

Lessons from the Battlefield

2 Samuel 21:15-22; 23:8-39

It might interest you to know, if you lived through the 80's as I did, that Mr. T., the famous mohawked, gold-wearing, thuggish-looking, yet wholesome entertainer, has a Twitter account. And not only that, it's a great Twitter account. Mr. T. exudes joy and gratitude in all that he says, bearing constant witness to his faith in Christ. I pity the fool who doesn't follow Mr. T. on Twitter. Earlier this year he posted a prayer that has stayed with me. It read, very simply, "Thank you Jesus, for this opportunity to trust you more." When I face times of difficulty or uncertainty, giving thanks to God for another opportunity to trust him is not the first thing that pops into my head. I just want the difficulty resolved and the uncertainty to give way to certainty. I feel out of sorts until I can find relief again in a return to "normal life." But as Doc Holliday famously said to Wyatt Earp in the great western movie *Tombstone*, "There is no normal life, Wyatt. There's just life."

We get a sense of that reality from reading our text for today. Notice the refrain that we encounter over and over. Verse 15 reads, "There was war again between the Philistines and Israel." Verse 18: "After this there was again war with the Philistines at Gob." Verse 19: "And there was again war with the Philistines at Gob." Verse 20: "And there was again war at Gath." In these various snapshots taken from different times in David's reign over Israel, the author shows us that David's life and reign were marked by the recurring turmoil of threats from enemies and the destruction of war. David never knew the blessing of a "normal life" of settled peace and security. But he knew the Lord, and that is far, far better. The New Testament describes the Christian life as warfare (see Eph. 6:10-20), which communicates to us that we must not expect it to be an easy, peaceful, settled life free from difficulties and uncertainty. We will suffer. It may be suffering in our own bodies with failing health. It may be suffering through difficulties in marriage, or with infertility, or with singleness, or with watching our own children walk away from Christ. It may be suffering the loss of a job, or the death of a loved one, or broken relationships when we refuse to compromise on truth. Or maybe it will come in the form of discouragement over our own failures. Whatever form it takes, the battle that occurs in those moments will be a battle for your faith. The enemy's strategy will be to stir up fear in you that will drown out your faith. He will try to convince you that you cannot really trust God, that your circumstances are simply too overwhelming, or your sins are too great, to believe that God really loves you. He will tempt you to run away from God rather than toward him. And it is in those moments, when you are tempted to give way to fear, that you need the Word of God to strengthen your faith.

The two passages before us today give us directions to strengthen faith over fear. I will walk through those reasons in a moment, but first I want to give you again the big picture of what is going on in 2 Samuel 21-24. After we have read an overview of David's reign in chapters 1-20, the author closes out his book with a series of snapshots, not a chronological account, of various episodes in David's reign that highlight the covenant faithfulness of God to David's house. These four chapters are arranged as a chiasm:

A. David ends a famine by atoning for Saul's sin, 21:1-14

B. David's giant-slaying men, 21:15-22

C. David's song of deliverance, 22:1-21

C.' David's last words, 23:1-7

B.' David's mighty men, 23:8-39

A.' David ends a plague by atoning for his own sin, 24:1-25

As you can see, we are grouping together today the two "B" sections. When we read these two sections together, we can draw out three words of direction to strengthen faith over fear when we are tempted to believe the lies of our enemy.

The first word is this:

1. Receive the Lord's gift of strength through others.

In 1 Samuel 17, David appears as the young man who nails Goliath in the forehead with a stone and then uses Goliath's own sword to chop off his head. In 1 Samuel 18, David is the young warrior who is promised Saul's daughter in marriage if he can collect 100 foreskins from slain Philistine warriors, and instead he collects 200. But what a difference time can make. Notice 21:15: "There was war again between the Philistines and Israel, and David went down together with his servants, and they fought against the Philistines. *And David grew weary.*" As he has grown older, David is not the same warrior he was in his younger days. His weakness is starting to show, putting his life in jeopardy. And, as we see in 21:15-22, there are still giants left.

So what does the Lord do in the face of David's weakness? He provides David with giant-slayers! At just the moment when the well-armed giant Ishbi-benob threatened David's life, David's servant Abishai stepped in to cut him down (vv. 15-17). The same story is repeated with David's servant Sibbecai the Hushathite against Saph the giant (v. 18), again with David's servant Elhanan against Goliath the Gittite, which seems to be a reference actually to the brother of Goliath as 1 Chron. 20:5 says (v. 19), and again with David's nephew Jonathan against an unnamed giant with twenty-four digits who taunted Israel in a manner reminiscent of Goliath himself (vv. 20-21). Where David is weak, his mighty men are strong, supplying precisely what is needed to fend off the threats from these massive warriors.

