

STRENGTHENED IN THE LORD

1 Samuel 30:1-31

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David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God (1 Sam. 30:6).

Jacob DeShazer was born into a Christian family but grew up as a rebel to his parents' faith. In 1942, having enlisted in the Air Force, Jacob was on board the USS Hornet in the Pacific Ocean preparing for what history would remember as the famous Doolittle Raid. Named for its commander, Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle, this raid would be America's first reprisal for the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The Easter service held on the aircraft carrier's deck was packed with airmen, but DeShazer had no interest. Two weeks later, Jacob took off with his squadron and as bombardier made sure that his plane's bombs hit their targets in the city of Nagoya, Japan.

The Doolittle raid was a one-way trip, with the plan calling for the crews to bail out of their planes over neutral China. Two of the bombers, however, including DeShazer's, strayed over Japanese held territory and Jacob was taken into custody as a prisoner of war.

The next three years would be hellish for DeShazer and his friends. They were tortured into making confessions and held for months in solitary confinement. Several were publicly executed and the rest held as war criminals. Jacob kept himself going by cultivating an intense hatred of his Japanese captors. In time, the few surviving airmen were transferred to a military prison in China and provided with basic amenities, including a single Bible to read. When Jacob's turn came to possess the Bible, he read it straight through, starting in Genesis, seeing the Old Testament prophecies confirmed in the New

Testament portrait of Jesus. In his reading of Romans 10:9, DeShazer received grace from God to believe, confessed his sins and knew the joy of God's forgiveness. As Paul had written, Jacob called upon the name of the Lord and was saved. He later wrote: "How my heart rejoiced in my newness of spiritual life, even though my body was suffering so terribly from the physical beatings and lack of food." In the lowest depth of agony God had given life to Jacob's soul.¹

DISASTER AT ZIKLAG

Jacob DeShazer was not the first person who needed to be brought low before his heart was opened to call on the Lord for salvation. A more famous example is the Old Testament's great hero, David. David had fled from the persecution of Israel's king Saul to seek refuge among the Philistines, an action the Bible regards as going over to the ungodly (1 Sam. 27:2). To fit in among the wicked, David adopted a life of deceit as he secretly made war on Israel's enemies. His cunning came to an end when the Philistines gathered to invade Israel, forcing David to side openly with Israel's enemies or turn coat against his new friends. Just when David seemed trapped, God delivered him by means of the suspicious Philistine lords, who objected to having an Israelite contingent in their army. Chapter 29 concludes with David still spinning his designs, reluctantly marching away from the scene of action to his base in the southern desert.

Chapter 30 picks up at the end of David's and his men's sixty mile march to Ziklag. During the three-day journey, their hearts must have been lifted at the thought of relaxation after so much stress, along with joyful reunions with wives and children. As the band drew near, however, they may have been alarmed at the sight of smoke on the horizon; we can easily imagine the ranks breaking and men racing forward to their homes. The sight that greeted them was the stuff of nightmares: "Amalekites had made a raid against the Negeb and against Ziklag. They had overcome Ziklag and burned it with fire and taken captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great... And when David and his men came to the city, they found it burned with fire, and their wives and sons and daughters taken

¹ Cited from Don Stephens, *War and Grace: Short Biographies from the World Wars* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 2005), 135-144.

captive” (1 Sam. 30:1-3). After all the deprivations of so many years – month after month of harassment, flight, and danger – David had now reached the end of his rope. The entire city was empty, Amalekite raiders having seized their wives and children, no doubt to be sold into slavery under the most desperate conditions. Among the missing were David’s two wives, Ahinoam and Abigail (1 Sam. 30:5). It was just too much to face, and “David and the people who were with him raised their voices and wept until they had no more strength to weep” (1 Sam. 30:4).

This blow was not only too much for David to bear, it was also the last straw for his wearied men. They had joined David because of their own troubles with Saul, but also because of the promise of blessing attached to the young hero. There had been high moments, but their hearts could no longer bear the bitterness of affliction to which David had led them. Enough was enough, and the men now vented their anger at their leader: “David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters” (1 Sam. 30:6).

This was rock-bottom for David. He was separated from the people of Israel and the ordinances of saving religion. His desperate plans to buy time had bought disaster instead. The wives in which he had taken comfort were suffering unknown horrors because of David’s failure, and his men, having lost children as well as wives, were done with him. David largely deserved their scorn, having incredibly left his base completely unguarded while he marched off with the Philistines, leaving the Amalekite raiders he had provoked for sixteen months free to strike and pillage. Dale Ralph Davis comments:

Here is a sobering and disturbing picture for God’s people. Are there not times when you think it cannot get any worse? And 1 Samuel 30 says, Yes, it can. There are times when you conclude that your present trouble is the last straw; you simply cannot take any more. Then comes Ziklag, the last straw after the last straw.²

We can think of at least two reasons why David suffered so greatly at Ziklag. The first was that he was backslidden with respect to his faith, so that all his woes were ultimately of his own making.

