



Friends forever

A friend loves at all times (Proverbs 17:17).

Friends are important to everyone. Friendship is central to community and society. It is pivotal to congregational life. It is essential in marriages. Without friends, life is tragically lonely. Human friendship is a beautiful gift of God.

A friend loves at all times. The Bible has much to say about friendship. The Psalms mention friends, friendship and friendliness often. The Book of Proverbs also speaks of friends. We can read about friendship in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Think of Proverbs 18:24: *A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.* This is the friend, the kind of friend, mentioned in Proverbs 17:17. Our brothers can be, and often are, our best friends. I teach my children that they ought to consider their brothers and sister as their best friends: friends for life. Brothers, however, are not always loyal. Families do drift and rift apart. We, therefore, seek a better friend, a more loyal friend.

Proverbs 17:17 speaks of loyalty. A friend loves you in the midst of deepest troubles. A friend stands by you in difficult times. Friendship is a covenant. It is a relationship bound up in promises and obligations. It is a relationship of both commitment and action. Friendship is shown in this: undying loyalty, faithfulness to death. It is embodied in steadfast faithfulness and abiding love.

This is the friendship of David and Jonathan. Jonathan, heir apparent to the throne, stood aside for David, the Lord's anointed. Jonathan supported David as a friend, even to death. And David loved his friend to the end. David laments his friend's death with one of the most powerful funeral dirges in history. His song in 2 Samuel 1 is a heart-rending lament from the lips of a real friend. There David sings at the news of the death of his friend, *"I grieve for you Jonathan my brother; / You were very dear to me; / Your love for me was wonderful, / More wonderful than that of women."*

David is not suggesting that marital love is less than friendship. No, this underlines Jonathan's complete faithfulness and self-denying commitment to David, who was to take his place on Saul's throne. Jonathan was a friend who stuck closer than a brother. Though he was no brother by blood, his spirit was joined to David's.

But friendship is a dangerous thing, for friends are not always loyal. We all have had the experience, I think, of being let down by friends. We expect them to be there for us and they are not. Having many companions in good days does not guarantee that there will be any in times of trouble. Friends bring us great pain when they abandon us. Scripture speaks of this too. Think of Job's three friends. They were bound to Job in a covenant of friendship (Job 2:11). Yet these friends scolded and berated him when they should have comforted him and encouraged him. They accused him of sin when they should have stood by him in his innocence. Other failed friends come to mind. Thomas said that he would go to Jerusalem to die with his Lord. Peter also said that he would die for his Lord. Both ran away in their Lord's hour of need. Mark abandoned Paul. Demas, in love with this present world, left Paul.

But there is even more. Friends can turn on us. Those whom we trusted, become enemies. David experienced that when his friend Ahithophel joined Absalom in his rebellion against father David. Psalm 41:9 comes to mind: *Even my close friend, whom I trusted, he who shared my bread, has lifted up his heel against me.* David's son, the Lord Jesus Christ, quotes this Psalm when He spoke of Judas. His friend betrayed Him. His bosom friend sold Him for the price of a slave. Even as we sit at the Lord's Supper table we should remember that the Lord Jesus was taken away, betrayed

by a friend. He was bound for our sins, because one of his friends had gone out into the night in order to carry out his schemes. A friend betrayed the Lord. Our Lord knows what betrayal is like. When your friends fail and leave you, know that your Lord Jesus Christ is the Friend who sticks closer than a brother. He knows betrayal. He is the Friend who loves at all times. He will never leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:6).

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