

FIRST SAMUEL

FATHERS, BROTHERS,
FRIENDS, AND OTHERS



A
STUDY
OF

MALE RELATIONSHIPS

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men
by H. Michael Brewer

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Fathers, Brothers, Friends, and Others: A Study of Male Relationships

A Seven-Session Bible Study for Men

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First Samuel

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introduction

Men's

BIBLE

Study

The Reason for This Study

*We trust in God the Holy Spirit,
everywhere the giver and renewer of life . . .
The same Spirit
who inspired the prophets and apostles
rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture.*

These words from “A Brief Statement of Faith,” adopted officially by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in 1991, state a primary conviction of Presbyterians. Presbyterians believe that God’s Spirit actually speaks to us through the inspired books of the Bible, “the unique and authoritative witness to Jesus Christ in the church universal, and God’s Word” (*Book of Order*, PC(USA), G 14.0516) to each of us.

Recent studies, however, have shown that many men know very little of what the Bible says; yet many do express a desire to learn. To help meet that need, this Bible study guide has been prepared at the request and with the cooperation of the National Council of Presbyterian Men of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and its president, Youngil Cho.

The Suggested Pattern of Study

Men may use this guide in a variety of weekly settings: men’s breakfasts, lunches in a downtown setting, evening study groups in homes, and many more. The material provides guidance for seven one-hour sessions. To facilitate open discussion it assumes a small group of men, no more than twelve, one or preferably two of whom might be designated as leaders. Each session is a Bible study; there must be a Bible for each man. The Bible, not this study guide, is the textbook.

The men are not required to do study outside the group sessions, though suggestions are given for such study. To be enrolled in this study, however, each man is expected to commit himself to make every effort to attend and participate fully in all seven sessions.

The pattern of study is to be open discussion. Agreement by all to follow seven rules will make such study most effective:

1. We will treat no question as stupid. Some men will have more experience in Bible study than others, but each man must feel free to say what he thinks without fear of being ridiculed.

2. We will stick to the Scripture in this study. The men in the group have gathered for Bible study, not to pool their own ideas on other matters, however good those ideas may be.

3. We will regard the leader(s) as “first among equals.” Leaders in these studies are guides for group discussion, not authorities to tell the group what the Bible means. But following their study suggestions will facilitate learning.

4. We will remember that we are here to hear God speak. Presbyterians believe that the Spirit, which spoke to the biblical writers, now speaks to us through their words. We do not come simply to learn about the Bible, but with minds and hearts expecting to receive a message from God.

5. We will listen for “the question behind the question.” Sometimes a man’s gestures and tone of voice may tell us more of what he is feeling than his words do. We will listen with sympathy and concern.

6. We will agree to disagree in love. Open discussion is an adventure full of danger. Men will differ. None of us will know the whole truth or be right all the time. We will respect and love and try to learn from each other even when we think the other person is wrong.

7. We will make every effort to attend and participate faithfully in all seven sessions of this study. Participation will involve making notes in the spaces provided for your own answers to questions relating to the study and, from time to time, sharing with others your answers, even when you worry that they are not the “right” answers.

Some Suggestions for the Leader

Those who lead groups in this study should be especially aware of these seven “rules.”

Though two leaders are not required, having a team of leaders often helps to open up the group for freer discussion by all its members. One leader might be responsible for introducing the study at a given session and for summarizing other parts of the study where such summaries are suggested. The other leader might take more responsibility for guiding the discussion, helping to see that each man who wishes has a chance to speak, helping to keep the study centered on the Scripture, and moving the group along to the next subject when one has been dealt with sufficiently. Or the leaders might alternate in their responsibilities or share them equally.

This material is a guide for study within the group. The study material for each session is to be distributed at the time of that session. The study guide for each session is in the form of a worksheet. Each man should have a pencil or a pen. Spaces are provided for each student to make brief notes for his answers to questions on the passages to be studied. A good deal of the time may be

spent as the men quietly, individually, decide on and note their own answers to these questions. Some are designed simply to guide the students in looking at key passages. Others are intended to help the student think about what these passages mean to us today. The real basis of this study should be the ideas that come in the times when the men are quietly studying their Bibles and deciding individually on their answers to these questions. When a man has made a note on his sheet concerning his answer to a question, he has had to do some thinking about it. And he is more likely to be willing to tell the group his answer.

There should also be time, of course, for the group to share and compare answers to these questions. In the New Testament the Holy Spirit seems most often to be manifest within a group. God speaks to us authoritatively through Scripture, but often what God says to us in Scripture becomes clearest when voiced by a Christian friend. We learn through each other.

Each session ends with an Afterword. During the session the leader may call attention to things in the Afterword when they seem appropriate.

Among the many characteristics of a good discussion leader are these: (1) He tries to give everyone who wishes a chance to speak, without pressuring anyone to speak who does not want to. (2) He does not monopolize the discussion himself and tries tactfully to prevent anyone else from doing so unduly. (3) He is a good listener, helping those who speak to feel that they have been heard. (4) He helps to keep the group focused on the Scripture. (5) He tries to watch for signs that show that the group is or is not ready to move on to the next question.

This kind of study can generally be carried on much more effectively with the participants sitting informally in a circle or around a table rather than in straight rows with the leader up front. Frequently, especially in a large group, you may want to divide into groups of three or four, or simply let each man compare his answers with those of the man sitting next to him.

Often, more questions have been given than some groups are likely to cover in one hour. If you don't answer them all, don't worry. Pick the ones that seem most interesting and let the rest go.

The questions in this study guide are phrased in various ways and come in different orders, but basically they are intended to help the participants think through three things: (1) What does this passage say? (2) What does it mean? And (3) What does it mean now to you? It is our conviction as Presbyterians that when believers study together God's word in an atmosphere of prayerful expectancy, God will speak to them.

Throughout each study there are Scripture quotations. These are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. While this version is used throughout this study guide, it may prove beneficial for each participant to use the version with which he feels most comfortable.

Testing has shown that the discussion that arises in each study may cause the session to last longer than the intended sixty minutes. A clock figure has been placed in each session to suggest where a study might be divided into two sessions. Discussion is at the heart of these studies and should not be sacrificed for the sake of presenting the lesson exactly as suggested in this study guide.

In the letter inviting the writers of these studies to attempt this work, Dr. Marvin Simmers, having recognized some difficulties, added, "Remember, we are not alone!" The leader also may take courage from that assurance.

First Samuel

INTRODUCTION

The books of 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel comprise a long sermon written as history. Or perhaps we should say that these books are history written as a sermon. While the stories contained in these books are much older, the books, as we have them, do not appear to have been written until sometime during the exile in Babylon.

The writers seem to have wanted to preserve faithfully the stories that had been handed down for generations, but they also wanted to draw out the meaning of those stories. First Samuel and Second Samuel are intended to teach us the lessons of Deuteronomy, namely that obedience to God brings blessing and disobedience invites disaster.

Originally, First Samuel and Second Samuel were one uninterrupted narrative, separated into two scrolls for ease of handling. Our English Bibles have enshrined that artificial division, and so we speak of two books of Samuel. In this series of study and discussion sessions we will look only at 1 Samuel.

Historical Setting

The context for the events that we read about in 1 Samuel is a time of great transition for Israel. The Israelites have existed as a loose confederacy of tribes for some generations, but this casual arrangement has left the Jewish people ill-prepared to deal with their enemies, the Philistines. The Philistines, who have mastered the techniques of iron working, are technologically superior to the Israelites, who are still living in the Bronze Age. The Philistines seem to be better organized for conquest and defense. During the period of the Judges, Israel had depended on one charismatic leader after another to rescue them from their enemies, but the Philistines have grown stronger and stronger. Israel's claim on Palestine is in serious jeopardy when 1 Samuel opens.

Onto the stage of history, at this critical moment, stride three larger-than-life figures. Samuel is the last of the Old Testament judges, as well as a priest and a prophet. Samuel's birth was accomplished through the miraculous intervention of God, and he was delivered into the hands of the priest Eli to be raised at the shrine at Shiloh. Samuel's shadow looms large across the events of this book that bears his name.

The second figure is Saul, the son of a wealthy farmer, whom Samuel anoints to be Israel's first king. Saul is brave, strong, and charismatic, but his reign is a tragic story. He falls from favor with Samuel because of his acts of disobedience to God, and he becomes increasingly depressed and unstable as he attempts to rule Israel.

After Samuel's break with Saul, we meet young David,

who is secretly anointed to be Israel's next king. David is handsome, shrewd, ambitious, a redoubtable warrior, and a wise administrator. Though he makes some serious mistakes in his lifetime, he seems to be passionately in love with God, and the Bible calls him a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). David was the greatest king of Israel, an arresting combination of shepherd, soldier, lover, poet, and politician.

These three men—Samuel, Saul, and David—are the chief players in 1 Samuel. The old priest Eli, who raises Samuel, also plays a prominent role, as does Saul's son Jonathan. Most of our discussions will concentrate on these men.

The Story

We will not attempt to cover every event in 1 Samuel, so you may want to keep an outline of the whole story in the back of your mind.

Samuel is born miraculously to Hannah, who has prayed fervently for a son. When the boy is old enough, Hannah keeps her vow to God by bringing Samuel to be raised by Eli the priest. Eli is a man of integrity, but his sons are corrupt. Samuel grows in body and spirit under Eli's tutelage. Meanwhile, Israel's situation worsens. Israel hits rock bottom when the Philistines capture the Ark of the Covenant, Israel's holiest reminder of God's presence. Eli dies when he hears the news.

Samuel helps to rally Israel in the years that follow, but eventually the Israelites demand that Samuel anoint a king to govern them. Samuel opposes the idea, believing that God is Israel's only true king. Nevertheless, Samuel acquiesces and anoints Saul to be king.

Saul consolidates the tribes into a nation and mounts a reasonably effective defense against the Philistines. But two rash actions put Saul at odds with God, and at God's command Samuel secretly anoints David to be king.

Saul knows nothing of this secret anointing. Saul knows David as a talented musician and as the brash young man who challenged Goliath. Saul loves David at first and gives him a prominent place in his army, but soon grows increasingly jealous of David's popularity. Eventually, Saul sets out to kill David.

Saul's son Jonathan also loves David as a soul brother. He helps David escape Saul's wrath and David becomes an outlaw in the wilderness, pursued by Saul and mistrusted by the Philistines. Sometime during this period Samuel dies, and David is left without his trusted mentor. When Saul accidentally falls into David's hands, the shepherd-warrior spares the king's life, but the two are never truly reconciled.

When Saul and Jonathan are killed in battle with the Philistines, David grieves bitterly, but the way is open now for him to claim the throne of Israel, which God has established for him.

