

Sheltering Trees: The Gift of True Friendship

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Date: June 28, 2026

Church: 16th Avenue Gospel Chapel

References: 2 Samuel 15, John 15:13; Proverbs 18:24; 2 Samuel 15:1-6; 2 Samuel 15:13-22; 2 Samuel 15:24-25; 2 Samuel 15:29-30; 2 Samuel 15:32-34; 2 Samuel 17:27-29; 2 Samuel 18:33; 2 Samuel 19:1; 2 Samuel 19:5-6; John 15:14-15

The 2 A.M. Friend

Two a.m. in the morning when the car battery died. It didn't help things by pouring rain.

This person said, "I scrolled through my contacts, and dozens of names lit up on my screen, and yet my chest sank with the thought, Who could I actually call right now? I called Ben. He wasn't someone I hung out with every weekend. We hadn't posted a picture together in months, but he picked up on the second ring. 'Stay where you are,' Ben said. 'I'll be right there in a minute.' Twenty minutes later, headlights broke through the rain. Ben showed up with jumper cables, hot coffee, and a quiet smile. He didn't give me a lecture or ask for the full story. He just showed up. That moment changed my definition of friendship. Ben didn't just help me restart a dead car battery. He restarted my faith in people."

I began to notice patterns in the way that few others had consistently showed up in my life. That's when I realized the qualities that defined a true friend:

- Presence over performance. True friends don't care about appearance; they show up just as they are. They care about just being there, listening without trying to fix everything. They don't rush to solve all of your problems. They just make you feel that someone's listening when you talk.
- Consistency and quietness. Even when the party is over, they still check in.
- Sacrifice without keeping score. They give without keeping tallies of how many favors they've done.

These traits stood in dark contrast to the friendship I'd been chasing—relationships built on convenience, fun, or social validation.

My question to you this morning: **Do you have a friend?** I mean a real friend. Someone you could call at two in the morning in the pouring rain. Someone you could call at twelve noon when you need him. Someone that just sticks there for you when nobody else will.

I don't know if you know the name Samuel T. Coleridge. He was born in 1772 and died in 1834. Some of you might remember the poem *The Ancient Mariner*—he wrote that. But he wrote another poem, not nearly as well known, called *Youth and Age*. In that poem was a phrase: "Friends are like sheltering trees."

I want us to think about that for a moment. Sheltering trees. You ever notice in the hot sun in the park, you look for the shade? Do you ever notice that sometimes if the sky grows dark and you hear the thunder rolling, you decide, "I need to get under some cover somewhere"? Sheltering trees, leafy limbs, people that protect and care, take care of you in the winter, take care of you in the summer, and just are there like a shelter. A sheltering tree.

Maybe you've heard this phrase—I've heard it most of my life, but I never knew what its origin was. The phrase is, "A friend in need is a friend indeed." Interesting? That originated about 200 years before Christ was born, when the Roman Empire was ruling. A friend in need is a friend indeed.

One person said it like this: "Friends are like stars. You may not see them, but they're always there."

Well, a friend in need is a friend indeed. What does that mean, actually? Does this mean that when I have a need, I can only share it with one person? I only know one? No. One person who's a true friend—a friend in need is a friend indeed—or could it possibly mean that only a true, close friend will share his need with you?

Friends are important. You want to choose them wisely. You want to make sure, as much as possible, that they are a **friend indeed**. I want to speak to you this morning about friendship, and I can only say to you that friends are **essential**—they're not optional. Jesus said in John chapter 15:

[John 15:13 NKJV] - Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

Well, I happen to know someone that has greater love than that. I know someone that laid down his life for his **enemies**, for those that hated him, for those that rejected him. But in the truest sense, the Lord Jesus gives us the level, the standard, if you please:

[John 15:13 NKJV] - Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

Friends must be **cultivated**. What do I mean? You've got to work on it. They're not just spontaneous. You don't just meet someone and say, "Oh, you're going to be my closest friend." They have to be cultivated. Proverbs 18 and 24 puts it like this:

[Proverbs 18:24 NKJV] - A man who has friends must himself be friendly, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

You say, "Well, what does that mean?" That simply means that if you're a friendly person and you reach out to others in friendship, they reach back to you. A man who has many friends must show himself to be friendly to start with.

