what we had done, followed us into battle and won.

Unfortunately, he had decided that the men had to fight while fasting and had announced that anyone who ate would be cursed. The men were weak and hungry, and quite frankly I hadn’t heard the order. When we went into the forest and there was honey on the ground, I automatically stuck my staff into it and ate it off the end of it. It was delicious and just the energy boost I needed; I have to say it revived me. One of the men warned me that I would be cursed because of what dad had ordered. It was definitely, a rolling of the eyes moment if you can imagine my frustration at dad’s command. Logic showed me that dad’s decision was wrong, and I said so. I pointed out that I had clearly been revived by eating and that it only made sense that the men should too after the battle. Dad thought otherwise and it led to the decision that I should die for my sin. The people on the other hand stood up for me. They had heard me explaine to dad that I hadn’t heard the order and they decided to do something. They realised that if it wasn’t for me going into the garrison, we would not be celebrating this victory over the Philistines. I was spared that day thanks to their protests. Thankfully that that was early on, before dad’s paranoia and jealousy had driven him to the point of madness. He could see reason this time.

I couldn’t trust dad’s decision making or his words. None of us could, even the servants questioned him. Not to his face obviously but they knew he could change his mind in an instant. He might have said he would do no harm to David or anyone for that matter. But in the blink of an eye, he would be ordering their destruction. Stopping a mad man with the power of a king from acting on his emotions was a fulltime job for all of us.

My service to Israel meant that I needed to be found trustworthy by those around me. In being true to my word and keeping my promises God found a true servant, and Israel would be assured safety in God’s guidance. I honoured God in my relationship with David and our behaviour toward each other, giving God the glory in all that we did guided us and protected us in those uncertain days.

My covenant with the house of David came after one of dad’s notions to kill him. I swore by almighty God to tell him the truth about dad’s plans for him always. When I questioned dad about his decision to put David to death, he hurled that spear at me too. It was clear that no one was safe from the madness of the king not even me his oldest son. It wasn’t safe for David, and I warned him of this. It was a terrible day for we did not know if we would ever see each other again. He bowed before me three times in gratitude for keeping my word and bringing him the truth. We wept together and swore a friendship beyond us. We swore a friendship before God that would extend so far into the future that our descendants would benefit from our oath. I could not nor would not betray my friend or his family and he promised the same to me before we parted ways.

We never saw each other again after that.

As for Michal and David well, dad gave her to another man. There was no choice for her in this she was a bargaining chip like all of my sisters in the politics of peace making and territory gaining. David had lost his wife and become a fugitive, he suffered greatly at the hands of my dad, the king. Constantly on the run, but never lifting a hand to harm Israel or my father. He could have ended his own anguish but instead refused to harm a hair on my dad’s head. Even after everything he put him through. David would not lift his sword against him because he understood that no matter his behaviour God had anointed him. Even the great David knew not to stand against what God had anointed.

David mourned our deaths. He wrote a lament in our honour, and he made the people of Judea learn it too. David became the great king he was meant to be. He was steadfast in his seeking God, and he was true to his word and the covenant that he made with me. David remembered me and my descendants.

We died at Gilboa, me and dad. It was after this that David kept his promise to me as he had while I was alive. Sometimes we don’t see the promises made to us in our own lifetime sometimes those promises are kept long after we are gone. This is how that all panned out.

Ziba was my dad’s steward and David sent for him and asked him if there was anyone left from the house of Saul. Ziba informed him that my son, Mephibosheth, Saul’s grandson was still alive although he was lame in both of his feet.

Do you know David brought him to the palace to sit at his table, included him in the feasting and gave him a place as though he was his son. But that’s not all, he restored back to him all of his grandfather’s land. Instead of Ziba becoming a steward to the King he was restored to serve in the house of Mephibosheth, him and every one of his 15 sons and 20 servants were assigned. Their job was to make sure that the land was worked, and the crops were brought in and Mika my grandson was provided for.

What a gift! What a promise! Such love poured out on my family for the sake of one man’s promise to another. In my absence, David became father to my son and grandfather to Mika. Adopted into his family our families became one again. I am so grateful that David did not react with indignation to the appalling treatment that he suffered under the orders of Saul. There are many out there who would have wipe out the whole household to ensure that they were safe from persecution. Not David. He remembered his promise, he remembered our love for one another, and he responded with kindness and so much more. Let’s face it, he was now King, he didn’t have to do anything, and I wasn’t there to remind him. But he chose to love.

Have you chosen love. In this world that we live in we don’t see promises kept. Covenants are broken, mercy and grace are replaced by entitlement and rights and as for love well that is mostly shown if you deserve it.

David chose the better way, and my family did not get what they deserved. They were loved and restored to their rightful place beside the King. In case you are wondering what the better way was it was God’s way. Our reward for choosing the better way was never about the promises that we made to each other, it was about the promise God had made to us. What was that promise? Well… it was the same promise he made to Moses and Joshua, to his chosen people, which includes you ‘I will never leave you or forsake you says the Lord.’ He works for us not against us. We just need to trust in Him. If two men who tended sheep and donkeys can keep their promise to each other how much more will the God who created the universe keep His promise of eternity to you. I will leave that thought with you.