

The Life of David

David's Mighty Men

2 Samuel 23:8-39

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Scripture

There are six sections in the epilogue to “The Life of David” in 2 Samuel 21-24. The fifth section tells us of David’s mighty men. Let’s read about David’s mighty men in 2 Samuel 23:8-39:

⁸These 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.

⁹And next to him among the three mighty men was Eleazar 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. ¹⁰He rose and struck down the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand clung to the sword. And the Lord brought about a great victory that day, and the men returned after him only to strip the slain.

¹¹And next to him was Shammah, the son of Agee the Hararite. The Philistines gathered together at Lehi, where there was a plot of ground full of lentils, and the men fled from the Philistines. ¹²But he took his stand in the midst of the plot and defended it and struck down the Philistines, and the Lord worked a great victory.

¹³And three of the thirty chief men went down and came about harvest time to David at the cave of Adullam, when a band of Philistines was encamped in the Valley of Rephaim. ¹⁴David was then in the stronghold, and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem. ¹⁵And David said longingly, “Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!” ¹⁶Then the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate and carried and brought it to David. But he

would not drink of it. He poured it out to the Lord¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ Now Abishai, the brother of Joab, the son of Zeruah, was chief of the thirty. And he wielded his spear against three hundred men and killed them and won a name beside the three. ¹⁹ He was the most renowned of the thirty and became their commander, but he did not attain to the three.

²⁰ And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was a valiant man of Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds. He struck down two ariels of Moab. He also went down and struck down a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen. ²¹ 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 hand and killed him with his own spear. ²² These things did Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and won a name beside the three mighty men. ²³ He was renowned among the thirty, but he did not attain to the three. And David set him over his bodyguard.

²⁴ Asahel the brother of Joab was one of the thirty; Elhanan the son of Dodo of Bethlehem, ²⁵ Shammah of Harod, Elika of Harod, ²⁶ Helez the Paltite, Ira the son of Ikkesh of Tekoa, ²⁷ Abiezer of Anathoth, Mebunnai the Hushathite, ²⁸ Zalmon the Ahohite, Maharai of Netophah, ²⁹ Heleb the son of Baanah of Netophah, Ittai the son of Ribai of Gibeah of the people of Benjamin, ³⁰ Benaiah of Pirathon, Hiddai of the brooks of Gaash, ³¹ Abi-albon the Arbathite, Azmaveth of Bahurim, ³² Eliahba the Shaalbonite, the sons of Jashen, Jonathan, ³³ Shammah the Hararite, Ahiam the son of Sharar the Hararite, ³⁴ Eliphelet the son of Ahasbai of Maacah, Eliam the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite, ³⁵ Hezro of Carmel, Paarai the Arbite, ³⁶ Igal the son of Nathan of Zobah, Bani the Gadite, ³⁷ Zelek the Ammonite, Naharai of Beeroth, the armor-bearer of Joab the son of Zeruah, ³⁸ Ira the Ithrite, Gareb the Ithrite, ³⁹ Uriah the Hittite: thirty-seven in all. (2 Samuel 23:8-39)

Introduction

I believe it was on Monday, January 12, 1970 that I attended my first day of high school at Pearson High School in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. At some point during that first day I entered the large, impressive Assembly Hall. High up on the walls were boards with names on them in gold lettering. Each year, various students were recognized and had their names permanently printed on the boards. There were names from previous years of Head Boys, Head Girls, Best Athletes, and so on. It was awe-inspiring to look at the Roll of Honor going back for many decades and wonder if my name might ever make it on to that list.

There is, I think, within humanity a desire to recognize and affirm greatness and achievement. So, for example, we have Halls of Fame for different sports, celebrities, professionals, and so on.

King David also recognized and affirmed greatness and achievement. We have his list in 2 Samuel 23:8-39. This is his Hall of Fame. These are the men he affirmed as having special honor in his kingdom. But David's mighty men also tell us that God was at work. We learn something about God's ways in establishing David's kingdom by studying David's mighty men.

The Bible contains many lists of names. Sometimes we may become discouraged by reading yet *another* list of names. However, we want to keep in mind that "*everything* that was written in the past was written to teach us...." Why? "...so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope" (Romans 15:4, *NIV*). The entire word of God is written so that we might have hope in Jesus.

The list of David's mighty men in 2 Samuel 23:8-39 was divided into a number of groups. The first group consisted of three mighty men: Josheb-basshebeth, Eleazar, and Shammah (23:8-12). The second group consisted of three unnamed mighty men (23:13-

17). The third group consisted of thirty-four mighty men whose names are listed as being members of “the thirty” (23:18-39). Most likely, “the thirty” had thirty men, but when some died they were replaced by new men. With this in mind, let us get to our lesson.