The outline that follows is from *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*.¹ It will help you keep the story in mind.

Studying the Bible or Studying Men?

There are many approaches one might take in examining all the lessons of 1 Samuel, but we will view the book through the lens of men's relationships. As with any lens, this will overlook some parts of the book, but will bring others into sharper focus.

Why men's relationships? Most of the important events in 1 Samuel relate directly or indirectly to the relationships between the men we have discussed above.

First Samuel will not provide us with Twelve Easy Steps for Establishing Meaningful Friendships Among Men. The Bible is seldom so tidy. What we can expect to find in 1 Samuel are stories—stories of friendship and love, stories of jealousy and betrayal, stories of fathers and sons, stories of mentors and apprentices.

By their nature stories are fluid, not readily condensed into morals and principles and outlines. These stories allow us to look into the lives of men who lived long ago, but who faced many of the same life-issues that we wrestle with. These stories have survived because they resonate with our own stories and because the breath of God blows through them. If we look closely, in the faces of Samuel and Saul and David we might glimpse our own faces, either as we are or as we want to be.

Welcome to the story. I hope you will bring your own stories into the mix as well, so that together we may gain a clearer understanding of the story that God has in mind for the men of today.

<h2 style="margin: 0;">1 Samuel</h2> <p style="margin: 0;">The Last of the Judges and the Beginnings of the Earthly Monarchy in the Kingdom of God</p> <p style="margin: 0;"><i>"Samuel said to Saul, . . . 'Your kingdom will not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart; and . . . appointed him to be ruler . . . because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you' " (13:13–14).</i></p>			
<p>1 Samuel: Last of the Judges</p> <p>In answer to prayer, Samuel is born, 1 and is reared in the house of the Lord, 2–3 The Philistines defeat Israel and even briefly capture the ark, 4–6 Encouraged by Samuel, Israel resists the Philistines, 7 Reluctantly, Samuel at last agrees to appoint a human king for Israel, 8</p>	<p>9 Saul: First of the Kings</p> <p>Guided by God, Samuel anoints Saul as Israel's first king, 9–10 Saul wins battles, 11, 14 Samuel gives a farewell address, 12 but now turns from Saul to David, 13, 15</p>	<p>16 The Early Life of David, Israel's Greatest King</p> <p>David gains high position in Saul's court, 16–18 But Saul's jealousy forces David to flee, 19–24 David becomes leader of a guerrilla band, 25–27</p>	<p>28 The Last Days of Saul</p> <p>Through a witch, Samuel's ghost warns Saul that he will be killed, 28 The Philistines advance on Saul, though without David, 29 (David's battle with Ziklag), 30 Saul kills himself after being wounded in battle by the Philistines, 31</p>
<p>Sources: First and Second Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings are one continuous story and contain both contemporary court records and later tradition, completed and edited during the exile.</p>		<p>Purpose: First Samuel extols the glories of Samuel, Saul, and David, but it also warns that the welfare of the nation depends on its faithfulness to its true king, the Lord.</p>	<p>One Relationship to the New Testament: The concept of the kingdom of God is basic to the teaching of Jesus.</p>

Resources

The footnotes will indicate a number of books that deal with men's issues from a variety of Christian perspectives.

If you wish to pursue deeper research on the fine points of 1 Samuel there are a multitude of commentaries available. Here are a few that I have found particularly helpful and accessible:

Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel (Interpretation)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990.

David F. Payne, *I & II Samuel (Daily Study Bible of the Old Testament)*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982.

James D. Newsome, Jr., *1 Samuel, 2 Samuel (Knox Preaching Guides)*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982.

Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel (Word Biblical Commentary)*. Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983.

William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

1. William M. Ramsay, *The Westminster Guide to the Books of the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 86.

session

Men as Fathers

AND SONS

1 Samuel 1:12–28;
2:11–26; 3:1–18

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Fatherhood? Sonship? Why begin our discussion there? After all, not all men are fathers.

True. Although most adult men may be fathers in our culture, by no means is every male called to fatherhood. However, every male begins his life as a son, and our relationship (or lack of relationship) with our fathers has a lifelong impact on our personalities, our possibilities, our outlook on the world, and our self-image. We can hardly begin a discussion of male relationships without considering what is ideally our first relationship with another man.

Furthermore, 1 Samuel is woven from such a web of paternal and filial ties and frictions that the book could almost be retitled *Fathers and Sons!* Eli, Phinehas, and Hophni; Saul and Jonathan; Samuel and his sons—these crucial bonds provide much of the impetus for the generations-long saga that unfolds in 1 Samuel.

Indeed, this Old Testament book begins with the birth of a son, Samuel, and the boy's "apprenticeship" to a surrogate father, Eli. Eli, a priest, watches over an important Israelite shrine at Shiloh. He is a man who treats his responsibilities seriously and works diligently to serve God. Eli takes young Samuel under his wing (and his roof) and raises the boy in dedication to God. In effect, Eli becomes an adoptive father to Samuel, whose biological parents live some distance away.

Although Eli is a faithful priest, we discover that his sons, Phinehas and Hophni, have not followed in his footsteps. These "scoundrels" (2:12) were inexcusably abusing their priestly authority. Priests were normally given part of the sacrifices that worshipers brought to the shrine; this was understood to be an appropriate contribution to the livelihood of the priests and their families. But apparently Eli's sons were claiming more than was their due, and were demanding portions of the meat that should have been completely burned on the altar.

In effect, Phinehas and Hophni were stealing from God, and they were not above using intimidation and threats to get their way. The irreverent young men also had sexual relations with the women who assisted at the shrine. The writer sums up the sinfulness of Phinehas and Hophni by telling us that "they had no regard for the LORD" (2:12). Eli is obviously grieved by his sons'

behavior, but on the one occasion when we are permitted to see Eli correcting Phinehas and Hophni, the priest is tragically ineffectual.

The sparse biblical account leaves us wondering what went wrong in Eli's family. When Phinehas and Hophni were young, was Eli busier with his priestly duties than with his fatherly responsibilities? Did the boys grow up without boundaries because Eli failed to provide loving discipline? Or did Eli do all the right things, and his sons made the wrong choices on their own?

On the other hand, under Eli's tutelage Samuel "continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and with the people" (2:26). Again we are curious about details the biblical text leaves out. Has Eli learned about fathering from his earlier mistakes? In his aging years is Eli able to spend more time with Samuel than he did with his own sons? Or is Samuel simply cut from a different cloth than Phinehas and Hophni?

While we can only conjecture about cause and effect, we can speak with certainty of the grief and loss that derive from broken relations between fathers and sons. Many of us have personally experienced that pain.

As we look for biblical principles to guide us in our quest for healthy male relationships, we will also explore the insights offered by modern research and the social sciences. The Bible is not a how-to manual that will answer every question raised by fathers and sons, but as we discover ourselves mirrored in these timeless stories we may be opened to unsuspected possibilities in our own relationships.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Have the group read silently 1 Samuel 1:12–28 and 2:11–26. Or, if you are comfortable doing so, the leader may summarize the content of 1 Samuel 1:12–28 and ask the group to read only the second passage. In either case, after the readings are finished ask the group to list the important persons and key events in the readings.

Elkanah and Hannah dedicate Samuel to God as a Nazarite. This vow obligates Samuel to abstain from the fruit of the vine, to leave his hair uncut, and to refrain from any contact with dead bodies—all outward symbols of the boy's lifelong consecration to God.

Aside from the act of baptism, in what ways do we dedicate our children to God?

The decision to make Samuel a Nazirite and to leave him in Eli's care seems to have been made solely by his mother. Do you think fathers in our culture defer child-rearing decisions to mothers? If so, why does this happen? How do you think parental responsibility ought to be shared by fathers and mothers?

One of Eli's mistakes as a father is suggested by God speaking to Eli through a prophet who says, "Why . . . honor your sons more than me?" (2:29). Should a man put God before his own family? In what ways does a man's personal faith affect his children?

Considering 3:13, Eli may also have failed his sons by refusing to discipline them. Can you recall instances in your own life when you were enriched or strengthened by loving discipline? Can you recall times when you had to discipline others? Why is discipline so important to growing children?

Most Christian fathers would willingly die for their children in a moment of crisis, but in our daily decisions we too often devote our time and energy to other priorities. What do you see as the rivals that lure men away from their fatherly responsibilities? Do you know of men who have dealt creatively and faithfully with these demands on their time?

David Popenoe, a professor of sociology at Rutgers University, maintains that the presence of an active and involved father helps children in ways that mothers cannot.¹ Fathers serve as role models for sons and help their daughters learn how to relate to males. Fatherly play—quite different from motherly play—teaches children about challenge, boundaries, managing emotions, and self-control, Popenoe asserts. Fathers not

only contribute to their children's independence and individuality, but paternal involvement in childcare seems to play a major role in instilling compassion and empathy in children.

In view of the importance of a father in the family, the increasing number of fatherless homes is particularly troubling. Divorce and out-of-wedlock births are the primary causes for the epidemic of absentee fathers. While divorce need not necessarily separate fathers and their children, a study in the late 1980s revealed that one in five divorced fathers had not seen his children at all in the past year, and less than half of divorced fathers saw their children more than several times a year.²

In our culture, do you believe that we take fatherhood seriously? Why or why not?

In your lifetime, what changes have you seen in the way men approach fathering? How do you feel about these changes?

How can the church help fathers live up to the demands and responsibilities of raising children?



WHAT FATHERS OWE THEIR CHILDREN

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

When we help to bring children into the world, we commit ourselves to their care and nurture. What can children reasonably expect from their fathers? What does a committed father owe to his children? Questions of this scope defy brief and simple answers, but we may safely offer some broad guidelines.

Patrick Morley stresses paternal protection from the world, loving encouragement, and daily intercessory prayer.³

Larry Crabb suggests that a father must communicate three messages to his children:

1. "It can be done."
2. "You're not alone."
3. "I believe in you."

And remember that communication with children has to do with lifestyle and actions, not just words.⁴

1. David Popenoe, "The Vanishing Father," in *The Wilson Quarterly* (Spring 1996, Vol. XX, No. 2), pp. 19–21. Essay adapted from *Life Without Father*. Copyright © 1996 by David Popenoe.

2. Popenoe, p. 14.

3. Patrick Morley, *The Man in the Mirror* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1989), pp. 92–96.

4. Larry Crabb, *The Silence of Adam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 154.

Gary Smalley and John Trent encourage a commitment to honor our children. They define honor as “a decision we make to place high value, worth, and importance on another person by viewing him or her as a priceless gift and granting him or her a position in our lives worthy of great respect; and Love involves putting that decision into action.”⁵

Among the suggested ways of giving honor to our children are helping them to value themselves, establishing loving boundaries, building positive loyalties, and offering honor to God.⁶

Some recurring themes clearly emerge:

1. A father must spend time with his children. Quality time will not replace quantity of time. Fathers who continually postpone interaction with their children are investing themselves in the wrong priorities.

