

The Child Of A Difficult Father

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] In our evening services, as we've been saying, we are studying the life of Jonathan. And the title of our series is Living by Faith, When Life is Unfair. And as we do this study, we are recognising the fact that there are many, many ways in which life is unfair. Sin has damaged the world in such a way whereby people experience suffering and people cause suffering. And so often that suffering is unfair, whether that's people caught up in a war that they never wanted to be part of, whether it's people betrayed by somebody they trusted, or maybe when it's somebody who's just plagued by inward struggles of their own making. These are such, these things that are a reality for so many people. And it's reminding us that Christianity is never about pretending that life is perfect. Christianity is about recognising that there's so many things in the world that are wrong. That's the whole reason Jesus came. The whole reason Jesus came into the world is to put right what has gone wrong, to fix something that's broken, and to bring every injustice to account, to call a humanity that has rejected him, to come back to him, to find healing, to find life. Jonathan's life is a fascinating subject to look at because it gives us two things.

It gives us an example of someone for whom life was frequently unfair, but it also gives us an example of someone who came through it all, living by faith. So far we've looked at Jonathan's courage in the face of war, we've looked at his wisdom in the face of foolish religious ideas around him. Last week we saw him gladly recognise the fact that David was going to be the king instead of him. And in all of these big kind of high-profile things Jonathan showed remarkable faith. This week I want us to look at something that's much more personal to Jonathan. We can read again verses 1-4. Saul spoke to Jonathan his son and to his servants that they should kill David. But Jonathan's son delighted much in David and Jonathan told David, Saul my father seeks to kill you, therefore be in your garden in the morning, stay in a secret place and hide yourself, and I will go out and stand beside my father in the field where you are and I will speak to my father about you and if I learn anything I will tell you. And Jonathan spoke well of David to Saul his father and said to him, let not the king sin against his servant David, because he has not sinned against you and because his deeds have brought good to you. Our title tonight is the child of a difficult father. Now before looking at Jonathan I wanted to start by saying something that's very personal to me. I want to say that in discussing this topic tonight

I am not in any way talking from personal experience. Now when I say that I don't want, I really hope that I don't sound insensitive to anybody who's had a very different experience from me, but I do just want to start by saying with thankfulness to God that I've been blessed with a wonderful father. My father has been an extraordinary blessing in my life, not just to me and to our family but to so many people in his life and work as a doctor. I have lost count of the number of people who have said to me what a difference he made in their lives and he's still a wonderful father to me and I want to say that because A, I'm so thankful to God for both my parents but B, I do not want to give any impression that anything I say tonight is coming from my personal experience because it's not. I cannot talk from personal experience about being the child of a difficult father but there are many people who could. For a lot of people what Jonathan experienced with his father is all too real and that's an incredibly hard thing for anyone and it's incredibly unfair and yet even though that can have such a massive effect on our lives it's something that we often don't talk about. I have never preached a sermon on this topic before. I don't even know if I've ever touched on this topic in a sermon before. That's another reason why Jonathan's life is so helpful for us to look at. And as we look at that I want us to just explore three things. I want to look at Jonathan's experience, then I want to talk a little bit about some of our experiences and then I want to close by seeing how God is so different. First of all then let's just unpack a little bit of what Jonathan's experience was. As I said when we were reading we'd be noticing in these teens chapters that there's a contrast being

presented between Saul and his failures and Jonathan who is successful.

Saul is king, Jonathan is his son and his heir but really it's Jonathan who shows leadership, it's Jonathan who achieves success and all the time Saul is repeatedly making mistakes.

That contrast is manifested in military victories, in the displays of courage and initiative that Jonathan shows, in the relationship between the two men have with David and most of all in terms of their relationship with God. And because of that contrast we could easily kind of place Saul here as a failure and we could place Jonathan over here as a success and kind of see them as kind of quite far apart in terms of the difference between the two men and there's no doubt that Saul is a tragic figure in the Old Testament. Jonathan is one who we can have so much admiration for so we can put one there and one there.