Friends impact our lives. Choose them wisely. You run with rebels, guess what? You become a rebel. You run with wise men, guess what? You become wise.

There was an interesting story about a man who thought he would do an experiment. He took a beautiful songbird and put a common, ordinary English sparrow in the cage with the songbird, hoping that the sparrow would learn to sing like the songbird. But to his surprise, the sparrow didn't learn to sing, but the songbird learned to chirp like the sparrow.

We have to be careful who we hang out with. I don't know if you've ever noticed it or not, but it's quite common for people from the South of the United States, like myself, to have a little different accent. You might have noticed that over the years. We can't really do much about it; it just comes along with the territory. But you know what's rather humorous to me is when I get around people, I find them trying to talk with that Southern accent. It seems so funny to me because they can't really do it when you're a Canadian or a Frenchman or something else, but things do catch on, you know? And knowing it, whether we intend to or not, we sort of gravitate and sort of imitate things. Choose your friends wisely. The next thing you know, you'll be imitating those friends.

Levels of Friendship

There are different levels of friendship, let me put it that way.

Most of us have **acquaintances**. Now, an acquaintance is someone you can meet here at this fellowship or this church gathering. You could meet them here. You don't really know them; you just sort of see them when you come to this particular meeting. We call these people acquaintances. Are they friends? Well, yes, to some degree they are friends. We might call them superficial friends. In other words, you say to them, "How are you today?" and they go,

"I'm fine, how are you today?" and you go, "I'm fine." Neither one of you is fine, but you're just a superficial friend, and you're not going to open up and start sharing things with people like that. They are friends, but not close friends—not yet. Maybe you'll work on that, maybe you'll develop that or cultivate that.

And then there's another level of friendship we call **casual friends**. Casual friends are closer friends than acquaintances; they might have common interests with you. You can talk about certain subjects and you're both conversing on those subjects, and you don't see them that often, but you can converse with them. We'd call them casual friends.

And then there's a **close friend**. A close friend is someone like the illustration I read before, that maybe you could call on for a particular need at an inconvenient time. You know them well enough, you've learned their character, you have similar personalities, and you would call them a close friend. They might have the same sports, hobbies, crafts, or things like that. You would have them as a close friend. It is good to have close friends.

But then there's another level, and I'm going to call this one not just a close friend, but an **intimate friend**. Now, intimate friends are people that can come to your house and sit down and not have to have all the answers and not have to have all the questions. They don't really need all the details. They're just a close friend. Maybe you've just graduated, or maybe you just got a bonus at work, or have gotten some great honor, and they come over and they're just thrilled, and they want to tell you how much they appreciate your efforts, your personality, and your character. They're just a close friend. A close friend might walk into a hospital room and just be there. A close friend will weep when you weep and rejoice when you rejoice. There's a deep commitment to close friends. A close friend should be someone that you trust with your life—someone who, as we would say in today's language, "has got your back." You can open up. You don't have to prove anything; they're just there for you.

Sometimes this intimate friend is not your husband or not your wife. That's a sad day. I could say before the Lord and call God as my witness, my beloved wife is my closest intimate friend, except for one other. And I think you probably know that is a friend that sticks closer than any other friend.

A King in Exile

Now, just in case you thought we weren't going to use our Bibles this morning, would you turn with me to 2 Samuel chapter 15, please? 2 Samuel and chapter 15.

Now, while you're finding 2 Samuel chapter 15, we're going to enter into an episode in the life of King David. Now, King David was the second king of Israel in a long list of kings. I

can't even remember how many there were altogether. The first one was King Saul, and then there was King David, and then there was King Solomon. They all reigned 40 years in Israel, and you might remember that.

King David was a man after God's own heart. King David was not perfect. He made some mistakes, and some of those mistakes, he lived long enough to suffer the consequences of. And no doubt the episode we're going to look at this morning represents some of the consequences of a bad decision where David forgot about the Lord, thought about his own need, and sinned against the Lord. And there are consequences to all sins.