2. A father must affirm and listen to his children. This is one way of communicating the value we place on our children. If children feel worthwhile in their father’s eyes, they are more likely to find esteem in their own eyes.

3. A father must lovingly discipline his children. While allowing children to be children, a father must also help youngsters learn to respect boundaries.

4. A father must encourage his children. There are more than enough voices in the world saying, “You’ll never succeed.” Children are greatly blessed by a loving father who assures them, “You can do it!”

5. A Christian father must share and model his faith. A father’s first responsibility in evangelism is to instill Christian faith in his own children. No father can make that decision on his child’s behalf, but he can be sure that his words and actions have made the love of Christ visible to his child.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Have the group read aloud 1 Samuel 3:1–18, each person taking a turn reading a few verses.

Eli seems remarkably patient as Samuel repeatedly wakes him in the wee hours! Can you recall an occasion when your father (or a father figure) gave attention to you at an inconvenient time? What feelings does that evoke for you now?

Although it takes a while, Eli listens carefully enough to Samuel that the priest is able to discern that the boy is being called by God. Do you think most fathers do a good job of listening to their children? Do you think fatherly listening is important? Why or why not?

Eli takes Samuel’s sense of calling with the utmost seriousness, and gives weight to the message that Samuel delivers from God. In what ways can fathers communicate that they honor their children and respect their gifts and interests?

As Eli obediently accepts the hard message from God, he models a dedicated faith before Samuel. How do you believe fathers can model their faith effectively for their children?

Concluding the Session

Allow the participants a few moments to reflect and respond to today’s session. Beginning with the leader, go around the circle inviting each man to share a new idea, or a disagreement, or a memory evoked by the study and discussion.

You may close with the following prayer, or one of your own choosing:

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for the men who have fathered us into manhood, and we pray for the grace to forgive their shortcomings. Help us to be good and loving fathers to those you may entrust to our care, and give them the grace to look beyond our mistakes. Amen.

5. Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Gift of Honor* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), p. 16.

6. Smalley and Trent, p. 17.

Afterword

One way of understanding and resolving the sometimes stormy relationship between fathers and children is to think of them as stages or rites of passage that men go through in their journey toward manhood.

1. *Honor or reverence*

Fathers are seen as manhood personified. No matter what kind of individual a father is, we accept him unconditionally; he becomes our definition of a man. Whether fathers live by that model or fight against it, we grow up with the image they project.

2. *Rebellion*

Although we begin with a close identity with our fathers, we have to move away from them in order to define ourselves. We may never be able to articulate it, but the first man to guide us along the road to adulthood is also the first man to obstruct us. The extent of a child's rebellion and the father's reaction vary greatly in families. While this stage may range from barely noticeable mumbling to extreme and violent conflict, especially with sons, in most families it is a time of frequent confrontation.

3. *Reidentification*

If men fail to acknowledge the imprint of their fathers, they deny themselves an opportunity for self-knowledge and growth. Accepting one's father's imprint is an important step in resolving differences. Resolving differences with a father can be important in helping men to relate to other men as well.

After learning to see their fathers as flawed human beings, men can begin to discover that they themselves are not so perfect. They can begin to recognize in themselves qualities their fathers had that are both admirable and undesirable. The struggle to become one's own person, with one's own values distinct from those of one's parents, frequently occurs when men become fathers themselves. This presents an opportunity for change. Men want to be better than their own fathers, even as they seek to pass on the valuable things they have observed and learned from their fathers to their own children.⁷

Looking Ahead

A man's relationship with his father may be the first relationship chronologically, but the first relationship in importance is a man's relation with God. Are you comfortable with the idea that we can be friends with God? Give some thought this week to what it means to you to have a friendship with God. If you wish to prepare ahead, you may read 1 Samuel 17:1–51 and Psalm 23.

7. Cecil Murphey, *Mantalk* (Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1991), p. 48.

session *two*

A Man in Friendship

WITH GOD

1 Samuel 17:1–51; Psalm 23

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Perhaps we bristle at the idea that men are called to be friends with God. We are servants of God, worshipers of God, even reflections of God. But friends? Isn't that presumptuous? After all, God is infinitely above us—all-powerful and all-holy.

God's loftiness—or transcendence—is one of the pillars of Christian theology. But an equally important theological pillar is the nearness—or immanence—of God. The Creator is willing to enter into the creation. God meets us where we are.

Thus, God approaches Abraham in loving invitation, and Abraham comes to be called the friend of God (Isaiah 41:8; James 2:23). This sort of exceptional relationship becomes the norm in the New Testament. Jesus himself represents the down-to-earth presence of God among us, and at a crucial moment Jesus says to his followers, "I do not call you servants any longer . . . but I have called you friends" (John 15:15).

Friendship with God is not a demotion for the Most High. In fact, Christ says that our friendship is founded on our obedience (John 15:14). Nor is this friendship a promotion for you and me, as if God has decided to elevate our status. Rather, the friendship that Christ reveals has always been God's will for us. As unlikely as it may seem, the transcendent God desires an intimate friendship with you and me!

This friendship is often misunderstood or misrepresented. For instance, God's friendship does not automatically shield us from hardships and calamities. The story is often told of St. Teresa during the difficulties of grueling travel, mired in the mud with her mule. Utterly dejected and miserable, the dispirited woman yelled toward heaven, "God, if this is how you treat your friends, it is no wonder you have so few of them!"¹

Nor is friendship with God a once-a-week or a one-way relationship. No living relationship between persons can long survive without time spent together in genuine mutuality. This is true of friends, parents and children, and husbands and wives. And our relationship with God is equally dependent upon our spending time with God. We affirm and build up our friendship with God through worship, prayer, Bible study, and spiritual companionship.

The Bible describes David as a man whose heart was true to God (1 Kings 11:4). While David sometimes sinned and made his share of mistakes, we are left with the impression that David loved God passionately. Just as we occasionally disappoint our human friends, so we will also disappoint God at times. But friendship does not demand perfection as much as loving commitment.

A healthy relationship with God is fundamental to human existence. We will consider a variety of ways in which men may relate to others, but friendship with God is the foundation and reference point for every other relationship into which a man may enter.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

You may have the group read silently the entirety of 1 Samuel 17:1–51, or, if the passage is too long, you may have strong readers take turns reading aloud 1 Samuel 17:3–11, 32–37, 41–49.

To review the reading, write the names David and Goliath at the top of a piece of newsprint. Ask the group to supply descriptive words or phrases from the reading that can be written under the appropriate name. Then allow participants to add other words or phrases from their own understanding of the characters in the story. When the review is completed, invite the group to address the following questions.

Goliath is described as a formidable and well-armed warrior. Why was David willing to face Goliath in spite of the odds?

Trust is one component of our friendship with God. Can you find evidence in the words of David that the shepherd boy trusted God?

1. Isabel Anders, *The Faces of Friendship* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1992), p. 11.

In what areas of your life do you find it relatively easy to trust God? In what areas do you find it difficult to trust God? What could you do to increase your trust of God?

David was a shepherd. In what ways do you think this occupation may have helped or hindered David's friendship with God?

How much time do you spend alone in the presence of God? Do you think it is important to spend undistracted time with God? What gets in the way of your spending time with your Friend, and what could you do to improve the situation?

Look at Goliath's relationship with his own gods in verse 43. How does this compare with David's relationship with the Lord?

Patriotism doesn't seem to be David's primary reason for facing Goliath. In view of David's words in verses 46–47, what do you believe is David's motivation for going into battle?

True friends stand up for one another, as do David and God in this story. Can you think of times in your life when you felt that God was standing up for you?

Do you ever feel called to stand up for God? In what situations? Do you find it difficult or easy to be God's friend on such occasions? What gets in the way of our standing up for God in our daily lives?



FRIENDSHIP SET TO MUSIC

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

While David was a brave warrior and a gifted king, he is probably best remembered for the writing of psalms. The Book of Psalms contains prayers and songs about God that span the whole spectrum of human emotions. Because these psalms speak to such a wide range of experiences, the Psalter has long been the primary prayer book and hymnal for both Jews and Christians.

We are touched by the scene of David alone with his sheep in the wilderness, singing praises and laments to his Best Friend. David's most enduring accomplishments lay not in warfare or kingship, but in the realm of praise and prayer. In the Book of Psalms we get an intimate glimpse of the divine comradeship that sustained David through so much turmoil and danger.

For the most part, the Book of Psalms contains frank and open conversations with God. Sometimes those conversations are marked by praise and joy. At other times, the temper of the psalmist may reflect anger at God or despair at God's apparent absence.

Even when at odds with God, the psalmist remains committed to friendship with God. If the psalmist had already given up on God, there would be no point in continuing the conversation! We often fight most bitterly with the very ones we love the most. Why waste time and energy quarreling with those we don't care about?

Underlying the psalms is the trusting conviction that God is indeed our friend. By our reckoning, God may be slow to act, but the psalms resonate with the certainty that God will come through for us, sooner or later. A slave or a pet may jump to our commands, but God is our friend, and friends love us freely, uniquely, and often surprisingly.

Friendship with God has its ups and downs. Even the most devoted relationship with God must still navigate the turbulent waters of anger, disappointment, and bewilderment. The genius of the Book of Psalms is that such troubling feelings are not denied or suppressed, but are offered honestly—even bluntly—to God.

Thus, the Book of Psalms is marked by an emphasis on personal feelings, a raw-edged honesty, an abiding trust, and a determination to hang on to our friendship with God no matter what may happen to discourage us. If we can learn to include these characteristics in our own spirituality, our friendship with God will be immeasurably deepened and strengthened.

The headings in the Psalter were added by later generations and cannot be relied upon to accurately tell us which psalms were actually written by David. Nevertheless, there is no reason to doubt the tradition that many of the psalms were the work of the

shepherd-king. We will treat Psalm 23 as a psalm of David. Whether or not Psalm 23 truly came from David's lips is not as important as the fact that the psalm certainly reflects David's heart—a heart in love with God.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

If your participants are all using the same translation of the Bible, you may wish to read Psalm 23 aloud in unison. Your hymnbook may contain a responsive version of the psalm, or one of the men may volunteer to recite the psalm from memory.

Friends usually have some things in common. David the shepherd pictures God in the same occupation. Have you ever considered the ways that you and God might be alike? What do you and God have in common? What more would you like to have in common?