[6 : 32] But if we set them apart like that it's so easy to forget that they are still father and son, they're still tied together by this unique relationship and what these chapters are showing us is that Saul didn't just fail as a king, he also failed as a father. In particular there's loads of different things that we could kind of say about Saul and in many ways this kind of dynamic is scattered across all of these chapters so in order to bring it all together I'm going to just pick three key words that summarise the issues that are presenting themselves in Saul's behaviour as a father. First one is insecurity and so if we look at the things that Saul does we can see very clearly that he's insecure. We saw a bit of that last week and he was jealous of the praise that David was getting. David slain 10,000, Saul's only the thousands and it provoked Saul to anger. Coupled to that was fear. We read at the end of chapter 18 that with everything that was going on Saul became even more afraid of David and it's fascinating because in chapter 16 David had confronted and defeated Goliath. He was a hero, an ally, somebody who had rescued Saul from an awful situation and yet just a couple of chapters later Saul sees David as the enemy and the threat and so that jealousy and fear all combines to create suspicion and it continues on into the next chapter. If you read into chapter 20 you'll see that when yet again

Jonathan speaks in David's defence Saul replies by saying as long as the son of Jesse lives on earth that's David the son of Jesse neither you Jonathan nor your kingdom shall be established the man has got to die and yet again Jonathan says why what evil has he done. So Saul is suspicious of the threat that David poses he's suspicious of Jonathan's friendship with him these insecurities are making him paranoid and his thinking is totally skewed by the fact that he's convinced that David is an enemy he's someone of whom Saul always thinks the worst and again it's so fascinating because if you look if you remember back to last week we were saying that Jonathan rejoiced that David was going to become king yet again Jonathan is the one who does what Saul should have done. Saul should have rejoiced in God's purposes being fulfilled even if it meant the kingdom passing to David but Saul just can't do that he can't do that because he is gripped by insecurities he couldn't cope with David getting more praise he was convinced that David was a threat he was paranoid about everything

David did but these insecurities they didn't just plague Saul they also meant that he took them out on Jonathan and that's so often the case isn't it insecurities don't tend to make somebody quiet and timid insecurities tend to make people harsh aggressive and intimidating and it's a great reminder for us that whether it's at school at work or in community in the community the person who's a dominant bully is never the person who is most self-assured is always the person who is most insecure that's the kind of behavior that we see in Saul so we see insecurity the second thing we see is inconsistency we read about some of that so you've got Jonathan trying to placate his father say look David's not done anything and you see that in verse 6 Saul listens to the voice of Jonathan says yet as the Lord lives he shall not be put to death so he even swears he makes an oath bringing God into what he's saying he says he's not going to be put to death and so you think oh phew he's calmed down just four verses later Saul's time to kill David again and it's not the first time Saul's been inconsistent and we read about the whole issue with with Saul saying oh here's my eldest daughter you should marry her and then when the time came he was like oh yeah she gave the daughter to somebody else and then he offers another daughter and even then it's with with ulterior motives all of this leaves Jonathan in the situation where one minute his father says one thing the next he says something else and that meant that Jonathan couldn't trust what his father said it also meant that frequently

Jonathan was caught in the middle Jonathan knows that David is God's chosen king he rejoices in that but he's constantly having to deal with a father who one day is promising before God that he's

