

Courage: Past, Present and Future

2 Samuel 23:20-23

2 Samuel 23 is a very interesting chapter. We could compare it to a hike on a mountain trail, where every step reveals some new marvel, some marvelous wonder. The chapter opens with the words, *“These are the last words of David,”* and while they may not have been the very words he uttered while lying on his death bed, they certainly were among the last words he wrote. We might call it *Psalm 151*, as it certainly resembles a song that might be sung as David was looking back on his life. And that is the tone of the rest of the chapter as well. It is almost as if the writer is trying to tie up some loose ends here at the end of David’s earthly life. So he provides us with a list of David’s Mighty Men, beginning in verse eight.

There are some pretty amazing stories here. We learn very quickly why these were called “Mighty Men.” Several of them are singled out: Eleazar, who, when everyone else retreated, stood his ground in a battle with the Philistines, *“till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword.”* Shammah stood alone in a field of lentils, defending it against the Philistines there. Once David, feeling homesick, wished out loud that someone would bring him a drink of water from the well at Bethlehem. Three of the mighty men broke through the Philistine garrison at Bethlehem to retrieve a drink of water, and David, recognizing the tremendous sacrifice these men had made, felt unworthy to drink it. Instead, he poured it out on the ground as an offering to the Lord.

But there is another man mentioned here, and he is the one we focus on today. His name is Benaiah, and though this is not the only place he is mentioned, still you may not have heard or even thought of him very much. His story is found in verses 20-23:

Benaiah son of Jehoiada was a valiant fighter from Kabzeel, who performed great exploits. He struck down two of Moab’s best men. He also went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion. And he struck down a huge Egyptian. Although the Egyptian had a spear in his hand, Benaiah went against him with a club. He snatched the spear from the Egyptian’s hand and killed him with his own spear. Such were the exploits of Benaiah son of Jehoiada; he too was as famous as the three mighty men. He was held in greater honor than any of the Thirty, but he was not included among the Three. And David put him in charge of his bodyguard.

To be the kind of person Benaiah was requires courage. That should go without saying. You find yourself in a situation where you must either run, fight or die, and suddenly you are able to summon up from deep within boundless measures of courage. You didn't really know that you had that kind of bravery in you, but when the circumstances demand it, you discover who you really are, what you're really made of. But most importantly, you discover what you're really made *for*.

1 We must demonstrate courage regarding our past.

When we read verses 20-23 we get the impression that Benaiah had it all together, that he was fearless and brave and strong, that he had never had any difficulty in his life that he couldn't handle. But that is not the entire picture. Remember that this passage includes the names and a few of the exploits of David's Mighty Men. But who were these Mighty Men? When we trace their origins in the pages of Scripture, we learn that they certainly didn't start out to be Mighty Men at all. We find the first mention of them in 1 Samuel 22:1-2:

"David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam [this was before David was king, and Saul was trying to find him in order to kill him]. When his brothers and his father's household heard about it, they went down to him there. All those who were in distress or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader. About four hundred men were with him."

"Distressed, in debt or discontented." They certainly don't sound very mighty, do they? And while we don't have the details of their lives before they gathered around David, we can pretty much imagine the kinds of things that would cause a man to be in distress. Life had turned sour for many of them, for many different reasons—none of which we are given. The point, though, is that these men found a purpose in David's cause, and that, finding that purpose, their past faded away. Instead of remaining bitter and defeated, these men rose to the occasion and proved themselves to be Mighty Men. They weren't mighty because David said they were, and they weren't mighty because they had killed enemy soldiers. It was the other way around. Their renown as David's Mighty Men was the result of being able to set aside the failures and disappointments of the past, and demonstrate courage in doing so.