Two chapters over we read further stories of amazing feats of David's mighty men. In 23:8-12 we have an account of "The Three," David's three most distinguished warriors. Verse 8 reads, "These are the names of the mighty men whom David had: Josheb-basshebeth a Tahchemonite; he was chief of the three. He wielded his spear against eight hundred whom he killed at one time." Whether that means in a single battle or during a single military campaign, 800 kills is a superhuman feat. Verses 9-10 read, "And next to him among the three mighty men was Eleazer the son of Dodo, son of Ahohi. He was with David when they defied the Philistines who were gathered there for battle, and the men of Israel withdrew. He rose and struck down the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand clung to his sword. And the LORD brought about a great victory that day, and the men returned after him only to strip the slain." When the whole Israelite army withdrew from the Philistines, Eleazer stood there like a stone wall, taking on the opposing

army by himself. And he fought them until his hand muscles froze in place as he gripped his sword. And the most shocking thing is that he won! His fellow soldiers returned, not to a fight, but to a plunder of the slain. The next two verses tell of Shammah, who likewise engaged the Philistines by himself as he defended a plot of ground in Israel, and like Eleazer, he too won the battle by himself.

But we're not done. After telling of "The Three," the author goes on to tell us about "The Thirty," a group of David's men not quite as elite as the three, but still very impressive. We have stories about two men in this group in verses 18-23. Verses 18-19 tell again of Abishai the giant-slayer, only this time to report that he once wielded his spear against 300 men and came out victorious. And then we come to Benaiah. Verses 20-21 read, "And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was a valiant man of Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds. He struck down two ariels of Moab ['ariel' seems to refer to a Moabite hero]. He also went down and struck down a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen. And he struck down an Egyptian, a handsome man. The Egyptian had a spear in his hand, but Benaiah went down to him with a staff and snatched the spear out of the Egyptian's hands and killed him with his own spear." Now, you may find it odd that the author specifically wanted us to know that the Egyptian whom Benaiah killed was handsome. I find it odd too, which is why I think a better translation of that word would be "impressive," referring not to his looks but to his size. The parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 11:23 tells us that he was five cubits tall, which would come to seven-and-a-half feet! In other words, this Egyptian was a lot like Goliath, armed with a spear, and Benaiah went up against him with only a staff, but he wrestled his own spear away from him and killed him with it, much like David decapitated Goliath with Goliath's own sword.

As we read story after story after story, we should ask, what's the point? Is the author trying to remind us of anything? I believe he is. The stories of David's mighty men should remind us of prior stories recorded for us in Scripture. In Judges 3:31 we read about the leader Shamgar, who saved Israel by killing 600 Philistines with an oxgoad. In Judges 14:6 we read about Samson tearing a lion apart. In Judges 15:15 we read about Samson killing 1,000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey. And in 1 Samuel 17, of course, we read about David killing the giant Goliath. What do these superhuman feats have in common? They are all accomplished by the power of the Spirit of the Lord. For example, Judges 14:6 tells us that the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon Samson just before he tore the lion apart. Judges 15:14 says the same about Samson just before he killed 1,000 Philistines. And 1 Samuel 16:13 tells us the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David on the day he was anointed by Samuel, and in the following chapter comes the slaying of Goliath. Have we just read about ridiculously impossible feats of supernatural ability among David's mighty men? Yes, we have. That's the author's way of showing us that the same Spirit who came upon the judges and upon David to equip them to do the impossible has likewise come upon David's men for the same purpose. Their strength is a supernatural strength, protecting David's life and his kingdom. That is why their mighty acts are acts of the Lord. Verses 10 and 12 both make that point: "And the LORD brought about a great victory that day" (v. 10); "and the LORD worked a great victory" (v. 12). Where David is weak, the Lord supplies strength through the supernatural empowering of his mighty men.

We all have weaknesses, and that's one of the reasons God gave us the church. The Lord has placed you in the church to supply strength where you are weak through the gifts of your

brothers and sisters. But fear of exposing your weaknesses can deny you the opportunity to receive this grace from the Lord. Do you have marriage struggles? Did you realize there are older, wiser couples in this church who have been right where you are and can help you learn how to find your way through them? Do you struggle with besetting sins? Did you know there are people in this church who know that same struggle who will love you and fight to help you overcome those sins? Do you wrestle with doubts about the Bible, about God, about your own salvation? Do you know you're not the only one who has had those doubts? Are you given to anxiety? Do you know that you're not alone in that struggle? God has put the church together as a body, arranging us all in his wisdom so that where one member is weak, others can bring needed strength through the Holy Spirit. But you cannot avail yourself of this blessing if you are not willing to receive it.