not gonna harm David the next day he's trying to kill him so there's insecurity there's inconsistency perhaps most of all there's instability one of the most tragic things about Saul it's not that he was just a totally terrible man it's the fact that there was some ways many ways in which he was good but there's this inward battle between a gifted man and a broken man and we witness in these chapters a gradual descent as Saul makes more and more mistakes and his insecurities just consume him there's times when he's good and you know we're going back to verses six to seven and Saul welcomes David back into his presence as before it's as though everything is fine again and you can read at the end of chapter 18 that Saul even prophesies at times and so we have a confusing section so you can ask me about it later if you want to know more about it but the point is that you know not everything that Saul does is bad sometimes he does stuff that's good but there's other times when his behavior is terrible let me read verses eight to ten there was war again David went out and fought with the Philistines and struck them with a great blow so that they fled before him then a harmful spirit from the Lord came upon Saul as he sat in his house with his spear in his hand and David was playing the lyre and Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear but he eluded Saul so that he struck the spear into the wall and David fled and escaped that night. Now there's a wee phrase that we may be finding difficult this idea of a harmful spirit coming from the Lord it's not the first time that phrase has appeared in Samuel you go back to chapter 16 and the same thing is said here a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented Saul and that's a wee bit of a difficult one for us to understand and this when this spirit had come on to Saul when he'd been troubled they had sought out somebody to play music for Saul in order to comfort him you can see that in the passage that we read and David the passage is on the screen and David was the one chosen to do that so David would come and he would play and by playing it would give Saul relief you see that in verse 23 whenever the harmful spirit was upon Saul David played it Saul was refreshed and was well the harmful spirit departed from him.

[14 : 33] Now as you said that's a wee bit of a hard thing for us to understand but I think we can risk making it a bit too complicated that harmful spirit had come as a result of Saul's disobedience and that's not an infrequent pattern in the Old Testament you think of the nation of Israel as a result of their disobedience as a nation God would send their enemies Philistines or whoever to come and oppress them so as a nation we see that pattern disobedience leads to God's allowing of enemies to come and oppress them exactly the same thing is happening to Saul as an individual here in because of his disobedience and God is allowing this harmful spirit to affect him and it's a chastisement from God the key point is that the person through whom healing comes is David and if you think about it that could not have been a more clear and powerful message to Saul that look David this is the man that

God has chosen even Saul himself is benefiting from David and yet Saul can't see it he can't accept it he cannot cope with the fact that David is God's chosen king he wants to cling on to it all himself and that descent into brokenness leads towards a frightening instability we've seen these verses on verse 10 8 to 10 of 19 where David as Saul tries to attack David in the next chapter he does the same thing to Jonathan and so when Jonathan speaks in defense of David for the umpteenth time Saul's anger was kindled against him and said you son of a perverse rebellious woman now this is a father speaking to his son and he says you son of a perverse rebellious woman do I not know that you've chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame and to the shame of your mother's nakedness for as long as the son of Jesse lives on earth neither you nor your kingdom shall be established therefore send and bring him to me for he shall surely die Jonathan answered his father why should he be put to death what has he done but Saul hurled his spear at him to strike him so Jonathan knew that his father was determined to put David to death you look at these verses you can see verbal abuse here with the awful things that that Saul says to Jonathan and that descends into physical abuse or at least attempted physical abuse and and if you were to read the whole of 20 chapter 20 you discover that none of this is happening in private it's all happening at a royal banquet Saul is completely unstable it's all awful Saul is insecure inconsistent unstable and Jonathan is frequently on the receiving end of it and he can't just walk away from it he can't just be like oh I'm just gonna go and just have a quiet life and get away from all this Saul is a broken difficult man but Jonathan is tied to him because he's his father Jonathan cannot change who his father is there's no getting away from it and ultimately we're gonna see in a couple of weeks time but Jonathan dies fighting at his father's side against the Philistines it all seems so unfair so we've seen insecurity we've seen inconsistency and we see instability all of that is manifested in Saul and