In the opening verses of the psalm David recalls the ways that God takes care of him. List below some ways that God cares for you. Whether "important" or not, be sure to include some of the examples of God's care that are most touching and meaningful to you personally.

In verse 3, David speaks of being led in "paths of righteousness" (RSV). Does a true friend care whether we are right or wrong, moral or immoral, honest or deceitful? Or is a real friend indifferent to our choices and actions? How does it affect our lifestyles if we declare ourselves to be friends with God?

David declares that he is not afraid of misfortune because God is with him (verse 4). Do you believe the friendship of God will protect us from every hurt and loss? If not, what good is the presence of God?

Not every psalm is as peaceful as this one. Psalm 22 begins, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest" (Ps. 22:1–2). What is the value of expressing our feelings in prayer? Are you comfortable sharing "bad feelings" with God? How do you feel about "accusing" God in our prayers?

What phrases in Psalm 23 speak most clearly of David's trust in God?

David expects to enjoy God's friendship through his whole lifetime. How can David be sure of God's continued love? How can you be sure?

Concluding the Session

We are often threatened or uneasy in situations that invite us to name and admit our feelings. Invite the participants to ponder silently their feelings at this very moment. Reassure everyone that they will not be asked to share their feelings aloud. Perhaps the study has raised emotions, or maybe individuals are carrying feelings that relate to other areas of life. After a few moments of self-appraisal, you may close with this prayer:

God our Friend, you know us inside and out because you made us who we are. You know us because you entered into our world and our lives through Jesus. You know us because your Spirit lives in us. There are no secrets from you, and so we admit our feelings to you right now. *(Allow a few moments of silence.)*

We're not afraid to tell you about the places where we need help in our lives. *(Allow a few moments of silence.)*

We trust you to stick with us even after you have seen the parts of us we try to keep hidden from the world. Thank you for being our friend forever. Amen.

Afterword

Writer Robert Farrar Capon in his book *The Third Peacock* sheds interesting light on two aspects of friendship, as it relates to God and to others:

“When we say that a friend ‘helped’ us, two meanings are possible. In the case where our need was a Band-Aid, a gallon of gas or a push on a cold morning, we have in mind mechanical help, help for times when help was at least possible. But when nothing can be helped”—when there is no easy answer —“when the dead are irretrievably dead and the beloved lost for good,” it is *presence* that matters, not mechanical help. “The only way [God’s help] makes any sense is when it’s seen as personal: When we are helpless, there he is. Jesus is blithely paradoxical—or inconsistent, if you like. . . . His chief concern is to *be himself for you*. And since he is God, that is no small item.”

Friendship with God, as we even find the boldness to speak of it, is a matter of *being*, and of being ourselves with God, as God is God with us.²

“The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend,” the Book of Exodus says (Exodus 33:11), and in the Book of Isaiah it is God himself who says the same thing of Abraham. “Abraham, my friend,” he calls him (Isaiah 41:8). It is a staggering thought.

The love of God. The mercy of God. The judgment of God. You take the shoes off your feet and stand as you would before a mountain or at the edge of the sea. But the *friendship* of God?

It is not something God does. It is something Abraham and God, or Moses and God, do together. Not even God can be a friend all by himself apparently. You see Abraham, say, not standing at all but sitting down, loosening his prayer shawl, trimming the end off his cigar. He is not being Creature for the moment, and God is not being Creator. There is no agenda. They are simply being together, the two of them, and being themselves.

Is it a privilege only for patriarchs? Not as far as Jesus is concerned at least. “You are my friends,” he says, “if you do what I command you.” The command, of course, is “to love one another,” as he puts it. To be his friends, that is to say, we have to be each other’s friends, conceivably even lay down our lives for each other. You never know (John 15:12–15). It is a high price to pay, and Jesus does not pretend otherwise, but the implication is that it’s worth every cent.³

Looking Ahead

Are most of your male friends within your own age group? Mentoring—sharing respect, support, and wisdom between generations—is an often neglected relationship among males. Next session we will look at Samuel’s mentoring relationship with David. You may wish to read 1 Samuel 16 and 19:18–24 in preparation. You may also wish to review your memories of older men who have served you as mentors.

2. Anders, pp. 11–12.

3. Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 50.

session *three*

Men as

MENTORS

1 Samuel 16; 19:18–24

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

“Son, you won’t live long enough to make all the mistakes yourself,” my father has often told me. “You might as well try to learn from a few of mine.”

Modern men are in desperate need of mentors! Ideally our fathers serve as our mentors, but we do not live in an ideal world. Absentee or inadequate fathers are far too common. Sometimes the stresses of growing and facing issues that are different from those our fathers faced create so much conflict that a mentoring relationship is difficult to sustain. Even the most devoted father cannot entirely fulfill the need a man has to receive respect, tradition, and wisdom from members of the previous generation.

What is a mentor? The word itself derives from a Greek myth. When Odysseus went off to war, he asked his friend Mentor to keep an eye on his son. When trouble arose in the household, one of the Greek deities descended from the heavens to dwell in Mentor’s body. Thus Mentor was able to give sound advice and wisdom to his friend’s son.

In our language, “mentor” has come to mean a teacher, an advisor, or a coach—typically an older person who hands along traditions to a younger person. We don’t have to subscribe to Greek mythology to understand that something holy and heavenly takes place in a mentoring friendship. The mentor is one provision God has made for our continued growth and learning in manhood.

But our culture does not readily supply opportunities for mentoring:

- Largely gone are the days of apprenticeship.
- We no longer pass on trades from grandfather to father to son.
- In the workplace, older, experienced workers are often viewed as an outdated and overpaid liability to be “let go” or pensioned off into early retirement.
- Multigenerational households—in which children may be blessed by the enriching presence of grandfathers or uncles—are the odd exception nowadays.
- Schooling is no longer carried out through discipleship.

- The generation gap continues to create a vague mistrust and suspicion between men of different ages.
- Our culture generally devalues aging people, and any sense of deference or respect for those who have journeyed further along on the road of life is quickly disappearing.

All of these factors, as well as a misguided sense of self-sufficiency among too many men, have conspired to pronounce last rites over the mentor.

But the need remains. As men, we are diminished by cutting ourselves off from our older brothers. We lose a sense of history and identity, as well as the important affirmation that we unknowingly crave from our elders. At the same time, we cheat our younger brothers by refusing to take on the mantle of the mentor, sharing our insights, giving our attention, offering our praise and assistance.

The mentor not only blesses, but also benefits. To genuinely listen to the young is to continue our own learning. To spend time with the young is to be energized by their enthusiasm. And to have our advice and insights warmly received by a member of a younger generation is uniquely uplifting.

We rightly remember David as a great leader, but we should not overlook the fact that David had a valued and beloved mentor in Samuel. This was not the first mentoring relationship into which Samuel had entered. Samuel had tried to serve as a mentor for Saul, but Saul’s growing instability and continuing errors in judgment had frustrated Samuel’s efforts. Finally, in disappointment and bitter grief, Samuel had broken with Saul. Soon afterward, the older and wiser Samuel helped a young and inexperienced David begin the journey toward the throne of Israel.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Invite the group to read 1 Samuel 16:1–13 silently or aloud. You may wish to ask for two volunteers if you choose to read aloud—one to read all the words of Samuel and the other to read the remaining lines.

Why is Samuel in danger as he sets out to find David in Bethlehem?

Can you see any risks involved in the mentoring relationship? What are those risks? How might they be minimized?

God is directly involved in establishing the mentoring friendship between Samuel and David. If you were seeking such a relationship, how might God give help to you? Could you expect help from the church?

With God's help, Samuel is able to see possibilities in David that no one else has seen, not even David himself. One might say that a mentor tries to see another person as God sees them. Can you recall an occasion when someone was able to see something special in you? Did that make a difference to you?

Has there ever been a time when you were able to see the hidden potential in another person? What did you do about it? How do you feel about it now?

Do you believe David's father, Jesse, is at fault because he doesn't see David in the same way that Samuel does?

Does the nurture of a loving father remove the need for a mentor?

The Holy Spirit comes to David through the anointing of Samuel. Why do you think God chooses to work in our lives through the presence of other people? Have you ever been conscious that God was working through you to touch someone?



SOMEONE TO TURN TO

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Howard Hendricks believes that every man needs to actively seek three important relationships in his life.¹

Dr. Hendricks insists that a healthy man needs a Paul, a Barnabas, and a Timothy

A Paul is a mentor, a spiritually mature man who has some mileage on the road of life. Obviously, this person need not be perfect or have all the answers! What is crucial is a willingness to invest himself in your life and to share honestly from the storehouse of his own successes and failures.

A Barnabas is a friend with whom we can be ourselves, a fellow sojourner who will care about us, travel beside us, and share accountability with us. In Sessions 5 and 6 we will further explore this kind of friendship.

A Timothy is a younger man in whose life you can invest yourself, someone who will welcome you as a mentor. In the life of a Timothy you can help to build for a future that may extend well beyond your own lifetime.

What kind of person should you look for to be your mentor? Or to turn the question around, what sort of person should you strive to be in order to serve as a mentor? Glenn Wagner lists several expectations that we can reasonably bring to any man-to-man friendship, but these apply especially to a mentoring relationship:

Acceptance—to be fully known, accepted for who I am, without becoming someone's "project."

Understanding—to be listened to without interruption and without unsolicited advice.

Loyalty—to keep confidences without ever wanting to hurt me.

Self-disclosure—to risk revealing innermost feelings without fear of rejection or manipulation.

Availability—to be there for me, night or day, even at 2:30 AM. in time of need.

Genuineness—for him to be who and what he says he is.²

1. Dr. Howard G. Hendricks, "A Mandate for Mentoring," from *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, Al Janssen, ed. (Colorado Springs: Focus on the Family Publishing, 1994), pp. 53–54.

2. E. Glenn Wagner, "Strong Mentoring Relationships," from *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, p. 59.

How and where do we seek such relationships? Remember that mentoring is essentially a special kind of friendship. We might look for Pauls or Timothys in any place that we could expect to find friends: the church, the workplace, our neighborhood, our social circles, clubs or fraternal organizations, even within our extended families. But we must be committed to genuinely search for mentor partners. Left to chance, such relationships may never happen on their own. If we want the growth and fulfillment of mentoring/being mentored, we may need to “court” the appropriate persons. For many of us, this may be a strange notion, but surely we should invest as much thought and effort in finding our friends as we would in buying a car or choosing a job.

Most men would be deeply gratified if another man invited them to lunch and said, “I see good things in you, and I’d like to get to know you better. Can we get together now and then?” Obviously some risk is involved in offering your friendship to another person, but the rewards are worth it.

