**Friendship**

Friendship is part of God’s plan for a healthy social life. Williams defines friendship as “a relationship of mutual trust and congeniality.”[[1]](#footnote-1) It is important to remember that, unlike familial relationships, which are set from birth, friendship is a voluntary association. Families are determined by birth, while friendship is a free choice.

Before we examine the Bible’s teaching on the subject, we will comment on the historical context in which these instructions were given, that is, the practice of friendship among the Jews and the Greeks.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Greeks highly valued friendship. It held an important place in their culture. Although friends did gather in groups, more commonly one party would meet with another. Curiously, the Greeks considered that the highest expression of friendship was for one individual to lay down his or her life for a friend. Jesus taught His disciples the same in John 15:13. The Greeks not only enjoyed friendship, but also wrote about it. Aristotle spoke of friends as “one soul,” that is, soulmates.

The Old Testament sometimes describes friendship in covenantal terms. When two individuals became friends, they would sometimes make a covenant between themselves (see 1 Sam 23:18). A covenant obligated the parties to support one another, which extended the friendship beyond the level of feeling and emotion to promise and dedication. Because of his friendship/covenant with Jonathan, for example, David extended kindness to Jonathan’s son, Mephibosheth (2 Sam 9:1, 7; 21:7).

In the apocryphal work *Sirach*, we find specific instruction about friendship (see *Sirach*, 6.5-17; 11.29-12.18; 22.19-26; 37.1-6). In *Sircah*, we also read, “A faithful friend is a strong defense, and he that findeth him findeth a treasure. A faithful friend is beyond price, and his worth cannot be weighed. A faithful friend is a ‘bundle of life,’ he that feareth God obtaineth him (*Sirach*, 6.14-16).[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Hebrew term for friendship is רֵעַ (*rea*). It can refer to a friend, a near neighbor, a countryman, a comrade, the friend of the bridegroom, or a lover. It is also used in the expression “one another,” which in the Hebrew is rendered “a person with his friend.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Other Hebrew terms expressing this concept are אַלּוּף (*aluph*), meaning “one engaged,” מִיֻדָּע (*miyudah*), or “acquaintance,” and אֹהֵב (*othev*), denoting “one who loves.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In addition, the phrase אִישׁ שָׁלוֹם (*ish shalom*), i.е., “a man of peace,” could also refer to a friend.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The Greek designations for friendship are as follows. The primary term is φιλός (*philos*), or in the verbal form, φιλέω (*phileo*), indicating brotherly love. The adjective ἰδιός (*idios*), meaning “one’s own,” can refer to friends as well.[[7]](#footnote-7)

What does the Bible have to say about friendship? The bond of true friendship is stable and consistent (Prov 17:17). A friend is there even in hard times (Prov 27:10; Ecc 4:9-12; 1 Sam 19-20; 2 Sam 15:13). One may expect from a friend open and honest counsel (Prov 27:6, 9, 17). A friend can keep a secret (Prov 17:9; 11:13). In Jesus’ words, the highest expression of friendship is to lay down one’s life for a friend (Jn 15:13). The Scriptures speak of “a friend who sticks closer than a brother” (Prov 18:24).[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Bible presents several examples of friendship, such as Ruth with Naomi, David with Jonathan, and Daniel with his three friends. Jesus Christ, being truly human, also had friends. Although He loved all persons, He nonetheless had a special relationship with the apostle John (Jn 21:7) and with Lazarus and his sisters (Jn 11:5, 36).[[9]](#footnote-9)

At the same time, the Bible warns us to be aware of certain excesses. If a friend, for example, is leading us away from the Lord, we must not follow him or her into error (Deut 13:6-8). Thus, we cannot always trust our comrades – a friend may give us bad counsel (2 Sam 13:1-5). If one must decide between being faithful to God or a friend, the former always has our first loyalty (Ex 32:27). The Bible also warns that improper behavior by a friend can have a negative effect (Prov 22:24-25; 1 Cor 15:33). This may also necessitate terminating the relationship.