as a result it brought such difficult experiences for Jonathan and reading about Jonathan's relationship with his father is tragic equally tragic is the fact that all of this is so real for so many people today all of this what we've seen here all of it's been repeated a thousand times a million times since Saul there are many many people today who are the child of a difficult father and I'm sure that there's people in here who know exactly what that's like and I'm sure there's many people in our community who know what that's like and and it's important to say that that that the church isn't immune from this I think over the years there's probably been many many many fathers who were an angel when they came to church on a Sunday and were a nightmare at home I want to talk about it for a few minutes and as we do so we'll be focusing on fathers but so much of what we're saying is true for somebody who's got a difficult mother a difficult spouse a difficult boss or colleague and the same three headings are helpful because a difficult father will be somebody who's insecure now that's reminding us that everybody has a story and so often there's a spiral of hurt in people's lives where somebody who feels bruised whether it's because of their upbringing or their circumstances they then go on to bruise other people themselves people hurt others because others have hurt them and that's a pattern that happens so frequently it happens in so many ways fathers can be jealous because they don't have what others have or they haven't achieved what they wanted to do they can be afraid because they're worried that insecurities are going to be exposed fathers can be suspicious of others sometimes even of their own children and as I'm saying that's true of mothers bosses husbands wives colleagues it's all a reminder of how powerful and how dangerous our insecurities can be they are so powerful because I'm pretty sure that there are people here if you could stand in front of a hundred people and all 100 are saying saying to you you are a wonderful person whom we admire and value so much and you've got a hundred people in front of you saying all that and at the same time there's a voice in your heads that's saying they're wrong they don't really know you they don't know what you'd really like which voice are you more likely to listen to it's always that one and once these insecurities grip us two terrible things can happen one is that we can kind of feel like a victim and we can see everybody else as a threat and because we see everyone else as a threat we can justify treating them badly you look at Saul he thought he was in the right in all the awful things that he did he's just everything's just gone everything's gone mad in his mind the result in terms of a father is that a man fails to provide for his child's security because he's desperately trying to deal with his own insecurity and maybe maybe you've been on the receiving end of that maybe you have had that relationship with somebody who's far more concerned about about you thinking that they're special than they are about helping to show you that you are special a difficult father will be somebody who's inconsistent and at one level we're all inconsistent none of us are kind of perfect everyone battles in decision no one except Jesus is a model of clarity and consistency everyone else is a hypocrite at times but a difficult father is worse than that they'll say one thing one day the next day it's different you do something one day and they're they're delighted you do the same thing the next and you get hammered for it one day they make a promise the next day it's long forgotten expectations continually change boundaries move promises are broken the result of that is that trust becomes impossible and a difficult father is somebody who's unstable and you'll all I'm sure be familiar with the book Jekyll and Hyde where you have a respectable doctor and a violent murderer somebody who seems great somebody who seems awful and the whole story is based on the fact that it's actually the same person and that that's how it can be one day wonderful one day awful it's always like that and sometimes fathers can be like that but others it might be your boss or it might even be a friend at school who one day they're really nice to you the next day they're awful towards you whatever it is if you're exposed to that it's a guarantee it's a recipe for guaranteed anxiety because you spend your whole life walking on eggshells you don't know you don't know what's going to happen you're scared to say or do the wrong thing and sometimes it's nothing that you've said or done but you're just on the receiving end though what you're the one who gets lashed out at and just as it was with Saul it can lead to verbal abuse maybe the most awful things that anybody has ever said about you have come from the lips of your father or somebody else who should never teach you like that it can lead to that kind of awful verbal abuse and just as it was with Saul it can lead to physical abuse I don't know what that's like but there's so many people who do and all of this creates the nightmare situation where you hate someone you love one day they're wonderful the next they're awful you love them but you hate the person that they can sometimes be it's so unfair it's awful now for those of us who've never experienced that we need to be sensitive recognising the fact that some people carry burdens and scars and bruises that we couldn't even begin to imagine and we need to show that sensitivity and