Another way to seek a mentor relationship is to be watchful for the crisis moments and turning points in your life and in the lives of the men around you. In a time of illness or job loss, is there a man who proves to be particularly helpful and supportive? Cultivate that relationship! Are you drawn to stand beside a younger man who is going through family upheaval or financial problems or spiritual struggles? Perhaps these are challenges that you yourself have weathered over the years. Make yourself available and see what develops!

And trust God’s guidance. Express to God your need for a mentor and your willingness to be a mentor to someone. Pray for God’s help in establishing the relationships you long for, and remain open to wherever God might lead you. The God who gives us our daily bread will also satisfy the hungers of the heart!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

You may wish to set this passage in context. As King Saul grew more emotionally troubled, he turned against David out of jealousy and fear. While Saul might have been a mentor to David, instead he became an enemy. After fleeing his home in the middle of the night in order to escape Saul’s soldiers, David sought refuge with someone he could trust.

Ask someone to read aloud 1 Samuel 19:18–24.

Samuel has not appeared in the story since he anointed David in chapter 16. Do you think Samuel has ignored David since that event or has the prophet maintained a relationship with the young shepherd? Why do you think so?

Do you have an older friend to whom you could turn on short notice in an emergency? Do you have a mentor who will listen patiently while you pour out your troubles? If not, do you feel the need for such a person?

Now turn the last question around. Do you have a younger friend whom you would expect to turn to you in this way?

Scholars are unsure how to translate “Naioth” in verse 18, but the text makes clear that Samuel and David settled down to spend time together. Are you honestly willing to invest the time needed to cultivate a mentoring relationship with another man? What obstacles might get in your way? Do you believe the maxim that we always find time for the things that truly matter to us?

We may be confused by the details of the prophetic frenzy that fell upon Saul and his soldiers, but Samuel may have caused that condition by standing between David and his attackers. Has a friend ever stood up in your defense? Is it hard for you to admit that you need help from others?

Speaking personally, what do you think would be the hardest challenge of being a mentor?

In your own life, what do you think would be the value of having a mentor?

Concluding the Session

Because men are often uncomfortable showing their feelings, sometimes they fail to express our appreciation and admiration for their mentors. Invite your participants to consider making a phone call or sending a note this week to someone who has served them as a mentor: a father or grandfather, older brother or uncle, a teacher or coach, a pastor or a mature friend. If that person is no longer living, encourage the men to express their thanks to God in private prayer within the next few days.

You may conclude the session with the following prayer, or one from your own heart.

God of Moses and Joshua, God of Samuel and David, God of Elijah and Elisha, God of Jesus and the Twelve, God of Paul and Timothy, help us to find friends for the journey. We thank you for what we have learned from others and for what we may teach to others as we all grow together toward the fullness of the stature of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Afterword

To find the exceptional good fortune of a mentor who is also a friend is to know someone who answers letters, returns calls, asks about your life as well as tells of his or her own, finds your work of value, but is able to give constructive criticism, too. Such a person knows how to take compliments and give them; sees people as individuals, remembers names, asks about needs, and is faithful in love and prayer.

One pitfall is to continue in awe of a mentor who seems so far above what you can attain. The challenge is to be yourself with dignity and assert your own place without fuss or undue pushiness. Sometimes this means to disagree, to challenge and press a point in dialogue, as equals.³

Mentoring is a ministry of multiplication. Every time you build into the life of another man, you launch a process that ideally will never end.⁴

We need leaders in our society as well. In politics, in business, in industry, in education, in agriculture, in the professions, in the military. I don't need to remind you that the landscape is littered with the bodies of men who have forfeited their right to be leaders because they were not men of integrity. They were not men we could trust. . . . There's a severe deficiency in our culture, and it's seen in a number of areas. The first is the absence of fathers. I'm not talking only about physically absent; I'm talking about fathers who are emotionally and spiritually absent. The result is that the average boy in our society grows up and doesn't have a clue what a good father looks like.

The pedestals are empty! There's a shortage of older male models. It was well expressed by a little kid in a barbershop some time ago when I asked, "Hey, son, whom do you want to be like?"

He looked me straight in the eye and said, "Mister, I ain't found nobody I want to be like."⁵

Looking Ahead

Why do women seem to have more friends than men? Do men know how to have friends? Are men too aggressive? What are men afraid of?

Next session we will look at men as competitors and rivals. If you wish to prepare beforehand, you may read 1 Samuel 18:6–16 and 22:11–19.

3. Anders, p. 110.

4. Hendricks, from *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, p. 47.

5. Hendricks, from *Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, pp. 49–50.

session

four

1 Samuel 18:6-16;
22:11-19

Men as Competitors AND RIVALS

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

“I’m afraid.”

What harder words for a man to say aloud? What harder emotion to admit even to ourselves? Boys are chided from their youngest days to disdain fear. Even in these days when men are increasingly accepting of honest feelings, the “male creed” still consists mostly of admonitions to keep up a courageous facade. Be strong! Be brave! Be a man!

Fear is one of the great obstacles to healthy friendships between men. Beset by unspoken and unadmitted fears, many men adopt a warrior mentality that perceives every other man as a potential threat. If you doubt this, consider the variety of unexamined fears that most men carry around in an emotional tangle.

The fear of failure is a powerful reality for many men. We are afraid we will fall short in our grades or our performance on the playing field. We are afraid we won’t advance on the job or make enough money. We are afraid that we won’t be good enough fathers or husbands.

From an early age, men are repeatedly told the lie that our personal worth depends upon our accomplishments, our successes, our earning power. This explains why men can face so many setbacks stoically, but can be utterly demoralized by the prospect of losing a job. If we’re not earning, producing, getting ahead, then what good are we?

What does this have to do with male friendships? The gifts of intimacy, compassion, honesty, and warmth—the traits that enable true friendship—are not engendered in the competitive arena. We have rather few opportunities to learn friendship skills, and we are taught to discount the value of these so-called “soft virtues.”

Also, we tend to think that there is only so much room at “the top.” We must guard our turf, drive the hard bargain, get the better in every deal, make ourselves look good at the expense of others. These are the ingredients of success. In a dog-eat-dog world, men are more adept at chewing up potential competitors than at embracing possible friends.

The fear of differences further complicates our relations with other men. Scratch us deeply enough, and most of us discover that we are vaguely uncomfortable with people of other cultures, other faiths, other lifestyles, other nationalities, other races, other socio-economic backgrounds. We may speak glibly of

celebrating diversity, but we sometimes feel threatened by the differences between ourselves and others.

Fear of the feminine is a real but often unacknowledged fear among men. We are terrified that anyone should think us “sissies,” so we avoid any behavior that might be labeled as feminine. Girls and women often wear clothing that is traditionally masculine, but the average man would not be caught dead in any clothing that might be considered feminine. Girls may grow up with “boyish” names like Morgan or Rickie, but woe to the boy named Sue!

Ironically, friendship requires openness, acceptance, listening, nurturing, forgiveness, and sharing, all traits that our culture tends to define as feminine. No wonder men fall back on competition, one-upsmanship, and shoulder-punching in relating to other men.

The fear of being unmasked further inhibits genuine friendship among men. Many men have discovered in a moment of crisis that there is no other man to whom they can pour out their soul. Men may work side-by-side for twenty years without getting beyond sports talk and shallow chatting. We are afraid to let another man close enough to see our flaws, our fears, the chinks in our armor. Our weaknesses might be revealed. We might be ridiculed or exploited. Therefore we hang tough, act more confident than we are, and hope we can bluff the other guy more effectively than he can bluff us.

The fear of male intimacy is related to both the fear of the feminine and the fear of being unmasked. Two women holding hands in public or even exchanging a casual kiss rarely causes comment. Could the same thing be said of two men in our culture? Except for a brisk handshake or a hug on the athletic field, there are scarcely any “safe” circumstances in which men can touch each other in this country. We fear what others will think if we have close male friends.

We also fear male friendships because they seem dangerous. What if we let another man get close to us and he rejects us? Keeping our distance from other men or relating to them in aggressive ways minimizes the possibility that we will be hurt. So we endure the loneliness of isolation rather than take the risk of knowing and being known by a brother.

The tragic story of Saul and David illustrates the unhealthy model by which too many men still choose to relate to each other. Surely this is not what God had in mind for the sons of Adam!

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

This story takes place after the defeat of Goliath, when David has become an important military leader. David's success and popularity evoke Saul's jealousy, and thus begins a long period of suspicion and hostility on Saul's part.

Ask for four volunteers to read aloud 1 Samuel 18:6–19, each one reading one paragraph.

Saul is clearly jealous of the acclaim given to David. In what way does fear also play a part in Saul's hatred?

Saul has made it to the top. He is king of all Israel, yet he is still insecure and afraid. Why does success fail to lay our fears to rest?

Saul was at peace with David until he heard the chants of the women in the streets. How do the opinions of others affect our friendships? Can you think of an example that illustrates your answer?

Do you think David was a genuine threat to Saul, or was the danger all in Saul's imagination? How can we separate realistic fears from ungrounded worries? What are healthy ways of dealing with our fears about other men?

Do you find it personally threatening when other men perform better than you do or receive more praise? Why or why not?

By sending David repeatedly into battle, Saul hopes to keep his own hands clean while the Philistines kill David. Have you ever been in a situation where one man maintains the pretense of innocence while plotting to harm another man?

Saul pretends to favor David by offering his daughter to David in marriage. Can two men be friends while being dishonest with each other? Why or why not?

Saul's anger at David is made up of fear, jealousy, insecurity, and rivalry. What do you think are the chief reasons that men relate to each other in combative and competitive ways?

What do you think is the most important element in male friendship?



BRUISERS AND BATTLERS

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Are men more violent and aggressive than women? The statistics certainly suggest as much. Recent studies show that 89 percent of all violent crimes are committed by men; each year 1.8 million women are physically assaulted by husbands or boyfriends; and three times as many men as women are murdered.¹

Are men more violent because of physiological and biochemical factors? Are men more aggressive because of how boys are raised and socialized in our culture? Is the truth to be found somewhere in the combination of those factors? We will leave the resolution of such questions to more learned minds. It will suffice that we recognize that in our present culture, men are more inclined to violent and aggressive behavior than are women.

Shall we apologize for who we are? Not necessarily. Competition, aggression, the drive to excel over others—these traditionally male attributes have resulted in great strides and accomplishments in many areas of human life. Much of the history of culture and science has been written by the drive to explore, to tame, to overcome.

On the other hand, warfare, rape, spouse abuse, and gang violence—all activities primarily associated with men—are hardly a heritage to be proud of. The aggressive and confrontational impulse in men can be used for positive or destructive ends.