In this episode, he has a son by the name of Absalom. Absalom was a bit of a conniver. He wanted to be king. And he started a coup against his father to overthrow King David as the king and to raise himself up as the new king. We read that in the first verses of 2 Samuel chapter 15:

[2 Samuel 15:1-6 NKJV] - ¹ After this it happened that Absalom provided himself with chariots and horses, and fifty men to run before him. ² Now Absalom would rise early and stand beside the way to the gate. So it was, whenever anyone who had a lawsuit came to the king for a decision, that Absalom would call to him and say, "What city are you from?" And he would say, "Your servant is from such and such a tribe of Israel." ³ Then Absalom would say to him, "Look, your case is good and right; but there is no deputy of the king to hear you." ⁴ Moreover Absalom would say, "Oh, that I were made judge in the land, and everyone who has any suit or cause would come to me; then I would give him justice." ⁵ And so it was, whenever anyone came near to bow down to him, that he would put out his hand and take him and kiss him. ⁶ In this manner Absalom acted toward all Israel who came to the king for judgment. So Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel.

Now, this is not hard to understand. Absalom wants to be the new king. Of course, he's got to get people on his side. So he goes down to the city gate, and he positions himself with people who have a complaint or a case to bring before the king. Realizing in those days—not much different from these days—when you've got some kind of government or political issue, and you can't seem to get anybody to listen to you or take your case on, Absalom said, "I'm your man. I will handle that. I'll make sure it's heard. I'll give the right answers." And he even bowed down to these people who came before him and kissed them, and stole the hearts of the people.

Well, it's not long until King David is aware of the coup. Absalom has made it known to the hearts of the people. If you look again in verse 13, same chapter:

[2 Samuel 15:13 NKJV]

¹³ Now a messenger came to David, saying, "The hearts of the men of Israel are with Absalom."

Now David's got troubles all over the place. David has personal conflicts in his own family. He's destroyed himself in some of the sins that he's done. Those sins have come back to haunt him, and now he feels guilty, if nothing else. When he writes Psalm 51 and Psalm 32, those were both psalms of conflict, confessions of his sin before God. He remembers—you know, I forget the text, it's somewhere in Samuel or Kings—where it said that God said King David did everything right except the issue with Uriah the Hittite.

You say, "Who is Uriah the Hittite?" Well, he happened to be the husband of a very beautiful lady that King David lusted after, committed immoral behavior with her, and then had that man, his servant, killed in battle. And David is now suffering the consequences of that in his own family. He's got one of his sons who raped a daughter, and then another son who kills that son. There is a terrible, dysfunctional family. David, by this point, is destroyed by guilt in his life. He's lost touch with his family. He knows certain things.

Notice verse 14 of this same chapter:

[2 Samuel 15:14 NKJV]

¹⁴ So David said to all his servants who were with him at Jerusalem, "Arise, and let us flee, or we shall not escape from Absalom. Make haste to depart, lest he overtake us suddenly and bring disaster upon us, and strike the city with the edge of the sword."

As soon as David got the message of what Absalom was doing, you know what he said? "We've got to get out of here. I know that boy. He'll burn this city down. He'll kill us all, and we must get out."

Could we say at this point in the story, it would be nice to have a friend? It would be nice to have someone stick with you at this time. It would be nice to have a sheltering tree that could help you through a hard time. Let's keep reading at verse 15:

[2 Samuel 15:15-17 NKJV]

¹⁵ And the king's servants said to the king, "We are your servants, ready to do whatever my lord the king commands." ¹⁶ Then the king went out with all his household after him. But the king left ten women, concubines, to keep the house. ¹⁷ And the king went out with all the people after him, and stopped at the outskirts.

I think it might be the Living Translation—I forget which one it was—that says he stopped at the last house. Now, imagine the king. This is the king, and he's being run out of his own city. And he's got this band of soldiers with him. Verse 18 talks about 600 of them. If you're familiar with the life of David, when King Saul was chasing him down, he had 600 men that stood with him that whole time. They're still with him, and they're going with him. David looks back, as it were, over his shoulder. He stopped at the outskirts; he stopped at the last house and he looks back. You can only imagine what is going through that man's mind and that man's heart.

Look at verse 19:

[2 Samuel 15:19-20 NKJV]

¹⁹ Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, "Why are you also going with us? Return and remain with the king. For you are a foreigner and also an exile from your own place. ²⁰ In fact, you came only yesterday. Should I make you wander up and down with us today, since I go I know not where? Return, and take your brethren back. Mercy and truth be with you."