kindness to people so often we can you know we can just judge someone's behaviour without knowing anything about what they have to go through so for those of us who've never experienced it we need to be sensitive for anyone who has experienced this you need to heal now I think that's so crucial to say it's like we're not saying just oh just get over it or pretend it didn't happen or be strong it's like you will be carrying bruises and scars and wounds that need to heal and they will only heal with time with care with protection with love from those around you who can support you so some of us have never experienced it we need to be sensitive some of us have experienced it you need to heal all of us are capable of it so we've got to be careful and maybe there's somebody listening to this sermon either right now or in the future maybe there's somebody who's actually done it maybe there's a father or a mother or a spouse or a colleague looking at this chapter and they're not saying I'm Jonathan they're saying I'm Saul and your heart is crushed with regret for all of us for all of us there is hope and the reason there is hope is because God is so different we have been thinking about insecurity inconsistency and instability I want us to close tonight by recognizing that God is the complete opposite of all of these things God is secure now when I say that I don't just mean that he's a secure place for us to go he is that and that's wonderful but I mean God in and of himself he is secure in other words he is never ever ever insecure he's never any of these things that we see in Saul that we see in so many people around us and that's revealed to us in scripture so powerfully one of the key phrases that helps us is one that comes up again and again in the Old Testament you have it here in Exodus 6 to you have it in loads of different places

[28 : 44] God comes and he says I am the Lord now that might sound so obvious but it's so crucial God knows who he is he has total self-awareness he knows that he is God he knows that there is no other he is totally secure in his identity he is able to say I am the Lord and this is massively important for every one of us because it means that God does not have to prove himself God does not have to prove himself and that is so important because this is one of the big stumbling blocks that many people have in relation to Christianity they look at God and they want and expect God to prove himself so they want evidence they want proof they want signs they want a confirmation it's like well God if you're there you need to prove that you're there in other words God you have to prove yourself but one of the most foundational truths of reality is that if God is God then he does not need to prove himself to you or to anyone else and if you think about it why would you even want God to feel like he has to prove himself why would we want a God like that it's as though you know God if you prove yourself then then we'll worship you why would you even want a God like that as though you know if he kind of ticks the boxes that we set for him oh well then we'll worship him that's that's a pathetic God we don't want to worship a God like that we do not worship

God because he's proved himself why do we worship God we worship God because he is God he is God and he is completely secured in that he does not need to prove himself to us and it makes perfect sense he does not need to prove himself what does he need to do he needs to reveal himself and that's why he comes and says I am the Lord that's why the whole of our faith is grounded on his self revelation in scripture not in not in clever ticks to prove his existence but in his revelation of himself and that security is crucial and for what we're thinking about today because if you think about it insecurities insecurities in a father or in anybody else so often they will make us lash out won't they so you look at Saul he's you know troubled and he grabs the spear and lashes out throws it at David one day throws it at Saul the next he lashes out in other words his insecurities lead him to give out undeserved hostility and that's a crucial point our insecurities lead us to give out undeserved hostility you know exactly what that is like well anybody who's dealt with the public in their lives will know exactly what that is like but you have to you sometimes end up on the receiving end of stuff and you're like what on earth was that for and people are lashing out at you in a way that's not deserved it's all because of their insecurities insecurities lead us to give out undeserved hostility God is completely different his security means that he can give out undeserved favor his perfect total security shows itself in grace in other words God doesn't need you to do anything to make him secure enough to be kind to you he's totally secure he knows who he is he knows what he wants to do and that disposition towards you to be gracious to you is grounded not on anything that you ever do it's grounded on him his character his immense incredible security God is secure God is also consistent that's another of the great emphases of the Old Testament the fact that God is not like the the gods that all the other nations worship he's not capricious he's not like you one day is this the next day is that he's not deceptive he's never ever