1. Stephen B. Boyd, *The Men We Long to Be* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995), p. 25.

Sociologist Myriam Miedzian distinguishes between three aspects of aggressive behavior: (1) constructive aggression, which is assertiveness and determination; (2) antisocial aggression, exhibited in extreme competitiveness and a concern for dominance; and (3) destructive aggression, or violence.²

The aggressive tendency makes male friendships more difficult. Carried to an extreme, male assertiveness leads us to control and dominate, even within our “friendships.” The drive to get ahead may lead us to evaluate potential friends on the basis of what they can do for us. If our aggressive juices are always flowing, we will find it extremely difficult to admit weakness or accept help and support from others. We may end up limiting ourselves to relationships in which we either patronize others, outdo them, or use them.

We are sometimes surprised to discover how quickly we resort to violence in order to achieve our ends. Remember that violence is not always physical in nature. Sometimes men attack each other with words, attitudes, intimidation, or financial coercion.

There is no easy way to change patterns that have been deeply ingrained (perhaps even inborn). But we believe that Christ makes us new creations. With persistence we can learn healthier ways to relate to one another. With God’s help we can treat people more like people and less like things. With the support of other men we can open ourselves to the risks and rewards of friendships. With a clearer vision of our own needs and wants we can exchange the clenched fist for the open hand.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask the group to silently read 1 Samuel 22:11–19.

Saul has previously tried to run David through with a spear; he has also tried to impale his own son Jonathan; and now Saul wreaks revenge on a priest who has innocently assisted David in escaping from the king. Saul seems to think that everyone is his enemy!

What factors in our culture and lifestyle encourage us to treat everyone as potential enemies?

What is the human cost of such an attitude?

Have you ever been the target of violence from another man? (Remember that violence is not always physical.) How did the situation affect you?

Is force the best way to deal with force? What advice would you give to a boy being bullied at school?

We are struck by the refusal of the king’s soldiers to lift their swords against the priests. What are your personal standards for aggression? When do you believe violence is justified? not justified?

Can you think of times in your life when your “male assertiveness” has served you well? Can you think of other times when your aggressiveness has caused you problems?

Do you think men or women make friends more easily? Why?

As you review your male friendships, do you find it easy to show fearfulness, uncertainty, or weakness to your friends? How do you feel about this?

Concluding the Session

Before scattering you may wish to give participants an opportunity to express agreement or skepticism regarding the ideas raised in today’s discussion. Was there anyone who had an idea that they didn’t get to share? Is anyone puzzled or frustrated by this session? Is there a different appraisal of the male situation?

After closing comments, you may close with this prayer or one of your own choosing.

Prince of peace, we are made in your image, and we are thankful for who we are. We also bear the image of our world, and sometimes we are troubled by who we are. Teach us the difference between strength and domination, between self-control and emotional aloofness, between friendship and competition. We pray in the name of Jesus, the strong and vulnerable One. Amen.

2. Boyd, p. 25

Afterword

In his insightful book *No Contest*, Alfie Kohn points out that competition often has deleterious effects on the competitor. If “winning is not everything, it is the only thing,” then there is always next year or the next opponent. Even after winning the Super Bowl, a writer observed that Tom Landry, coach of the Dallas Cowboys, never took off “his mask of fear.” You never really finish proving that you are the best at whatever you are doing. This sets up a performance anxiety and compulsiveness around performance.³

How does one describe the power men? Here are some of their characteristics.

1. They are in control

To achieve success, they learn to put a lid on their personal feelings, holding back anger as well as positive feelings of affection. Above all, they use emotional silence to prove their nondependence on others.

2. They need power

Successful men want power—must have it—and they are out to get it. Ambition drives them and they have no brakes.

3. They need to manipulate

This necessitates their treating people impersonally. They turn down the volume of their human side, often so low even they cannot hear it, and live like detached individuals. They avoid people who have nothing to offer them. On the other hand, they bestow a lot of attention on someone from whom they want something.

4. They need to make money

In our culture, money equals success, and for many men that equates with masculinity. People tend to measure their worth by the amount of money they can command on the open market.

5. They deny their human selves

Power men pride themselves on standing alone. They may choose a wife for the social functions she can provide. They often select a church for what it can do for their community standing, and for the positive statement it makes on their job résumés when they mention their membership.⁴

Looking Ahead

Do men really need friends? What is a friend and how many do you have? In this session we’ve looked at some of the obstacles to friendship between men. In the next session we will turn our attention to David and Jonathan in order to name the building blocks of friendship. If you wish to read ahead, you may study 1 Samuel 18:1–5 and 20:1–12, 35–42.

3. Boyd, p. 39.

4. Murphey, p. 58.

session *five*

1 Samuel 18:1-5;
20:1-12; 35-42

Men as FRIENDS

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Remember the cowboy in the cigarette ad? He is strong, rugged, individualistic, self-sufficient, and alone against the world. For too many men, this make-believe figure is a model for our own daily existence. We work hard, maintain an appearance of toughness, dodge intimate friendships, shun support, hide our feelings and our dreams behind a facade of bravado. As a result, we are desperately lonely and isolated.

Many men have awakened somewhere in their middle years tired and empty, emotionally estranged from those around them, wondering why they feel so lost and listless when they have faithfully accomplished all the things a man is supposed to do in our culture. Unfortunately, our cultural model of manhood doesn't teach us much about friendship. We deny the importance of friendship, confuse acquaintances with friends, and become uncomfortable when relationships with other men begin to touch us beneath our calloused surface.

All human beings have an abiding need for intimacy and deep friendship. We need to be heard, to be understood, to be accepted. Some psychologists even speak of skin hunger—the need to be touched by other people. Women seem to do a better job of finding friends to meet these needs. In general, men do not fare so well.

Men who are socially conditioned to fear intimacy with other men must search for all of these needs to be met by relationships with women, which often include a strong sexual element. Sometimes this leads to promiscuity or serial marriages, as a man moves from one encounter to another in hopes of finding fulfillment. Sometimes the same mindset leads to utterly unrealistic expectations for a man's wife, as if she must satisfy his every need for friendship, understanding, sharing, support, and companionship. In any case, a man who can only turn to women for intimacy will end up frustrated and disappointed.

Male friendship—nonsexual intimacy between men—is a basic, but neglected, need in the life of every healthy man. Fortunately, men of today are becoming more aware of this need. Contemporary men are more open to seeking opportunities for honest and vulnerable friendships with other men.

Most of us have a large number of acquaintances, but true friends are fewer. We do not want to denigrate the

many relationships that are woven through a man's life. Work-related ties, recreational buddies, folks who share mutual interests, nodding acquaintances in the neighborhood or on the bus—all of these help to enrich life and ease our daily existence. But even the sum total of these rather casual relationships cannot meet a man's need for a friend of the heart.

One way to define real friendship is to make a list of the men you could call at three o'clock in the morning when you can't sleep and need someone to talk to. That's probably a short list! Most of us count ourselves richly blessed if we have two or three genuine friends. Actually, we probably can't handle more than a small handful of friends at any one time, because friends require an investment of time and energy that our acquaintances don't expect from us.

When we turn to the Bible in search of insights about friendship, we can hardly find a better example of male friendship than Jonathan and David. Jonathan was the son of King Saul. In spite of differences in their station and upbringing, in spite of the opposition of Jonathan's father, the shepherd boy and the king's son became inseparable friends. From these unlikely comrades, perhaps we can learn something about friendship in our own lives.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Ask one member of the group to read aloud 1 Samuel 18:1-5.

Even in this very brief passage, we see the portrait of a beautiful friendship. What striking phrases does the writer use to describe the friendship between David and Jonathan?

One mark of friendship is that friends seek the good of one another. How does Jonathan seek David's good in these verses?

This passage uses the word “love” to describe the relationship between David and Jonathan. Do you find it difficult to speak of loving another man? Why or why not?

Some commentators have speculated that Jonathan and David were homosexuals. Regardless of your feelings about homosexuality, what do you believe it says about our culture that we assume intimacy must be sexual in nature?

Have you ever had a male friendship similar to that between Jonathan and David? Do you have such a friendship at present?

Patrick Morley suggests the following “pop quiz” to help us honestly evaluate the relationships in our lives.¹

1. When things go sour and you really feel lousy, do you have a friend you can tell?
 Yes No
2. Do you have a friend you can express any honest thought to without fear of appearing foolish?
 Yes No
3. Do you have a friend who will let you talk through a problem *without* giving you advice? That will just be a “sounding board”?
 Yes No
4. Will your friend risk your disapproval to suggest you may be getting off track in your priorities?
 Yes No
5. Do you have a friend who will take the risk to tell you that you are sinning? Or using poor judgment?
 Yes No
6. If you had a moral failure, do you *know* that your friend would stand with you?
 Yes No
7. Is there a friend with whom you feel you are facing life together? A friend to talk over the struggles of life that are unique to men?
 Yes No
8. Do you have a friend you believe you can trust, that if you share confidential thoughts they will *stay* confidential?
 Yes No
9. When you are vulnerable and transparent with your friend, are you convinced he will not think less of you?
 Yes No
10. Do you meet with a friend weekly or bi-weekly for fellowship and prayer, and possibly accountability?
 Yes No

1. Morley, pp. 118–19.

Take the quiz and tally your answers. Do you feel free to compare your answers with those of other men in the group? How do you feel about the results?

What aspects of friendship are most valuable to you? With the whole group, make a newsprint list of the most important qualities of friendship. You may use the quiz, as well as material in the Afterword, to jog your thinking.

What are the best qualities that you personally can bring to a friendship?

The subject of vulnerability—the willingness to drop our defenses and pretenses—comes up often in the discussion of friendship. Perhaps Jonathan handing over his armor and weapons to David is a metaphor for vulnerability. Do you believe that vulnerability is really crucial to a friendship? Explain why or why not. Do you find vulnerability easy or difficult?



FRIENDSHIP OVER THE LONG HAUL

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

Some male relationships last only as long as the circumstances are favorable. We are pals as long as we are working in the same department, as long as we are both single, as long as we both benefit from the relationship. But Jonathan and David had a friendship that weathered all kinds of changes. These two were friends for life.

What holds a friendship together for the long haul? The mystery of human love defies neat equations, but the story points up some guidelines.

- **Honesty**—David admits his fear of Saul, and Jonathan admits the treachery of his father.
- **Commitment**—More than once the word “covenant” is used to describe the friendship of Jonathan and David. Genuine commitment is not a mood or a feeling, it is a choice that we stand behind someone no matter what.
- **Feelings**—We are creatures of both thought and emotion. It is both touching and revealing that Jonathan and David weep so freely together at the prospect of their parting.