So let me exhort you: don't isolate yourself from your brothers and sisters. Build trusting relationships with others in the church where you can be vulnerable about your struggles. Stay connected to your small group. Come share your heart at Sunday night prayer meetings. Call on your pastors when you need help. One thing we can help you with is to connect you with others in the church whom we know can supply what you need. And if you are not joined to a church, let me say this: you are living dangerously. God did not design you to walk alone. You need a church family, so give yourself to one. Isolating yourself from other believers denies you the opportunity to see great works of salvation that the Lord has for you. Receive the Lord's gift of strength through others.

A second word of direction to help us strengthen faith over fear is this:

2. Render your highest loyalty to Christ and his kingdom.

Not only do we see stories of incredible strength among David's men, but we also see the author highlight their profound loyalty to David. We see that theme come out particularly in two stories. The first is the story we have already seen of Abishai the giant-slayer in 21:15-17. Note what happened after Abishai saved David's life at the end of verse 17: "Then David's men swore to him, 'You shall no longer go out with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel.'" Do you remember the image from last weekend of the secret service agents falling on President Trump after he was shot and then, when they got him back up, forming a human shield around him? With their actions they were saying, "If another bullet flies, let it hit me, not President Trump." That's what David's men swore to him on this occasion. Any one of them would give up their own lives to protect their king. Why? Because they did not want the lamp of Israel to be quenched. That's an interesting statement. It indicates that they view David and his line as the source of light in Israel. David had been promised an everlasting dynasty by the Lord. He had brought the ark to Jerusalem, showing that he intended his throne to be a representation of the Lord's rule over Israel. His mighty men recognized that David's house was bound to God's purposes for Israel, and thus they counted their loyalty to David as loyalty to God.

There are other references to a "lamp" after this one. In 1 Kings 11:36, a prophet tells Jeroboam that he will tear ten tribes away from the house of David because of the sins of King Solomon, but he will leave the tribe of Judah to David's house, so that David the Lord's servant may always have a lamp before the Lord in Jerusalem. In Psalm 132:11, the Lord says of the city of Jerusalem, "There I will make a horn to sprout for David; I have prepared a lamp for my anointed." The continuation of David's line, even through dark times in Israel and Judah, is like

a small flame being passed from one candle to the next. Though the flame became, at times, ever so small before the encroaching darkness, it never went out. And then John 1:9 tells us that about 1,000 years after David, “the true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.” The small flicker that was the light of David’s house became the Light of the World.

The other story that shows us the loyalty of David’s men is found in 23:13-17. Here we read that David was at the cave of Adullam with his men (possibly before he ever became king), and the Philistines had taken control of David’s hometown of Bethlehem. David expressed his homesickness by saying in verse 15, “Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!” This was not a command. It was just a word of lament and longing. But three unnamed heroes among David’s men heard it and decided to act. They made a 25-mile round trip to Bethlehem where, at the risk of their lives, they snuck into the city, drew water from the well, and brought it back to their beloved leader David. Now we pick up in the middle of verse 16: “But he would not drink of it. He poured it out to the LORD and said, ‘Far be it from me, O LORD, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?’ Therefore he would not drink it. These things the three mighty men did.” That story comes across to us as an incident that would be very maddening. But David actually honored these three men with this act. He was so overwhelmed by their sacrificial loyalty to him that he counted the water as their own blood, which they put on the line for his sake. And he would not drink their blood, for blood belongs only to the Lord. So he poured it out as an offering to honor the Lord with this acknowledgement of their loyalty. Again, David’s men show that their hearts are devoted to David and his kingdom. They are loyal to the Lord’s Anointed One.

Loyalty is an idea that requires careful thought. We know that it is important to have, because a person who has no loyalty is a person who is completely self-centered. But loyalty can also corrupt us if it is untethered from God’s standards. So, for example, if a person discovers that sexual abuse has occurred within an institution that he works for, and out of a feeling of loyalty to his institution and its reputation he chooses not to report it, his loyalty has been corrupted. So we must cultivate loyalty, but it must be loyalty that is rightly ordered to God’s standards.