Lesson

Second Samuel 23:8-39 shows us what God does in building his kingdom.

Let's use the following outline:

1. God's Power to Save (23:8-12)
2. God's Enablement to Serve (23:13-17)
3. God's Recognition of Servants (23:18-39)
4. God's Reminder of Sin (23:39)

I. God's Power to Save (23:8-12)

First, let's look at God's power to save.

The first group consisted of three mighty men: Josheb-basshebeth, Eleazar, and Shammah.

The first mighty man mentioned was **“Josheb-basshebeth a Tahchemonite; he was chief of the three. He wielded his spear against eight hundred whom he killed at one time”** (23:8). He has not been mentioned before now. Like Samson, who once killed 1,000 Philistines with a fresh jawbone of a donkey (Judges 15:15), so Josheb-basshebeth killed 800 men with a spear at one time.

The second of **“the three mighty men was Eleazar 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”** (23:9). This Eleazar has also not been mentioned before now. However, we learn more about him in the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 11:13–14a, where we read

that Eleazar “was with David at Pas-dammim when the Philistines were gathered there for battle. There was a plot of ground full of barley, and the men fled from the Philistines. But he took his stand in the midst of the plot and defended it and killed the Philistines.” Second Samuel 23:10a goes on to say that Eleazar **“rose and struck down the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand clung to the sword.”**

The third of the three mighty men was **“Shammah, the son of Agee the Hararite”** (23:11a). Once again, this is the first time we learn about this mighty man. Like Eleazar, he also protected land that belonged to the people of God. The text goes on to say that **“the Philistines gathered together at Lehi, where there was a plot of ground full of lentils, and the men fled from the Philistines. But he took his stand in the midst of the plot and defended it and struck down the Philistines”** (23:11b-12a). We are not told how many Philistines he struck down, but whatever he did made David include him in the three mighty men.

The exploits of these three mighty men boggle the mind. We are astonished by their exploits. In fact, some among us may be even be a teensy-weensy skeptical of their accomplishments. I mean, how can one man kill eight hundred at one time—with just a spear?

Perhaps you noticed that I did not read the text in two places. Twice it says, **“And the Lord brought about a great victory that day,...and the Lord worked a great victory”** (23:10, 12). It was the Lord who gave these three mighty men power to deliver their people. The Lord was at work in them and through them to bring about his mighty purpose for the establishment of David’s kingdom on earth.

David’s kingdom was a physical kingdom that points us to Jesus’ kingdom that is a spiritual kingdom. The sword and spear are no longer used to establish Jesus’ kingdom. It is instead the good news of the gospel that is used to establish Jesus’ kingdom.

Throughout the centuries, God used men and women to share the good news of the gospel with others. Some of them, like Billy Graham, have shared the gospel with millions of people and seen many thousands saved. If people told Billy Graham how great he was as an evangelist, he would say that he did not save anyone but it was rather God's power that saved people. Rick Phillips asks:

Who is to say that the Lord will not do the same if we will likewise step forward with the gospel in our own time of great need—as missionaries, as evangelists, as parents, and together as a church? Paul declared that the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). If we will act valiantly in faith, armed with the good news of Christ, many of us can expect to be imbued with God's strength for mighty deeds as we rely on God's faithful presence.¹

II. God's Enablement to Serve (23:13-17)

Second, let's notice God's enablement to serve.

These next three mighty men are unnamed. Verse 13 says, **“And three of the thirty chief men went down and came about harvest time to David at the cave of Adullam, when a band of Philistines was encamped in the Valley of Rephaim.”** This incident took place when David was a young man. He had been anointed by Samuel as the future king over all Israel. David served King Saul for a while but Saul's jealousy forced David to flee from him. David made the cave Adullam his headquarters while he was a fugitive in Saul's kingdom. The cave of Adullam was about 12 miles from Bethlehem, and at the time Bethlehem was under the control of the Philistines.