- **Help**—Friends stand up for each other. Friendship requires that we be able to admit our need for help—as David does here—and be prepared to give what help we can—as Jonathan does. For most men, receiving help may be harder than giving it.
- **Mutuality**—True friendship cannot be one-sided. Nothing is quite as disappointing and hurtful as giving love to another person without receiving love in return. Through much of the story in 1 Samuel, Jonathan seems more committed to the friendship than David. We see the other side of the friendship when we are told that David wept even more profusely than Jonathan at their parting (1 Samuel 20:41). Later in the story, after the death of Jonathan, we see David seeking out the disabled son of his old friend in order to care for him in Jonathan’s memory (2 Samuel 9). Friends are not always equally able to help each other, but true friendship is always a two-way relationship.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Have the group read aloud 1 Samuel 20:1–12, 35–42. You may take turns reading a few verses at a time, or you may ask for three readers, one each to read as the narrator, as Jonathan, and as David.

Jonathan promises David, “Whatever you say, I will do for you” (1 Samuel 20:4). Do you have a friend who would stand by you in this way? Is there someone to whom you could honestly make this promise?

Do you think Jonathan is wrong to side with David against his own father? Explain your thinking.

Male tears were much more acceptable in the culture of Jonathan and David than in our own. Why do think this is so? How would you honestly feel if you were moved to weep during a meeting of this group? Why would you feel that way?

We are once again reminded of cultural differences when Jonathan and David embrace and kiss one another. Why do you believe men are so uncomfortable touching other men in our culture? What are your feelings about this? Do you see any signs that things are changing in this regard?

Concluding the Session

Some of the participants may be saddened by today’s discussion if they are reminded of a lack of true friends in their own lives. You may wish to remind the group that making friends is partly under our own control. We cannot control the responses or feelings of others, but we can make the decision to seek real friendship for ourselves. Invite the group to share ideas about where and how men might look for sustaining friendships.

You may conclude with prayer, perhaps the following:

God our Maker, you did not mean for us to be alone. We thank you for women whose love and friendship enrich our days. But we need men as friends, too. We need other men who stand beside us through thick and thin, who will accept us, who will love us. If we have such friendships already, give us the grace to treasure and nurture them. If we have not yet made such friendships, give us the courage and wisdom to keep looking, believing that all will find who seek in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Afterword

Two Travelers were on the road together, when a Bear suddenly appeared on the scene. Before he observed them, one made for a tree at the side of the road, and climbed up into the branches and hid there. The other was not so nimble as his companion; and, as he could not escape, he threw himself on the ground and pretended to be dead. The Bear came up and sniffed all around him, but he kept perfectly still and held his breath; for they say that a bear will not touch a dead body. The Bear took him for a corpse, and went away. When the coast was clear, the Traveler in the tree came down, and asked the other what it was the Bear had whispered to him when he put his mouth to his ear. The other replied, “He told me never again to travel with a friend who deserts you at the first sign of danger.”²

Looking Ahead

There is another element of the friendship of David and Jonathan that we have yet to explore. In Session 6 we will consider Jonathan and David as spiritual friends. What does it mean to bring God into a friendship? Why are so many men seeking a place in small, covenant groups in order to hammer out their spirituality in the supportive presence of other men? If you wish to read ahead, the next session will focus on 1 Samuel 23:15–18 and Psalm 139:1–6.

2. Aesop, “The Bear and the Travelers,” from *The Book of Virtues*, William J. Bennett, ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), pp. 271–72.

session

SIX

1 Samuel 23:15–18;
Psalm 139:1–6

Men as SPIRITUAL FRIENDS

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

We have looked at the friendship of Jonathan and David as a model for our own male relationships, but we have scarcely touched on one very important dimension of that Old Testament friendship. Jonathan and David were not just friends, but spiritual friends. In a sense every true friendship has a spiritual element, but David and Jonathan explicitly commit themselves to a friendship shared in the presence of God.

More and more men are finding value in gathering with a small group of other men to commit themselves to mutual spiritual friendship and support. Within the context of Christian brotherhood, men are able to explore their manhood, bare their pain, and help one another along the journey of discipleship.

Is it healthy for men to exclude women from such groups? If the group time deteriorates into a gripe session about women, that would be unhealthy. If the all-male group becomes a substitute for seeking vital friendships with people of both genders, that also would be unhealthy.

But many men discover unique dynamics in a group composed solely of other men. The fear of being misunderstood is less intense among other men who have lived through similar experiences. Participants are free to focus on issues related to manhood. Discussions of sexuality are less inhibited. Men discover that emotional support and intimacy are not limited to male–female relationships.

The foundation for spiritual friendship—between two men or among half a dozen—is the recognition of our need for other people to share our journey toward God in Christ. We each bring different gifts and strengths to our Christian discipleship. Spiritual conversations with devoted companions can strengthen the weak places in our own lives and the lives of others.

Key to this discussion is the concept of covenant, a loving and committed relationship between persons. In religious terms we usually think of covenant as primarily vertical—covenants between God and human beings. However, the horizontal direction is also crucial in Christian spirituality. We cannot relate to God as we should without also relating to our neighbors. In mutual covenants we move beyond casual, shallow relationships and bind ourselves to stand beside each other even through difficult times.

One approach to spiritual friendship is to study some of the biblical “one another” passages that offer guidelines for life within a community of faith. For instance,

- love one another (John 13:34)
- serve one another (Galatians 5:13)
- honor one another (Romans 12:10)
- submit to one another (Ephesians 5:21)
- bear one another’s burdens (Galatians 6:2)
- pray for one another (James 5:16)
- forgive one another (Ephesians 4:32)
- welcome one another (Romans 15:7)
- encourage one another (Hebrews 10:24–25)
- instruct one another (Romans 15:14)

Spiritual friendship groups can take many shapes and conform to many different schedules. What they have in common is a covenant relationship between men who want to love and help each other in the name of Jesus Christ.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

Give the group a moment to read 1 Samuel 23:15–18 silently, and then have one person read the passage aloud.

In this passage what is the situation in David’s life? What emotions do you think David was feeling?

What was Jonathan’s response to David’s crisis? What does it mean to you that Jonathan strengthened David’s hand “through the LORD” (1 Samuel 23:16)?

Jonathan says that he will take second place to David. Are you surprised by Jonathan’s willingness to give up the throne to David? When is it healthy to put another person before ourselves? When is it unhealthy?

Jonathan didn't give David any material help or alter his situation in any way. What was the point of Jonathan's trip? Did Jonathan accomplish anything?

This is not the first time David and Jonathan have made or affirmed a covenant with one another. (Compare 1 Samuel 18:3 and 20:8.) Have you ever made an explicit covenant with another man? If so, what was the occasion? If not, why do you suppose the situation has never arisen in your life?

Recalling the introductory section above, what aspects of spiritual friendship seem most important to you? What ground rules would you insist on if you were going to join in a spiritual group with other men?

As you think about this question, you may answer out of your experience if you have ever been involved in a covenant group, or you may speculate if you have never been part of such a group. Make two lists below: first list drawbacks and difficulties, then list benefits involved with participating in a spiritual friendship group.

DRAWBACKS

BENEFITS

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As you review the pros and cons of participation in a covenant group, which side of the issue seems most compelling?

Sometimes in spiritual friendships we may have the opportunity to help one another in tangible and concrete ways, but most of the time our support will come in less visible, though no less important, ways. Much of what happens in a covenant group has to do with feeling and knowing. In such a gathering of committed friends we come to know others, we come to be known, and we come to know ourselves.

True listening is a spiritual discipline. Listening consists of attentive and unhurried waiting, a sense of nonjudgmental openness, an effort to accurately reflect what has been said, a spirit of leaning toward the speaker, and a deep desire to understand. True listening will avoid snap judgments on what has been said, will eschew zingers and put-downs, will be slow to offer unsought advice. As suggested in James 1:19, the spiritual listener will be “quick to listen, slow to speak.”

This kind of passionate and active listening is so seldom given to us that we sometimes end up paying professionals to listen to us. What a precious grace for one friend to extend to another! In the words of Robert Brizee:

To listen to another person is to offer a gift.

To listen with caring to another person is to offer a gift of awareness.

To listen with acceptance to all facets of another person is to offer a gift of healing.

To listen with patience for new ways to see the past events of another person is to offer a gift of freedom.

To listen with reverence for new beginnings emerging within another person is to offer a gift of grace.¹

Only a misguided group will attempt to force participants to share beyond their level of comfort, but when we sense that others are truly listening to us we are empowered and encouraged to open our hearts. In that opening we may discover wounds and needs that we had kept hidden even from ourselves. In attempting to express our thoughts and feelings we may come to new self-understanding. And having been truly heard by others, we are inspired to truly listen to others.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

If the participants in your group are using the same translation of the Bible, you may read Psalm 139:1-6 aloud in unison. If not, invite one person to read the passage aloud to the group as others follow along in their own Bibles. Allow time to bring up differences in wording or phrasing among the different translations.

You may wish to remind the group that we cannot be certain that David is the historical author of this psalm. However, the psalm speaks beautifully in the spirit of the shepherd-king, and we will assume it represents David's thoughts.

1. Boyd, p. 196.



KNOWING AND BEING KNOWN

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

How would you sum up the main idea of these verses in a single sentence?

Why does David take such joy in being intimately known by God?

Do you think most people secretly long to be known to another person, or do most people prefer to remain hidden from others? Explain your feelings about this.

No one can know us the way God does. If God knows us so well, why would we need to make ourselves known to our friends?

When you need to be heard deeply, to whom do you turn?

God always listens to us, and when we listen to one another we are engaged in holy work. Are you a good listener? What would you like to change about your practice of listening?

Do you think you might like to participate in a covenant group built around spiritual sharing and support? What kind of people would you want in that group? Can you name specific men—or a single man—who might join you in such a covenant?

If you decided to start a group in which you could know other men and be known to other men, how would you begin?

Concluding the Session

You may wish to set aside time at the end of the session to encourage participants to express their feelings about this group. In what ways does the group meet their needs? Does anyone wish for changes in the group? What thanksgivings can be lifted up for the life of this group?

You may close by allowing a time for silent prayer, closed by the following or a similar prayer.

Searcher of hearts, you know us inside and out. Help us to know each other and to know ourselves. Give us courage to name our secrets. Give us grace to listen from the soul. Give us the peace that reigns when brothers live together in harmony and love. We pray for each of us and for all of us, in the name of Jesus our Brother. Amen.