That's the kind of man Benaiah was. *Before* he killed those Moabite enemies, *before* he killed the lion in a pit on a snowy day, and *before* he was victorious over the Egyptian giant, Benaiah was lumped among those who, because of life's surprises and letdowns, was "distressed, in debt or discontented." He never would have been known for these great exploits had he not learned to demonstrate courage over his past. Benaiah was among the Mighty Men of David, because he had found purpose and fulfillment in his life, and put his past behind him. Imagine the devastating consequences of going down into the pit to face that lion, and suddenly remembering some remarkable failure in your earlier days! Imagine standing before that Egyptian giant and perhaps remembering that day when you were younger, hearing another child call you a runt! No, now that we think about it, putting his past behind him and moving forward to realize his full potential may have been the most courageous thing Benaiah ever did!

What things in your past are holding you back? All of us have things behind us that should be allowed to be "behind us"! But too many of us are crippled by those things. It may be something you did or said, and it hangs over you like a dark cloud every moment of your life. It may be something someone else did to you, and the wounds were deep and still cause some pain. It may be someone else's perception of you that has somehow become deeply engrained into your soul and you can't shake it even though you know it's not right. We carry them around as though they were permanently attached to our bodies, as though we can never put them down and let go of them. It will take real courage to overcome them.

When Olympic ice skater Kristi Yamaguchi fell to the ice in the 1992 Winter Olympics, the crowd groaned. Everyone thought her chance for a gold medal had been destroyed by that mistake. But like the mighty champion she is, Kristi quickly got to her feet, flashed a smile, and resumed her performance. She received high scores from the judges, despite the mistake, and won the gold medal. It happened because though she fell, she didn't stay down--she got back on her feet. That took some real courage. She had trained and dreamed for years for that very moment, and to fall when she had reached the pinnacle of all of her hopes and dreams must have seemed devastating. Real courage is what enabled her to keep going, when the easiest thing to do when have been to slide on over to the bench and say, "What's the use?"

Winston Churchill once said, “Courage is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm.” The same thing is true of each of us, whether or not we are skating in the Olympics. When we fall, and each of us has or will, we must get up again. Life sometimes hands us things we didn’t ask for. When any of us looks back, there are some things we wish hadn’t happened. Some of them were things we couldn’t control, and some of them were things that happened as a result of our own sinful behavior. But here is something which is key to our understanding of life: those bad things...*happened*.

And there is not much, if anything, we can do to change that. I ran into an old high school friend the other day. He and I also attended the same church and participated in the same youth group activities. He wasn’t known for his holy lifestyle, if you understand what I mean, and even as an adult, it was plain that his priorities were nowhere near God. By his own admission, it was all about himself. But now, there is a peaceful depth of spiritual maturity that comes out in his speech and his life—it even shines through his eyes.

When we were visiting with each other, I noticed that the index finger on his left hand was shorter by about an inch. So I asked him, “When did you do that, and how?” He explained he was sitting in his deer stand early one morning, when he noticed that somehow the end of his rifle had some mud on it. So he reached out with his left hand and began to flick away the mud from the end of the barrel. Well, you guessed it, the gun went off, and so did his finger. He smiled with a little chagrin while he was telling me about it, but that led him into a deeper conversation. He said, “You know, Rocky, there have been a lot of times in my life when I did something stupid.” I nodded in agreement, for we’ve both done stupid things, and we both knew what he was like before Christ. He continued, “But Christ has forgiven me for all those things, and they’re in the past. I can’t change them, and can’t do anything about them. They *happened*. I’ve just got to make sure that I make the best of the life I’ve got left to bring honor to Christ.”

But at the same time, we’ve got to have the courage to admit to ourselves that many things in our past were very good things, even the things we thought were bad at the time. God has been so good to us, has He not? And there are things and events and

people in our past that have helped shape us into the kinds of people we are today. Just because they're in the past doesn't make them bad! But pay attention to this: even the good experiences can hold us back, if we are trying to relive those things over and over in our hearts. We can be prevented from becoming Men of God by refusing to let go of those things, be they good or bad. That's where you and I are today. We need more men (and women) who are willing to stand up to their pasts with courage and say, "*It happened. Now let's move forward. I want what's left of my life to bring honor to Christ.*"

2 We must demonstrate courage regarding our present.

Many times our courage is lacking because we are afraid. But if we were to take a very careful and close look at the reason for our fears, we would find that our fears are foolish. American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "When a resolute young fellow steps up to the great bully, the world, and takes him boldly by the beard, he is often surprised to find it comes off in his hand, and that it was only tied on to scare away the timid adventurers." He was saying that many times, facing and challenging the things that are in front of us will reveal that they are not nearly as big and menacing as they appear to be.