It is interesting to observe that the Bible discourages us from having too many friends (Prov 18:24). Furthermore, possibly the most destructive foe of friendship is gossip (Prov 16:28; 17:9). A healthy friendship is preserved by refraining from speaking or listening to empty rumors.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In spite of the intimacy and familiarity that close friends enjoy, one must be on guard not to take one’s friend for granted, but rather always show due respect (Prov 27:14; 25:17). The Scriptures warn, “A brother offended {is harder to be won} than a strong city, and contentions are like the bars of a citadel (Prov 18:19).

A friend’s betrayal is most painful (Lk 21:16; Mic 7:5), or when a friend abandons us in time of trouble (Prov 19:4-7). Therefore, our trust must be, first and foremost, in the Lord, who will never leave us or forsake us. The Bible forbids becoming surety for a companion (Prov 22:26-27). It is preferred to seek another means out of a financial crisis.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In ancient Israel, we encounter a special designation – the “friend of the king.” The Bible mentions: Ahuzzath, the “friend” (מֵרֵעַ) of king Abimelech (Gen 26:26); Hushai, the friend of David (2 Sam 15:37); and Zabud, the friend of Solomon (1 Kin 4:5). Other, unnamed “friends” of Saul (2 Sam 3:8) and Baasha (1 Kin 16:11) are also mentioned, as well as friends of Haman (Est 6:3).[[12]](#footnote-12)

Most likely, the expression “friend of the king” refers to someone who was not necessarily a personal friend of the king, but rather a counsellor. Certain features confirm our conclusion: (1) they were commonly found in the royal court, (2) they are listed among other deputies (1 Kin 4:5), (3) Haman’s friends are also called “wise men” (Est 6:13), and (4) Hushai, the friend of David, subsequently served Absalom in that same capacity (2 Sam 15:34; 16:18). On the other hand, occupying a government position does not exclude a personal friendship developing along with it. For example, when everyone was abandoning David, Hushai desired to remain with him and support him.[[13]](#footnote-13)

God’s Word provides some helpful suggestions for establishing healthy friendships. One must consider the character of candidates for friendship. The book of Proverbs advises us not to be “with heavy drinkers of wine, {or} with gluttonous eaters of meat,” (Prov 23:20), not to “eat the bread of a selfish man, or desire his delicacies” (Prov 23:6-8), and not to “associate with a gossip” (Prov 20:19), or “with those who are given to change” (Prov 24:21).

It is vital to care for one’s friends (Acts 19:31; Ps 35:14). One must be aware of a friend’s needs and respond to them. Friends help one another (Lk 7:6; 11:5-8; Gen 38:20). It is important to support a friend in difficult times (Acts 27:3). It is necessary to spend time together in order to develop and solidify that relationship (Matt 9:11; Lk 14:12; 15:29; Gen 38:12; Zech 3:8).[[14]](#footnote-14)

Friends share with one another their life experiences (Acts 10:24; Lk 15:6, 9). They often share common interests (Lk 23:12), which allows them to share more life experiences. They seek each other’s good and rejoice with the success of the other (Dan 2:49; Ps 122:8). Without doubt, good friends, if they are believers, pray one for another (Job 42:10).

Friends share with each other not only life experiences, but inner thoughts and feelings as well (Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15; Judg 7:13-14; Lk 12:4; 16:9). They counsel one another (2 Sam 13:3), give gifts to each other (1 Sam 30:26), and are prepared to suffer with their comrades (1 Kin 16:11).[[15]](#footnote-15)

Although all friends hope that their relationship will be characterized by intimacy and faithfulness, the Bible warns that it does not always turn out that way. Friends may fail to support us (Job 6:14), may mock us (Job 12:4; 16:20), forget us (Job 19:14), or even betray us (Ps 55:12-14; Job 6:27; 17:5; Zech 13:6; Ps 41:9). It may come to the point that a friend wishes our demise (Jer 20:10; 38:22; Lam 1:2, 19). Although friendship is necessary and beneficial, there are no perfect people in a fallen world. Therefore, we can never expect a perfect relationship. Our best friend is always the Lord.[[16]](#footnote-16)

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