

The Books of 1 and 2 Samuel, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 12: David Flees; Jonathan's Covenant

1 Samuel 20:1–21:15

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The aim of this lesson is to walk the class honestly through a hard transition in David's life, the beginning of his wilderness years, and to draw out three intertwined themes: loyal covenant love, the contrast between fear and faith, and God's faithful preservation of His anointed. In Jonathan, students see loyalty that holds fast at great cost. In David's flight, they see the very real effects of fear on a faithful heart. In the unfolding events, they see God quietly keeping His promise even through human weakness.

Guide the class to handle David's failures with biblical balance. The text neither excuses David's deception and feigned madness nor pronounces a heavy condemnation upon him. We should do the same. The point is not to make David either a flawless hero or a hypocrite, but to learn from a real man, after God's own heart yet gripped by fear, that fear left untrusting drives us to scheme and shade the truth, while faith brings our fear to God. Psalm 34 and Psalm 56, written from these very events, show us where David's faith finally landed.

Finally, keep the lesson anchored in God and pointed toward Christ. The deepest comfort of these chapters is not David's cleverness but God's faithfulness. The LORD preserved His anointed through friends, provision, and providence, because He had a purpose that ran through David all the way to the Son of David. Christ Himself, the truly innocent one rejected and on the run, would later use the showbread story to reveal the merciful heart of God's law. Let the class leave trusting the God who keeps His own.

Question 1

Student Question:

What does Jonathan's loyal covenant love for David (1 Samuel 20:12–17, 41–42) teach us about faithfulness that holds fast even at great personal cost?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Chapter 20 is, at its core, a portrait of loyal covenant love tested under pressure. David comes to Jonathan in fear and confusion, and the two devise a plan: David will be absent from the king's feast, and Jonathan will read his father's response to discover whether Saul truly means to kill David. The arrows shot beyond the lad will be the secret signal.

Before the plan unfolds, Jonathan reaffirms and deepens his covenant with David (verses 12–17). He calls the LORD to witness, asks David to show him the kindness of the LORD as long as he

lives, and extends the covenant to his descendants: “the LORD be with thee, as he hath been with my father.” Jonathan is binding himself to David in a loyalty that will outlast both their lives, even though he knows it means David, not himself, will have the throne.

The scene at their parting (verses 41–42) is among the most moving in Scripture. The two friends weep together, “but David exceeded.” Jonathan sends him away with words of covenant: “Go in peace, forasmuch as we have sworn both of us in the name of the LORD.” There is no bitterness, no clinging, no attempt to use the friendship for advantage. There is only loyal love releasing a friend into danger with a blessing.

Jonathan’s loyalty is costly. It will set him at odds with his father, expose him to royal rage, and confirm that he is helping the man who will replace his own dynasty. Yet he holds fast. This is what covenant love looks like: faithfulness that does not waver when keeping faith becomes expensive. In a world of fair-weather alliances, Jonathan shows us a love that is steadfast precisely when it costs the most.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jonathan’s covenant binds him to David for life and beyond, even at the cost of his own dynasty (1 Samuel 20:14–17).
- Loyal love is tested and proven under pressure, not in ease.
- The friends’ parting models love that releases and blesses rather than clings or exploits (1 Samuel 20:41–42).
- Covenant faithfulness holds fast precisely when keeping faith becomes costly.
- Jonathan repeatedly invokes the LORD as the witness and ground of his loyalty.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask the class what makes Jonathan’s loyalty so costly and so admirable.
- Discuss the difference between fair-weather friendship and steadfast covenant love.
- Consider how Jonathan releases David with blessing rather than clinging to the friendship for himself.

Question 2

Student Question:

When have you been tempted to abandon a loyalty or a friendship because it became costly or inconvenient, and how did you respond?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jonathan’s costly loyalty asks a personal question of us, because covenant love is easy to praise and hard to practice. Loyalty that costs nothing is not really loyalty; it is convenience. Jonathan’s

friendship became expensive, and he paid the price gladly. Most of our loyalties are tested precisely at the point where keeping them starts to cost us something.

Think of the relationships and commitments in your life: a marriage, a friendship, a commitment to the local church, a promise made to someone in need. It is easy to be faithful when faithfulness is pleasant and reciprocated. The test comes when the other person can no longer do anything for us, when standing by them puts us at odds with others, when keeping our word means real sacrifice.