"Go for it—as if you were just a prisoner of war anyhow, I free you. You can leave, you can go back."

Verse 21:

[2 Samuel 15:21-22 NKJV]

²¹ But Ittai answered the king and said, "As the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, surely in whatever place my lord the king shall be, whether in death or life, even there also your servant will be." ²² So David said to Ittai, "Go, and cross over." Then Ittai the Gittite and all his men and all the little ones who were with him crossed over.

Kind of reminds you of Ruth and Naomi, if you ever read the book of Ruth. And Ruth says to Naomi, "Your God is my God. Your people are my people. Where you go, I will go. Where you die, I will die." That's a true friend. It's an intimate friend.

David stops at the last house. All hope is gone. And then out of the cracks come 600 men that stood with him when Saul threatened. Now they cross over. Now Ittai the Gittite crosses over.

How many leafy limbs are on this sheltering tree? Well, it would seem to me as we read through the text—and we'll not take time to look at them all—but in verse 24:

[2 Samuel 15:24-25 NKJV]

²⁴ There was Zadok also, and all the Levites with him, bearing the ark of the covenant of God. And they set down the ark of God, and Abiathar went up until all the people had finished crossing over from the city. ²⁵ Then the king said to Zadok, "Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the LORD, He will bring me back and show me both it and His dwelling place.

You've got Zadok, and in that same verse, Abiathar. You've got them. The king said to them in verse 25—they are the priests—"Go back, take the ark." They're the ones carrying the ark of the covenant. They're on their way over Kidron, up the Mount of Olives, over into the wilderness. He said, "You go back. I've got a plan. Maybe you can be a contact. Maybe we can thwart the plans of the enemy." And so he's setting up actually a spy chain back in Jerusalem.

You'll notice in verse 29:

[2 Samuel 15:29-30 NKJV]

²⁹ Therefore Zadok and Abiathar carried the ark of God back to Jerusalem. And they remained there. ³⁰ So David went up by the Ascent of the Mount of Olives, and wept as he went up; and he had his head covered and went barefoot. And all the people who were with him covered their heads and went up, weeping as they went up.

This is the king. You're talking about a low point in this man's life. Then look at verse 32:

[2 Samuel 15:32-34 NKJV]

³² Now it happened when David had come to the top of the mountain, where he worshiped God--there was Hushai the Archite coming to meet him with his robe torn and dust on his head. ³³ David said to him, "If you go on with me, then you will become a burden to me. ³⁴ But if you return to the city, and say to Absalom, "I will be your servant, O king; as I was your father's servant previously, so I will now also be your servant,' then you may defeat the counsel of Ahithophel for me.

What David is doing is setting up more contacts in Jerusalem. But we ask ourselves this question: Who is Hushai the Archite? We don't have much information about him, but let me tell you, when the chips are down, you've come to the last house, and there's no help or no hope in sight, people like Ittai the Gittite and Hushai the Archite—I mean, they're just there for you.

Provision in the Wilderness

Later, we will read, if you turn to chapter 17, we'll look just for a moment at chapter 17 and verse 27. David has crossed over. The people have crossed over with him. Look at verse 27 of chapter 17:

[2 Samuel 17:27 NKJV]

²⁷ Now it happened, when David had come to Mahanaim, that Shobi the son of Nahash from Rabbah of the people of Ammon, Machir the son of Ammiel from Lo Debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim,

Does that ring a neat bell at all? Machir, the son of Ammiel from Lo Debar. You remember who else was in Lo Debar who went to a desert chieftain's house and was raised? That was Mephibosheth, Jonathan, Saul's son. You remember that story? Well, here is Machir from Lo Debar, a desert chieftain. Shobi's there. Machir is there. Look at Barzillai in that same verse, the Gileadite from Rogelim, notice what they brought:

[2 Samuel 17:28-29 NKJV]

²⁸ brought beds and basins, earthen vessels and wheat, barley and flour, parched grain and beans, lentils and parched seeds, ²⁹ honey and curds, sheep and cheese

of the herd, for David and the people who were with him to eat. For they said, "The people are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness."