The first prize winner of the 1997 Idaho Falls Science Fair was a freshman from Eagle Rock Junior High. In his project the young man urged people to sign a petition demanding strict control or total elimination of the chemical "dihydrogen monoxide." And for plenty of good reasons, since it:

- Can cause excessive sweating and vomiting.
- It is a major component in acid rain.
- It can cause severe burns in its gaseous state.
- Accidental inhalation can kill you.
- It decreases effectiveness of automobile brakes.
- It has been found in tumors of terminal cancer patients.

He asked 50 people if they supported a ban of the chemical. Forty-three said yes, six were undecided, and only one knew that the chemical was H₂O (water). The title of his prize winning project was, "*How Gullible Are We?*"

Without a basic knowledge of chemistry, any of us might fall for that one! But we're not so gullible as to believe that all of life is like that. In verses 20-21, look at the challenges Benaiah faced. We are told that *"he struck down two of Moab's best men."* In the Old Testament, the Moabites were descendants of Lot, and while they were closely related to Israel in that regard, they were always enemies. We're also told that Benaiah did a couple of other things that really distinguished him as someone who wasn't afraid to face whatever challenges and dangers he might encounter.

First, *"he went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion."* I don't know about you, but should I face a lion, my first instinct would be to avoid him at all costs. If I had to fight him, I wouldn't choose to do so on a snowy day, when my feet had no traction and my fingers might be numb from the cold. If I had to fight him, I wouldn't choose to do it in a pit, where I had no room to maneuver. Remember that the lion is called the "King of Beasts," and for very good reason. A male lion can be more than eight feet long and weigh more than 500 pounds. Its roar can be heard more than five miles away. Its eyesight can be five times better than a human with 20/20 vision. I have read that a lion is able, with one blow of his paw, to crush a human skull as if it were an egg. Its jaws are so strong that it can bite through any bone of the human body. One commentator points out that this was the worst possible foe, in the worst possible place, under the worst possible circumstances (Ray Stedman).

But second, in verse 21, Benaiah *"struck down a huge Egyptian. Although the Egyptian had a spear in his hand, Benaiah went against him with a club. He snatched the spear from the Egyptian's hand and killed him with his own spear."* 1 Chronicles 11 tells us that this Egyptian was 7 ½ feet tall and that this spear was as large as a weaver's beam. It is believed that a weaver's loom had a tremendous beam on it about six or seven inches thick. And all Benaiah had was a club, but he was somehow able to face this giant, seize the giant's own massive spear from his hands, and kill him with it!

What can we learn here? I would imagine that when the battle was over down in that pit, some of the blood on the snow belonged to Benaiah. And while we don't know how tall Benaiah was, there obviously were some major differences between him and the giant for the Bible to even record it. Pay attention to this: life's battles sometimes are very bloody and costly, and sometimes we may find ourselves wishing we didn't

have to go through them. I hope you never have to face a literal lion in a pit on a snowy day, or a massive giant, but you have had to face things you didn't want to face, and you have had to go through things you never would have chosen.

It could be some disease or other physical condition. It may be a challenge at your work or school, or even in your home. It may be a financial issue that is looming, or some soul-crushing disappointment. It may be a relationship problem, and in spite of your best effort the problem just won't go away. It may be almost anything that appears to be stronger, bigger and mightier than you are. The point is that you and I are often standing down in a "pit" or in front of a "giant" — what we do at that moment in time is what determines the kind of people we will be. And whatever you're facing, regardless of how threatening or troubling or frightening, you can stand up to it with courageous, bold faith and say, "Greater *is* [present tense!] He who *is* [present tense!] in me, than he who is in the world."