We live in a culture of disposable relationships, where loyalty is often only as deep as the next better offer. Jonathan cuts against all of that. He had every worldly reason to distance himself from David, and every personal incentive to protect his own future. Instead he bound himself tighter. His example asks whether our commitments are covenants or merely conveniences.

Notice too that Jonathan's loyalty was anchored in something beyond the friendship itself. He kept invoking the LORD. His faithfulness to David flowed from his faithfulness to God. That is the secret of loyalty that lasts: it is rooted not merely in feeling or benefit but in covenant before God, the same God who keeps covenant with us and calls us to keep faith with one another.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Loyalty that costs nothing is convenience, not covenant.
- Our commitments are truly tested when keeping them becomes costly or one-sided.
- A culture of disposable relationships makes steadfast loyalty countercultural.
- Jonathan bound himself tighter precisely where self-interest urged him to pull away.
- Lasting loyalty is anchored in covenant before God, not merely in feeling or benefit.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask each person where a loyalty in their life has been tested by cost or inconvenience.
- Discuss the difference between commitments that are covenants and those that are mere conveniences.
- Consider how anchoring our loyalties in God sustains them when feelings or benefits fade.

Question 3

Student Question:

How does Saul's rage at his own son (1 Samuel 20:30–33) further expose the destructive power of envy and unchecked anger in a hardened heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The feast scene (verses 24–34) exposes just how far gone Saul's heart has become. When David's place at the table is empty a second day, Saul demands an explanation, and when Jonathan defends his friend, the king erupts. He insults his own son with a vile curse and then

reveals the depth of his obsession: “for as long as the son of Jesse liveth upon the ground, thou shalt not be established, nor thy kingdom.”

Saul’s envy, which began chapters earlier as a sideways glance, has now consumed everything, including his love for his own son. In verse 33, he hurls his javelin at Jonathan to smite him. The same spear he once threw at David he now throws at his own child. Envy and rage, when fed, do not stay aimed at their original target; they spread, scorching everyone within reach.

This is the terrifying endpoint of unchecked sin. Saul is no longer a man with a problem; he is a man owned by his problem. His jealousy has hardened into something that overrides reason, affection, even fatherhood. He would rather destroy his son than admit that God’s favor had passed to David. The hardened heart loses the ability to love even those closest to it.

Verse 34 records the collateral damage: Jonathan rises from the table “in fierce anger,” and grieves for David, “because his father had done him shame.” The home is shattered. This is what envy and unchecked anger do to a family. They do not stay private; they wound the innocent and poison the closest bonds. Saul stands as a sober warning of where a nursed grudge finally leads.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Saul’s envy has grown to consume even his love for his own son (1 Samuel 20:30–31).
- Rage, once fed, spreads beyond its original target; the spear thrown at David now flies at Jonathan (1 Samuel 20:33).
- A hardened heart loses the capacity to love even those closest to it.
- Saul would rather destroy his son than admit God’s favor had passed to David.
- Unchecked envy and anger shatter homes and wound the innocent (1 Samuel 20:34).

Discussion Prompts

- Trace how Saul’s envy has spread from David to his own son.
- Discuss how a hardened heart loses the ability to love those nearest to it.
- Consider the collateral damage that unchecked anger inflicts on a family.

Question 4

Student Question:

Where might unchecked anger or resentment be damaging your own closest relationships, even those you most want to protect?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Saul’s rage at his own son turns the searchlight toward our closest relationships. It is a sobering fact that the people we wound most deeply are usually the people nearest to us. Anger and

resentment, left unchecked, rarely stay contained. They leak out onto spouses, children, parents, and friends, the very people we most want to protect.

Saul did not set out to harm Jonathan. His grievance was with David. But unchecked anger does not respect boundaries. It builds pressure, and the pressure finds release on whoever is closest when it bursts. How many homes have been damaged not by some great betrayal but by a slow accumulation of unaddressed resentment that finally spilled onto the innocent?

Examine your own heart honestly. Is there a resentment you are carrying, a grudge you are nursing, a low simmer of anger that you tell yourself is justified and contained? Saul told himself the same. The question is what that anger is doing to the people around you, the sharp word, the cold withdrawal, the impatience your family has learned to brace for.