Wow, they got a supply line came. There are all kinds of people coming. These people are friends. When the chips are down, they show up. And they show up with necessities. They show up with pallets or beds. They show up with food and water. They show up with utensils and pottery and pots. They show up to help King David and all who have crossed over with him.

David needed a sheltering tree, and the leafy branches are all over the place. God intervenes. Absalom's planning to attack David in the wilderness; he does so at his own expense, and Absalom is killed in battle. David, under grief and remorse and guilt, is not even happy—does not even rejoice. I mean, his son was his enemy, but all David could say whenever the messengers came and said God has overthrown, God has got you back in Jerusalem, you're back on the throne, the enemy has been destroyed—all David could say was, "Absalom, Absalom, oh my son, oh my son, Absalom!"

The director, the commander of the army, his name is Joab. Joab, who's kind of a shady guy himself, comes to David. Look in chapter 19 for a moment, or the last verse of chapter 18:

[2 Samuel 18:33 NKJV]

Then the king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept. And as he went, he said thus: "O my son Absalom--my son, my son Absalom--if only I had died in your place! O Absalom my son, my son!"

Look at verse 1:

[2 Samuel 19:1 NKJV]

And Joab was told, "Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom."

So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the people. For the people heard that it was said that day, "The king is grieved for his son, Absalom." The people stole back into the city that day—the people who were ashamed, they still stole away to flee from the battle. The king crossed over.

Look at verse 5:

[2 Samuel 19:5-6 NKJV]

⁵ Then Joab came into the house to the king, and said, "Today you have disgraced all your servants who today have saved your life, the lives of your sons and daughters, the lives of your wives and the lives of your concubines, ⁶ in that you love your enemies and hate your friends. For you have declared today that you regard neither princes nor servants; for today I perceive that if Absalom had lived and all of us had died today, then it would have pleased you well.

Well, whatever Joab was, he told the truth. Truth is hard to take sometimes. Joab said, "I've got one last word for you, David. If you don't get up and get back on that throne God has made a place for you, there's nobody going to spend the night with you here. All of us that have fought for you and risked our life for you, and some have died for you—nobody's even going to spend the night with you, David. God's done a bigger thing. Get back on the throne."

Thank you.

The Friend Who Sticks Closer Than a Brother

There is so much more that could be said, folks. I want to go back, in closing, to John chapter 15, please. John chapter 15.

There are a lot of times in your life that you're going to have things you cannot share with anybody. Not even your wife, or your husband, or your parents, or your children. Certainly not a friend. There are going to be times in your life when you've come to the last house. No help. No hope. And you're going to need someone.

Let me read again in verse 14 of John 15. To those who believe in the Lord, Jesus said:

[John 15:14-15 NKJV]

¹⁴ You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

Proverbs 18 says:

[Proverbs 18:24 NKJV] - A man who has friends must himself be friendly, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

At the beginning of this message, I asked you: **"You got any friends?"**

If you've got no friends on earth, if all have rejected you, if the world has turned against you, if you're at the last house and there's no one to help—there is a Man in heaven who gave his life for you. They spiked Him to a cross; He suffered and bled and died, and rose again the third day. And He wants to—are you listening?—He wants to call you His friends. He wants to be your friend.

And today, I'm asking you to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you'll have a Friend who will never forsake you. When you come to that dark moment in your life, when every other friend has forsaken you, He will never leave you or forsake you. He will be with you forever. And just to think that He wants to be your friend, and He wants you to be His friend.

Thank you.

There was a guilt-ridden Christian who had just given up. He just gave up. He went before the Lord and he said, "I have ruined everything."

God says, "I don't need you. But I want you."

That's the kind of Friend He is. God doesn't need any of us, but He wants to have a relationship with you through His Son, the Lord Jesus.

Wouldn't you just tear down the barriers today? Wouldn't you just give up and say, "My pride, my life, my money, my wife, my job... nothing matters anymore. I just need Jesus to be my Friend and my Savior"? I trust that if there's a decision to be made, you would make that decision right now.

Let's pray.

Father, in Your mercy and grace, please speak. Speak to dear ones who need to remember that You're the Friend that sticks closer than anybody else. Lord, we pray, if anyone needs to make that decision to accept Christ, they would do that this very moment and settle the issue for all eternity. In Jesus' name, amen.