How can we do that? David’s men show us an example: let our highest loyalty be given to Christ, God’s Anointed One, and to his kingdom. Everything else that is dear to us in this world must take a backseat to Christ. If your highest loyalty is to him in all your actions, you cannot go wrong. And this kind of loyalty will only be built when your heart and mind are stirred by a vision for the kingdom that gives you hope beyond this world. There are many things in this world that could strike fear into us. David’s men had plenty of reason to fear as well, but they stood firm and fought nevertheless because they were empowered by loyalty to a kingdom bigger than themselves. The more you give your heart to the kingdom of Christ that is to come, the more you will put your fears to death.

Finally, a third word of direction from this text to strengthen faith over fear:

3. Rest in the Lord’s grace to forgive your sins.

Our passage concludes in 23:24-39 with a list of names of those who belonged, at one time or another, to “The Thirty,” the wider group of David’s mighty men. In seminary, the final exam they give you before they allow you to graduate is forcing you to read these names and towns

with flawless pronunciation. You can read through the names, and you may recognize a few here or there. But I want to draw your attention to two in particular. At the end of verse 34 we read of “Eliam the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite.” We know without a doubt who Ahithophel the Gilonite was: he was David’s most trusted counselor who defected to David’s son Absalom during the insurrection and who later killed himself when the Lord frustrated his counsel with Absalom. We see here that Ahithophel had a son among David’s mighty men, and his name was Eliam. We also know that when David from his roof saw Bathsheba bathing, he inquired who she was, and she was identified to him as Bathsheba, daughter of Eliam (2 Sam. 11:3). Is Bathsheba’s father Eliam the same Eliam listed here? We don’t know for sure. But if he is, it makes David’s sin seem all the worse, that he willingly took the married daughter of one of his loyal, mighty men into his own bed. And if Ahithophel ever learned the truth, that would certainly help explain why he betrayed David and defected to Absalom.

But let’s admit we don’t know for sure that it’s the same Eliam. However, when we come to the end of the list of names, we are left with no doubt at all. The author saves for last in verse 39, “Uriah the Hittite: thirty-seven in all.” David’s servant Eliam may or may not have been Bathsheba’s father, but Uriah the Hittite most certainly was her husband. And David committed adultery with her against Uriah, impregnated her, and then had Uriah killed to cover it up. Uriah the Hittite had been nothing but a loyal, faithful servant to his king, and David sacrificed Uriah’s life to protect himself from the consequences of his own sin. Why does the author list Uriah right here at the end? It’s because he wants to remind us of two truths: David committed some very wicked acts, and David was fully forgiven by the Lord. His throne was not taken from him. His dynasty was not extinguished. His life was not ended. He continued to stand under the favor of the Lord and in the fortress of his covenantal protection. The author wants us to see that when David acknowledged his sin before Nathan the prophet, and Nathan responded by saying, “The LORD also has put away your sin” (2 Sam. 12:13), he really meant it. David suffered discipline from the Lord as a son, but unlike King Saul before him he was never disowned by the Lord, because the Lord had made a promise to him, and he kept it.

One of the greatest fears that plagues many believers is the fear of being abandoned by God. It is a fear that I have gone too far this time. I have messed up too badly. I have no hope of ever knowing the Lord’s favor again, so the only way I can cope is by hiding from the Lord, putting him out of mind, and medicating myself with whatever I can find to distract me from facing my own guilt. If that’s where you are this morning, or if you ever find yourself in that place, let the Word of God wash over you to cleanse you of that Satanic lie. The same David who had his loyal servant Uriah murdered is the man who wrote in Psalm 32,

“Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.

Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity;

I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (Ps. 32:1-5).

If you rightly feel the weight of your own sin, but then conclude that God wants nothing to do with you, then let me ask you this: Why are you making light of the cross of Jesus Christ? Why are you telling God that the payment of the life of his Son, fully God and fully man, is not sufficient for you? Why do you have the audacity to call into question the value of Christ's atoning work?

All God demands of you is faith. Look to Christ. Bring your sins to him, honestly confessing and seeking his forgiveness, and you will have it. Guaranteed. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Did you hear that? "Faithful" and "just." God is bound to the promises of his covenant. So if he refuses to forgive those who seek his forgiveness through Christ, he has broken his own Word, and that simply cannot happen. Look at David's example, and come to God with the assurance that you too are forgiven when you seek him in faith.

There are so many things in this world that can shake our faith and cause us to live in fear. Fight to strengthen faith over fear by receiving the Lord's gift of strength through your brothers and sisters in the church, by giving your highest loyalty to Christ and his kingdom, and by resting in the forgiveness of sins that is yours in Christ. When difficulty and uncertainty come into your life—when, not if—you will be able to pray with confidence, "Thank you Jesus, for this opportunity to trust you more." Amen.