The good news is that this kind of damage is not inevitable. Anger acknowledged and brought to God can be disarmed before it spreads. Scripture does not say never be angry; it says, “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath” (Ephesians 4:26). The remedy is to deal with it honestly and quickly, before it hardens, before it spills, before it wounds the ones we love most.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The people we wound most are usually those closest to us.
- Unchecked anger does not respect boundaries; it leaks onto the innocent.
- Homes are often damaged not by great betrayals but by slow, unaddressed resentment.
- We justify our anger as contained, just as Saul did, while it harms those around us.
- Anger brought honestly and quickly to God can be disarmed before it spreads (Ephesians 4:26).

Discussion Prompts

- Ask where unchecked anger or resentment may be affecting students' closest relationships.
- Discuss how anger spreads to the innocent when it is not dealt with honestly.
- Consider practical ways to address anger quickly before the sun goes down on it.

Question 5

Student Question:

How does the episode of the showbread at Nob (1 Samuel 21:1–6; Mark 2:25–26) reveal God's heart regarding mercy, need, and the spirit of His law?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When David flees to Nob (21:1–6), he comes to Ahimelech the priest hungry and in need. The only bread available is the holy showbread, the twelve loaves set before the LORD that, by the

law, were reserved for the priests to eat. Ahimelech gives it to David and his men, and David eats. This is a striking moment, and it raises real questions about law and mercy.

What makes this episode so important is that Jesus Himself returns to it centuries later. When the Pharisees accuse His disciples of breaking the Sabbath, Jesus appeals to exactly this story (Mark 2:25–26): “Have ye never read what David did, when he had need, and was an hungred?” And He draws the principle, “The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath.” God’s law was given to serve human flourishing under His care, never as a cold mechanism to crush the needy.

We must be careful here. Jesus is not teaching that God’s commands do not matter or that we may set them aside whenever convenient. He is teaching that the spirit and intent of the law is mercy, and that the God who gave the law is not a heartless legalist. The ceremonial provision about the showbread was never meant to leave a hungry, faithful man to starve. Mercy fulfills the law’s deeper purpose.

This guards us against two errors. On one side is a hard legalism that clings to outward form while missing the heart of love it was meant to serve. On the other is a careless lawlessness that uses mercy as an excuse to ignore God’s commands. The narrow, true path honors both: it takes God’s revealed will seriously and reads it through the lens of His merciful heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- David eats the consecrated showbread in genuine need (1 Samuel 21:1–6).
- Jesus appeals to this episode to teach that mercy expresses the law’s true intent (Mark 2:25–27).
- God’s law was given to serve human good under Him, not as a heartless mechanism.
- This is not a license to ignore God’s commands but a window into His merciful heart.
- The true path avoids both cold legalism and careless lawlessness.

Discussion Prompts

- Discuss how Jesus uses the showbread story to reveal the merciful intent of God’s law.
- Ask how to honor God’s commands while reading them through His merciful heart.
- Consider the twin dangers of legalism and lawlessness and how to avoid both.

Question 6

Student Question:

When have you been more concerned with the outward form of a rule than with the mercy and love it was meant to serve?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The showbread episode presses a personal question: have we ever been more devoted to the form of a rule than to the mercy it was meant to serve? It is a subtle and respectable failing. We can be scrupulously correct about outward observance and yet miss entirely the love that the observance was meant to express and protect.

Jesus reserved some of His sharpest words for exactly this. He rebuked those who would tithe their garden herbs with precision while neglecting “the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith” (Matthew 23:23). It is possible to be technically right and relationally cold, to keep the letter while violating the spirit, to defend a rule in a way that wounds a person.

Search your own attitudes. Is there a place where you have been insisting on the form of a thing while a hungry, hurting person stood in front of you needing mercy? A place where being right has mattered more to you than being kind? A correctness that has made you rigid rather than gracious? These are the modern equivalents of leaving David to starve in the name of the showbread.