One hot day, while he was sitting in the cave, **David said**

¹ Richard D. Phillips, *2 Samuel*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Iain M. Duguid, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), 427.

longingly, **“Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!”** (23:15). It doesn't seem that David actually wanted someone to fetch him water from Bethlehem. He was simply lamenting the fact that his hometown was in enemy hands. Edmund Clowney makes a very astute observation. He says, **“But surely David was not simply nostalgic for the town of his boyhood. He was the king of Israel, chosen by God and anointed. Yet he could not enter his hometown and drink from the well there. A leather canteen of that water would be a sign and pledge of the faithfulness of the Lord who would give to David the kingdom of God's promise.”**²

Apparently, three unnamed mighty men heard David say that he wanted to drink water from Bethlehem's well. They were utterly devoted to David and quietly spoke to each other about blessing their beloved leader. So, without David noticing, they put on their military uniforms, took their weapons, and set out for Bethlehem. After a twelve-mile long journey, they arrived at their destination. The text says, **“Then the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate and carried and brought it to David”** (23:16a). What happened next is utterly unexpected.

David must have been astonished by their devotion. He had not ordered them to go and fetch him water. But their devotion to David made his wish their command. Verse 16 goes on to say, **“But he would not drink of it. He poured it out.”** It formed a puddle on the ground and very quickly the water sank into the earth. This seems to us to be the height of ingratitude. The men risked their lives for David. And he simply poured it out.

But that is not at all what is going on here. David did exactly the right thing. Look at the text. It says, **“He poured it out to the Lord”** (23:16b). David went on to say, **“Far be it from me, O**

² Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 95.

Lord, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?” (23:17). Clowney notes, “To David, the water from Bethlehem was the very blood of the men who got it at the risk of their lives. He could not drink it. He must give it in worship to the Lord.”³

God enabled these three mighty men to serve David. David honored them by worshiping the Lord.

God still builds his kingdom by enabling his people to serve one another today. God has given his people spiritual gifts to serve one another. Did you know that Jesus said that on the day of judgment we will be judged by our acts of service to one another? He said in Matthew 25:34–40:

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.” Then the righteous will answer him, saying, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

God builds his kingdom by enabling us to serve one another.

III. God’s Recognition of Servants (23:18-39)

Third, let’s see God’s recognition of servants.

Verses 18-39 gives us a list of thirty-four mighty men whose names are listed as being members of “the thirty.” In verse 18a, we

³ Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture*, 96.

are told, “**Now Abishai, the brother of Joab, the son of Zeruah, was chief of the thirty.**” And in verse 20a, we are told, “**And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was a valiant man of Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds.**” We are told of the deeds these two mighty men. But the deeds of the other thirty-two mighty men are not noted.

Nevertheless, the names of these thirty-four men are recognized. Of David’s tens of thousands of servants, only these thirty-four are recognized. Their names are printed on the pages of God’s holy word as an eternal tribute to their faithful service to David.

God’s servants today will be recognized in glory for their faithful service to Jesus. Whether it be caring for children in the nursery during Sunday school or worship, or teaching Sunday school to teenagers, or teaching ESL to foreigners as well as sharing Jesus with them, or taking a meal in Jesus’ name to someone who is ill, God will recognize his faithful servants. A. W. Pink writes:

When the books are opened before an assembled universe and the fidelity and courage of God’s [servants] is proclaimed, it will be principally for the glory of their Captain, whom they served and whose fame they sought to spread, and by whose Spirit they were energized and enabled. Whatever crowns His servants and saints receive from God, they will be laid at the feet of the Lamb, who alone is worthy.⁴

IV. God’s Reminder of Sin (23:39)

And finally, let’s be aware of God’s reminder of sin.

Perhaps you noticed the very last name in the list of David’s mighty men. It is given in verse 39a, “**Uriah the Hittite.**” You remember that when David was king, he saw a beautiful woman

⁴ Arthur Walkington Pink, *The Life of David* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), 2 Sa 23.

bathing. She was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. David sent for her and after he learned of her pregnancy, he sent for Uriah. David tried to encourage Uriah to go home so that he might think that the child was his. But Uriah was one of David's mighty men, and he would not take personal liberties while his fellow soldiers were still engaged in battle. Eventually, David sent him back to the front line with a note that was essentially his death warrant. Uriah was killed, and David then took Bathsheba as his wife. That sordid narrative showed David his gross, immoral sin.

But David also learned of God's forgiveness. He repented of his sin. And God forgave him. But his kingdom never fully recovered from his sin. That would have to wait until the arrival of his Greater Son, Jesus.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the account of David's mighty men in 2 Samuel 23:8-39, let us be sure that our names are recorded in the Lamb's book of life.

My name never made it on to that Roll of Honor in the Assembly Hall at Pearson High School.

But my name is listed somewhere else. When the Apostle John described the eternal city of the New Jerusalem in the new earth, he wrote in Revelation 21:27, "But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life." That is by far the most important Roll of Honor. My name is in the Lamb's book of life because Jesus saved me.

I pray that your name is in the Lamb's book of life. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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