3 We must demonstrate courage regarding our future.

When we finish verse 23, we are not finished with Benaiah. His courage didn't end there. We learn in verse 23 that David was so impressed with the exploits of this courageous man that he made him captain of his guard. Eventually, he climbed all the way up the chain of command to become captain of the entire army. He became the second most powerful man in all of the kingdom of Israel — not because he knew somebody or bought his way there, but because of his courage.

We can't say that Benaiah had that goal in mind when he thought about going down into that pit. He didn't stand in front of the Egyptian giant and think, "Boy, one day this is going to look good on my resume." But the fact remains that these actions affected his future. One day, David took a look at those who were among his Mighty Men, and realized that like himself, Benaiah had killed a lion. Like himself, Benaiah had gone up against a giant and won. Had Benaiah merely been among those who watched the lion being killed, or who ran from the Egyptian giant, he never would have been considered. Benaiah was the best candidate for the position, and he proved it with loyalty, courage and bravery.

As Abraham Lincoln prepared to sign the Emancipation Proclamation, he took his pen, moved it to the signature line, paused for a moment, and then dropped the pen. When asked why, the president replied, "If my name goes into history, it will be for this act, and if my hand trembles when I sign it, there will be some who will say, 'he hesitated.'" Lincoln then turned to the table, took up the pen, and boldly signed his name. *Today in the Word, July, 1990, p. 8.* Well, the President was right—we have remembered him primarily for the leadership he gave in outlawing slavery here in the United States. Lincoln was looking to the future, and he knew that his actions in that moment would send out shockwaves into the entire world.

The opportunities that are yet on the horizon for each of us demand that we demonstrate courage. When you and I face impossible odds in our lives, we need to realize that according to the Scriptures, God is getting ready to do some amazing things in our lives, to put all the events in order so that He can put us where He wants us. It is very safe to say that Benaiah's future was affected by his decision to chase that lion down into that pit, and to surprise the Egyptian.

What we need are men (and women!) who understand that decisions made today affect our future. Yes, the future may be uncertain, and yes, it may hold a lot of problems and trouble for us yet. It doesn't matter who you are, there will always be a lion to chase or a giant to kill. But if we don't chase our lions today, and stand up to our giants today, we won't be equipped and ready when those opportunities arise for God to demonstrate Himself strong in our behalf.

It takes courage to be the man or woman of God today. It takes courage to stand up to the failures and disappointments of our past and refuse to be held back by them. It takes courage to look at our current circumstances and be victorious over them even if the odds are stacked against us. And it takes courage to look into what appears to be the dimness of the future and know that a future lived in God's purpose is actually shining brightly with promise and hope.

I end this message with two statements of belief. One is from Mark Batterson, who wrote,

Quit living as if the purpose of life is to arrive safely at death. Set God-sized goals. Pursue God-ordained passions. Go after a dream that is destined to fail without divine intervention. Stop pointing out problems and become part of the solution. Stop criticizing and start creating. Stop playing it safe and start taking risks. Expand your horizons. Accumulate experiences. Consider the lilacs. Find every excuse you can to celebrate everything you can. Don't let what's wrong with you keep you from worshipping what's right with God. Burn sinful bridges. Laugh at yourself. Keep making mistakes. Worry less about what people think and more about what God thinks. Don't try to be who you're not. Be yourself. Quit holding out. Quit holding back. Quit running away. And remember: If God is for us who can be against us?

The other is from the Apostle Paul:

I do not mean to say that I have got there yet, or that I am perfect yet. But I am trying hard to get there, because that is why Christ saved me. My brothers, I do not yet think that I have got all the things of Christ. But there is one thing that I am doing. I forget what is behind me and reach out to what is ahead of me. Like a man running a race, I try hard to reach the line so that I will receive the prize. Because we belong to Christ Jesus, God is calling us to receive this prize that he has for us in heaven. (Philippians 3:1-14, Worldwide English New Testament)

So stand up to the enemies of your spirit. Chase the lions. Conquer the giants. Be a Mighty Man (or Woman) of God.