None of this means truth does not matter or that we may bend God’s commands to suit ourselves. It means that the God who gives commands is merciful, and He calls His people to reflect that mercy. The test of whether we have understood His law is often found right here: when form and mercy seem to collide in a real human need, does our heart lean toward the rigidity of the Pharisee or the compassion of Christ?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- We can be devoted to the form of a rule while missing the mercy it was meant to serve.
- Jesus rebuked those who kept the letter while neglecting mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23).
- Being technically right can coexist with being relationally cold and unkind.
- Honoring truth does not require rigidity that wounds the hurting.
- Our response when form and mercy collide reveals whether we reflect the Pharisee or Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask where students have prized being right over showing mercy.
- Discuss how to hold truth and compassion together rather than pitting them against each other.
- Consider what it looks like to reflect God’s merciful heart in our handling of rules.

Question 7

Student Question:

How does David’s deception at Nob and his feigned madness before Achish (1 Samuel 21:2, 12–13) show what fear can do even to a faithful person?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

These chapters are unflinchingly honest about David's fear and the deception it produced. At Nob, David tells Ahimelech that he is on a secret mission from the king (21:2), which is not true; he is a fugitive. Fleeing further, he comes to Achish, king of Gath, the hometown of Goliath, and when the servants recognize him as the famous David, he is "sore afraid" (21:12) and feigns madness, scrabbling on the gates and letting spittle run down his beard until Achish drives him away.

We should be careful and balanced here, as the text is. The Bible does not pause to either excuse or denounce David in these moments; it simply records them. David, the same man who once ran fearlessly toward Goliath trusting that the battle was the LORD's, is here gripped by terror and resorting to lies and pretense to save himself. The contrast is deliberate and humbling.

What we learn is sobering: fear can do this even to a faithful person. When fear takes the wheel, even a man after God's own heart reaches for self-protection through deception rather than trusting God with the outcome. The lion-and-bear faith of the pasture and the slingstone faith of the valley do not insulate David from a season of fearful scheming. Faith is not a permanent immunity; it must be renewed in each new trial.

Yet notice what the larger record tells us. Psalm 34 bears the superscription that David wrote it about this very episode before Achish, and in it he testifies, "I sought the LORD, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears." So even this low moment became, in time, an occasion for David to turn back to God and learn. The God who let David stumble did not let him fall away. Honest fear can become the doorway back to trust.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The text honestly records David's deception at Nob and his feigned madness at Gath (1 Samuel 21:2, 12–13).
- Scripture neither excuses nor heavily condemns David here; it records the truth plainly.
- Fear can drive even a faithful person to self-protective deception.
- Faith is not permanent immunity; it must be renewed in each new trial.
- Psalm 34, written of this episode, shows David turning his fear back into trust in God.

Discussion Prompts

- Discuss the contrast between David at Goliath and David at Gath, and what changed.
- Ask how fear can drive even faithful people to scheme rather than trust.
- Consider how Psalm 34 shows David turning a fearful failure into renewed faith.

Question 8

Student Question:

In what area of fear have you been tempted to take control through scheming or half-truths rather than trusting God with the outcome?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

David's fearful scheming presses a personal question we would rather avoid: when we are afraid, do we trust God or do we try to manage the outcome ourselves through control, half-truths, and self-protection? Fear is one of the most powerful forces in the human heart, and it has a way of crowding out trust and reaching for the controls.

Most of our deceptions are children of fear. We shade the truth because we are afraid of what honesty will cost. We manipulate circumstances because we are afraid of what God might allow if we let go. We spin and manage and control because, underneath, we do not quite believe that God will take care of us if we simply tell the truth and trust Him. David, in his terror, reached for a lie. We do the same in subtler ways.

Identify your own version of this. Where does fear tempt you to take control through means you know are not fully honest or fully trusting? The exaggeration that protects your image. The detail left out to avoid consequences. The frantic managing of a situation that you cannot actually control. These are the places where fear has quietly displaced faith.

The alternative is the one David eventually found and wrote down: "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee" (Psalm 56:3, also from these years). Trust does not mean we feel no fear; it means that in the fear we bring the situation honestly to God and leave the outcome with Him. The same fear that once drove David to deceive later drove him to his knees. That is the redemptive arc available to us as well.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Fear tempts us to manage outcomes through control and half-truths rather than trust.
- Most of our deceptions are children of fear about what honesty will cost.
- Underneath self-protective scheming is a quiet doubt that God will care for us.
- The alternative is to bring our fear honestly to God and leave the outcome with Him (Psalm 56:3).
- Fear that once drove David to deceive later drove him to trust; the same arc is open to us.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask where fear tempts students to take control through scheming or half-truths.
- Discuss the quiet unbelief that often lies beneath our self-protective deceptions.
- Consider what it looks like to bring fear honestly to God rather than managing it ourselves.