Afterword

One of Jesus' first acts when he began his public ministry was to form a small group. . . . Jesus carried out his public ministry in the context of that small group. He spent three years with them in close fellowship. He asked them to join the group because he wanted their support and encouragement, he wanted to team with them in ministry. And he also wanted to establish a model for generations to come as the context in which we are to live out our journey of faith. Future generations would remember what Jesus had done, how he had called together his twelve, so we too would call together our twelve.

Thankfully, the early church followed Jesus' example. The saints gathered regularly in their homes for small group fellowship (Acts 2:42). Moreover, the Apostle John stressed group fellowship to those close to him. Writing to churches in the Asian province (modern Turkey) he reminded them, "If we walk in the light, as He is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another" (1 John 1:7, RSV). . . . So, when it came to small group life, Jesus modeled it, the early church practiced it, and the Apostle John proclaimed it.²

Looking Ahead

Sometimes the hardest friendship involves making peace with ourselves. What does it mean to befriend ourselves? What gets in the way? How should we care for ourselves in a healthy way?

Our outward friendships with God and other men will suffer unless we cultivate an inward friendship. Next session we will consider David as a man in friendship with himself. If you wish to prepare beforehand, you may read 1 Samuel 24 and Psalm 139:13–18.

2. Richard C. Meyer, *One Anothering* (San Diego: LuraMedia, 1990), pp. 2–3.

session

seven

A Man in Friendship

WITH HIMSELF

1 Samuel 24;
Psalm 139:13–18

Introduction

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

It has been said that to love someone is to see that person as God intended. Perhaps that is why we so often have trouble loving ourselves—we cannot see the beauty and wonder that God has created in us. Instead, we focus on our mistakes, our failings, our imperfections, and we end up disappointed in ourselves.

Does it seem wrong to you to love yourself? Why should you feel that way? Are you not the handiwork of God, made in God's own image? Did not Christ die and rise for you? Is not the Holy Spirit at work in you even now, making you into a new creation, shaping you into the likeness of Christ?

To be sure, self-absorption and self-centeredness are not our aspirations. But an honest and balanced love for ourselves is entirely consistent with God's plan for us. How can we be at peace with God or live in harmony with our neighbors if we are at odds with ourselves?

If we could see more clearly the value of ourselves—just as we are—we would not be so easily seduced by the treadmill race for fame, wealth, and power. Once we recognize our innate worth in God's eyes, then we need not heap up never-ending accomplishments and accumulations in order to prove our worth to the world.

And while life must always be lived in community, it is our goal to be self-defined. The self-defined man has a moral center built on self-respect and self-awareness. He doesn't spend his whole life constantly reacting to the blame or condemnation or judgment that others attempt to lay on us. The self-affirming man is committed to listening to others and learning from others, but does not depend on praise or flattery for his peace of mind.

Does this mean we settle into the stagnation of self-satisfaction and close our eyes to our faults? Of course not! Growth and progress are lifelong goals. We are never going to like everything about ourselves, nor should we. James and Evelyn Whitehead suggest that each of us lives in the plural; we are a mix of many personalities and motives.

This very day I find myself multiple, with enthusiasm for many parts of my life and apprehension about many others. I am, often at once, courageous and afraid, hopeful and despondent. I find my best efforts of

care for others are laced with a variety of motives, accompanied by a range of diverse feelings. And I realize as I mature that this variety of motives and feelings does not necessarily make me bad, but it does make me who I am. . . . The challenge of self-intimacy is to better understand this plural self and to better love it.¹

But if we wait until we are perfect to cultivate a gentle love for ourselves, then we are facing a lifetime of self-loathing. We celebrate that God loves us as we are. We have experienced the love of brothers and sisters despite our undeniable failings. If others can love us in our imperfection, surely we can make peace with our own flawed selves.

One compelling reason for learning to like ourselves has to do with our relationship with God. The details of your life and your personality, the particular details of your existence—both good and bad, beautiful and ugly—form the context by which God comes to meet you. If you do not find God in the ordinary stuff of your own daily life, then you probably will not find God at all. We only have one life, and if we deny the value of that life there is nowhere else left to look for God.

How can we tell if we are practicing a wholesome self-love? Some of the hallmarks include these:

- A willingness to let others love us
- Making peace with our imperfections
- The ability to forgive ourselves and to accept forgiveness from others
- Accepting failures and defeats as natural learning experiences
- Setting realistic limits on our work and responsibilities
- Allowing adequate time for rest and recreation
- The knack for accepting gifts and compliments graciously
- The capacity to spend comfortable time alone
- The habit of paying attention to one's own feelings, both physical and emotional
- The disciplined practice of seeking God within, through prayer and self-examination

1. Evelyn Eaton Whitehead and James D. Whitehead, *Seasons of Strength* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), p. 103.



Have the group read 1 Samuel 24:1–22 silently in preparation for discussing these questions.

Is it possible that Saul’s hatred for David reflects his own hatred for himself? Explain your answer.

We have said that the self-defined man does not live by reaction. Why does David stand his ground in spite of the urging of his men to kill Saul? What does it take to stand against the crowd?

David continues to honor Saul, bowing before him and addressing him as “my lord the king.” Why does David do this? Is David diminished by his respect for the king? Why or why not?

Is David misguided to leave Saul’s fate in the hands of God? Is this a sign of confidence or foolishness? Explain your thinking.

This event appears to change Saul’s mind about David, but in chapter 26 Saul is once more seeking David’s death, and David once again shows mercy to Saul. How do you account for Saul’s vacillation? Are you surprised that David spared Saul a second time? How would you explain David’s thinking?

Can you recall a time when you (or someone you know) refused to react according to the expectations of others? How is this a sign of self-affirmation?

May be summarized by the leader or read individually by the group.

While it is certainly a greater problem for women, men are not exempt from embarrassment about our bodies. We are uncomfortable if we are too heavy or too thin or too short or too flabby. We worry about losing our hair or losing our strength. We secretly compare ourselves to male models, athletic champions, and big-screen superstars, and we come up lacking in our own eyes. And let’s be quite clear about this: To dislike our bodies is to dislike ourselves! We are not just souls temporarily wearing disposable bodies. We are physical creatures, spirit and flesh inseparably intertwined in this world. We cannot despise our bodies and love ourselves.

In fact, we pay little respect to our physical existence. Men seem to take perverse pride in working too much, resting too little, scoffing at doctor’s warnings, eating and drinking to excess, ignoring symptoms of illness, and denying pain and discomfort. If our physical life is a gift from God, why do we dishonor God by abusing the gift?

Our bodies deserve better treatment. The apostle Paul admonishes us, “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple. . . . Therefore glorify God in your body” (1 Corinthians 3:16–17; 6:20).

One way to glorify God in our physical existence is by listening to the messages we receive from our bodies. Fatigue, soreness, insomnia, stomachaches, heartburn, rigid muscles, chest pains, these are important, perhaps lifesaving, communications that we too often ignore. A loving regard for our own flesh-and-blood existence will pay attention to the alarms and warnings of our overworked and neglected bodies. Some doctors believe that one reason women live longer than men is because women are simply more in tune with their bodies. When you are talking to yourself, shouldn’t you listen?

Attending to our bodies will also put us in touch with our feelings. There are physical signals that reveal anger, anxiety, fear, nervousness, depression, pleasure, contentment, stress, and excitement. When it comes to emotions, men are notoriously lacking in self-awareness. If we honestly don’t know how we feel, how can we hope to deal creatively and maturely with our emotions?

Understanding our feelings and expressing them creatively can immeasurably enhance our health and well-being. Strokes, heart disease, back pain, ulcers, and headaches are a few of the “benefits” we derive from dismissing and repressing our emotions. Many doctors maintain that most of the people lying in hospital beds got there through worry and stress.

God made us and declared that we are good! It’s time we quit arguing the fact! We are worth loving. We deserve to be healthy. We owe it to God and to ourselves to take care of our whole selves.

Questions for Study & Discussion by the Group

We return to Psalm 139 in this session, although a different section of the psalm. You may invite the men to read Psalm 139:13–18 aloud in unison or take turns reading a verse at a time.

The picture of God knitting you and me together in the womb is a striking image! What does this suggest about our physical “design”?

What does it mean to you when the psalmist declares that we are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (vs. 14)? Name at least three wonderful things about yourself!

Do you agree that God’s works are wonderful? Do you have difficulty including yourself as one of God’s wonderful works? If so, why?

Verse 16 suggests that God has a plan for your life. In order to fulfill that plan, must you change who you are? Or does God’s plan depend on your being yourself? Explain your thinking.

Considering the weightiness of God’s thoughts, do you suppose God made any mistakes in designing and creating you?

Our lives are made of many facets. In each of the following areas, think of one thing you might do to take better care of yourself.

- Eating _____
- Enjoying my senses _____
- Exercise _____
- My work life _____
- My family life _____
- Understanding/expressing my emotions _____
- Recreation _____
- Paying more attention to body messages _____

Why do you think so many men abuse and/or neglect themselves physically? What is the Christian response to this self-abuse?

Do you believe that God loves you just as you are? Do you really believe it?

Concluding the Session

You may wish to allow a few moments to reflect on all the sessions. What ideas stand out? In what ways have participants changed their thinking or their behavior? What has been helpful or unhelpful in these sessions? Have any of the participants found areas they wish to discuss or study further? What will this group do now that this book has been completed?

For your closing prayer, you may “pass” a blessing from man to man. Either going around the circle or proceeding in no particular order, ask each man to call another man by name and say to him, “I see the image of God in you! Be good to yourself!” When everyone has received a blessing, let the whole group finish with, “Amen!”

Afterword

The chief executive of a large company was greatly admired for his energy and drive. But he suffered from one embarrassing weakness: each time he entered the president’s office to make his weekly report, he would wet his pants!

The kindly president advised him to see a urologist, at company expense. But when he appeared before the president the following week, his pants were again wet! “Didn’t you see the urologist?” asked the president.

“No, he was out. I saw a psychiatrist instead, and I’m cured,” the executive replied. “I no longer feel embarrassed!”²

Rabbi Bunam said to his disciples: “Everyone must have two pockets, so that he can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words: ‘For my sake the world was created,’ and in his left: ‘I am earth and ashes.’”³

2. Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), p. 44.

3. Kurtz and Ketcham, p. 60.

THE WRITER

The Rev. Harvey Michael Brewer is the son of Harvey Samson Brewer, Jr., the grandson of Harvey Samson Brewer, Sr., the great-grandson of George Washington Brewer, the great-great-grandson of Peter Brewer, and the great-great-great-grandson of Mark Brewer. He is the brother of Rodney Brewer and Gay Brewer. Michael is a son and a father, a brother and friend, and he is deeply grateful to God for the men who have shaped his story and walked beside him on the journey.

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