unreliable and that means that never does a child of God have to think what will he be like today you just think about that we come to church every Sunday the start of every new week we never ever have to think what will God be like today we never have to think that he's totally consistent that's part of the reason why the concept of covenant is so important in scripture it's reminding us that when God makes a promise he keeps it when God enters into a relationship he will always be faithful and all of this is what makes God so totally trustworthy and for anybody who has been let down by a father or let down by anybody else please what I want you to see is that this is everything that you long for everything that you long for in terms of someone you can trust someone who's consistent that's what we find in God one of the desperate realities of people who are let down by a father figure in their lives and that might not be a father it might be somebody else that they've trusted somebody who's let down and hurt so often they will say I will never trust anybody again and that's how they tend to react to these situations now that statement is I would say slightly wise and extremely foolish it's slightly wise because I can understand the fact that that statement is motivated by someone saying I don't want to get hurt again now I can understand why somebody who's been hurt would say that they just don't ever want to be in the receiving end of that deception or manipulation again but it's actually foolish because if you say I won't trust anybody else you are also saying that the only person you can ultimately rely on is yourself now history philosophy science and experience will all show you that that's a massive gamble if you look to yourself as the most trustworthy reliable person in your life that's a big gamble if you want someone that will never hurt you then you need to go to somebody who cannot deceive you and please recognize that that somebody isn't you the only one who can never ever deceive us is God and that's why for everyone who is hurting at the way other people have treated you or hurting because of the way you've maybe behaved in your own life the only one who can ultimately heal you is God he is the one who is consistent he's the one who can restore and then last of all God is stable so we've seen the instability of Saul and of many others

God is completely different God is stable now this is captured really well in the words of the shorter catechism question for now the shorter catechism was written about 400 years ago it's a document containing lots of questions and answers that help explain and summarize some key and biblical truths if I pop through to question for you'll see that the question is what is God and some of you may be familiar with the answer it says God is a spirit infinite eternal and unchangeable now that's a magnificent description of stability so stable but what it also tells us is that stability that infinite eternal and unchangeableness is in his being wisdom power holiness justice goodness and truth now do you see what that is saying it's saying that God is stable in his being that's why he's secure totally secure I am the Lord he is stable in his wisdom so he never thinks or talks rubbish he's stable in his power now that's also amazing because power and instability is incredibly dangerous when combined together that's what you had in Saul power and instability that's what we have today in Putin power and instability never with God his power is totally stable he's stable in his holiness utterly pure always pure no corruption ever he is infinite eternal and unchangeable in his justice total eternal unchangeable justice when we talk about life being unfair we are talking about injustice God is never ever like that goodness oh that's just amazing infinite eternal and unchangeable in his goodness never a speck of badness in

God and in his truth no lies no manipulation no empty promises God is all of these things but the most amazing thing of all is that God doesn't say you know I'm infinite eternal and unchangeable I am God therefore you you tiny speck here on earth you must be my servant and do what I say he doesn't say that at all he says I want you to be my child and I will love you and protect you and care for you forever and that's the whole reason why we have the gospel that's why Jesus came so that God could make you that promise and he could keep that promise and God's commitment to you is unending we said a while ago that one of the great tragedies of Saul's life is that he couldn't get away from his father of Jonathan's life is that he couldn't get away from his father was and so all the the quadrants we see in Jonathan he still faces all this unfair awful stuff because there's no getting away from the fact that Saul is his father Jonathan cannot get away from the fact that Saul is his father they're just tied together that relationship is unbreakable and and in Jonathan's life it was desperately hard and tragic the amazing thing is the amazing thing with the gospel is that it's exactly the same and completely different it's completely different in that

[40 : 41] God is so merciful so good so kind so stable so consistent and so secure the perfect father but it's exactly the same because if you put your trust in Jesus God is your father you are his child and there is never ever ever any getting away from it it can never be undone you are his

forever Amen let's pray Father we thank you for what your word has helped us think and talk about tonight we want to pray for anybody in here for whom and Jonathan's experience is their experience for those who've struggled with a relationship a hard relationship with their father or perhaps with somebody else for whom the relationship should never have been like that and we just pray for healing for everyone for children and for the fathers or parents who've been difficult we pray for healing but above all we thank you that you are different we thank you that you are infinite eternal and unchangeable in your being wisdom power holiness justice goodness and truth and we thank you that with all of these things you're our father oh we pray that every one of us would know that reality in our lives tonight and forevermore and may your son our Lord Jesus just be drawing us all closer to you we pray in his name Amen