Question 9

Student Question:

How do we see God preserving His anointed through this whole dangerous season (1 Samuel 20:42; 21:9; Psalm 34, written of this time), even amid David's fear and failure?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Step back and see the larger story running beneath all the fear and danger: God is faithfully preserving His anointed. Through Jonathan's loyal warning, David escapes the feast alive. At Nob he is fed and even armed, for there he is given the sword of Goliath, the very trophy of his earlier God-given victory (21:9), a quiet reminder of the God who had delivered him before. At Gath, even his desperate ruse becomes the means of his escape. God's hand is at work in all of it.

This is the steady undercurrent of these wilderness chapters. David is anointed king, yet running for his life, sleeping rough, frightened and faltering. By every appearance, the promise of the kingdom seems impossibly distant. And yet, through friends and provision and providence, sometimes even through David's own flawed choices, God keeps him alive and moving toward the throne He had promised. The purpose of God does not depend on the perfection of David.

It is worth dwelling on the showbread and the sword together. At Nob, David receives bread for the journey and the sword that recalls his greatest victory. God provides both sustenance and a memorial of past faithfulness at the very moment David is most afraid. The God who fed and armed His servant in the wilderness is the God who does not abandon His own when they are weak.

Psalm 34, born of these events, gives us David's own testimony to this preserving grace: "This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them." The deepest lesson of these chapters is not David's resourcefulness but God's faithfulness. He preserved His anointed because He had a purpose, and that purpose was sure.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God preserves His anointed through friends, provision, and providence (1 Samuel 20:42; 21:9).
- At Nob David receives both bread and the sword of Goliath, sustenance and a memorial of past grace.
- God's purpose for David does not depend on David's perfection.
- God keeps His own alive and moving toward His promise even through their weakness.
- Psalm 34 testifies that the LORD hears and delivers those who fear Him out of all their troubles.

Discussion Prompts

- Trace the ways God preserves David across these dangerous chapters.
- Discuss the significance of David receiving both bread and Goliath's sword at Nob.

- Consider how God's faithfulness, not David's cleverness, is the deepest theme of the passage.

Question 10

Student Question:

Name one specific way Christ is forming you through this passage, whether toward loyal love, honesty in fear, or trust in God's preserving care.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Bring the whole study home and let Christ form you through it. These chapters have set before you loyal love, honest struggle, and a preserving God. Each of those threads leads to Jesus, and each presses for a specific response in your life this week. Ask the Lord which thread He is pulling on in your own heart.

Perhaps it is loyal love. Jonathan's steadfast covenant, holding fast at great cost, points to the One who is the truest friend, the One born for our adversity, who laid down His life and never let us go. Christ may be calling you to a loyalty that costs something, to stand by someone when it would be easier and safer to walk away. Loyal love is His own character forming in you.

Perhaps it is honesty in fear. David's flight, his half-truths, his feigned madness, all warn us how fear corrodes trust. And the innocent Christ, rejected and on the run, who Himself appealed to the showbread to reveal God's mercy, walked His own road of suffering without deception, entrusting Himself to the Father who judges righteously. He may be teaching you to bring your fear to God honestly rather than managing it yourself.

Or perhaps it is trust in God's preserving care. The same God who kept David through the wilderness, who fed and armed and guarded him, is the God who in Christ has promised never to leave nor forsake His own. Whatever your season, name one specific way He is forming you, whether toward loyal love, honesty in fear, or settled trust, and take that one step. The God who preserved His anointed will preserve you too.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The chapters' threads, loyal love, honesty in fear, and God's preservation, all lead to Christ.
- Jonathan's costly loyalty points to Christ, the truest friend who never lets us go (Proverbs 18:24; John 15:13).
- The innocent Christ walked His road of suffering in trust, not deception (1 Peter 2:23).
- God's preservation of David assures us of His promise never to leave His own (Hebrews 13:5).
- Sanctification calls for one specific, named step of love, honesty, or trust this week.

Discussion Prompts

- Ask which thread, loyal love, honesty in fear, or trust, God is pressing on each student.
- Have each person name one specific step to take in that area this week.
- Close by anchoring the class in the God who preserves His own all the way to Christ.