² Dale Ralph Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 250-1.

Secondly, however, we know that God was preparing David for a singularly important leadership role, and thus was determined to gain David's attention and draw his heart back to trusting obedience.

What was David to do in this shocking situation, his men literally gathering stones to put an end to his life and rule? From a leadership perspective, the best thing that a doubted leader can do is simply to lead. When I was a lieutenant in the Army, a story was told of a tank company that mutinied during the Viet Nam war because of fatigue and despair. Their colonel arrived, relieving the captain of his command and ordering the soldiers to follow him in an attack on the enemy. The angry soldiers asked why the colonel thought they would follow him. He answered, "Because I'm the colonel, and the food, ammunition, and artillery support go where I go!" One-by-one, the tanks began following the colonel and obedience was restored. David did something similar when he summoned the high priest, Abiathar, and asked for him to inquire of the Lord. If the men of David's band wanted to get their wives and children back they needed God's help, and God revealed himself only to his anointed servant, David.

Before mastering his men, however, David had to master himself. His long bout of self-reliance had led him to the brink of death, so it was time to abandon his program of self-salvation. At this moment of utter desperation, David did the one thing he most needed: "David strengthened himself in the LORD his God" (1 Sam. 30:6). If previously David had appealed to his own resources, with virtually no prayer and no recourse to God's Word, he now turned from his own strength and applied himself to the Lord. When we read that David "strengthened himself in the LORD his God," this does not mean that he performed some ritual that would supposedly provide him divine aid, nor that the emotional intensity of the situation placed him on a higher spiritual plane, but rather that by faith alone he laid hold the Lord and his salvation promises.

What does it mean to "strengthen yourself" in God? We have a clue in the previous occasion when Jonathan came to David in his distress and "strengthened his hand in God" (1 Sam. 23:16). Jonathan did this by reminding David of God's promise to elevate him to the throne, so that even Saul knew that he could not succeed against David (1 Sam. 23:17). This suggests that now at Ziklag, lacking Jonathan's help,

David reminded himself of God's promises. No doubt, he also recalled the Lord's prior help in saving him, and reflected on God's nature, including his omnipotence, faithfulness, and sovereignty. Adding all these together, David recovered from his fear and distress by thinking about God and personally appealing to God for salvation. Whereas Saul in his distress had sought comfort from an occult witch, receiving God's judgment of death (1 Sam. 28), David turned for strength to the Lord and received new life.

Jacob DeShazer turned to God for salvation by confessing his need of forgiveness and his belief that Jesus is Savior and Lord (Rom. 10:9). An example of a believer turning to God for strength is the Scottish pastor Andrew Bonar, who noted in his diary entry for October 15, 1864 that he had been meditating on Nahum 1:7, "The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows those who take refuge in him" (RSV). Later in the day, he suffered the death of his dearly beloved wife, Isabella, remembering the Bible verse he has studied: "Little did I think how I would need it half an hour after." For years afterward, Bonar would record Nahum 1:7 in his diary record for October 15. Why? Because in his grief for the loss of his wife, he was strengthening himself in the Lord with the Word of God.³ Another example is the pioneering missionary to Africa, David Livingstone. On occasions when Livingstone felt himself giving in to fear, he would remember Jesus' words, "Go ye therefore into all the world, and preach the gospel unto every creature, and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Mt. 28:18-20, KJV). Remembering that Christ had sent him with the gospel, Livingstone strengthened his heart in the knowledge that Christ would protect him.⁴ Roger Ellsworth sums up the meaning of the expression in 1 Samuel 30:6:

To strengthen ourselves in God means we remind ourselves of what Scripture says about God and his promises, and we bring those truths to bear on the situation. Every trial causes opposing voices to ring in the ears of the child of God. One is the voice of our circumstances,

³ Ibid., 254.

⁴ Cited in William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 421-2.

telling us that our situation is hopeless. The other is the voice of faith, telling us that our God is sufficient for the trial.⁵

FOLLOWING GOD'S WORD

From the moment of his return to faith in the Lord, David was a changed man. In the rest of the chapter, David shows us what to do when we have turned our hearts to God, whether for the first or the twenty-first time. Having renewed his faith in the Lord and received the strength that comes from God, David immediately consulted God's Word for guidance: "David inquired of the LORD, 'Shall I pursue after this band? Shall I overtake them?' He answered him, 'Pursue, for you shall surely overtake and shall surely rescue'" (1 Sam. 30:8). David received this revelation through the Urim kept in the high priest's ephod, a special provision God had made for Israel's leaders. It is the first time we read of David seeking God's Word since he entered Philistia and it marks the turning point in this phase of his life. No longer charting his own weaving course, David can once against plot the straight line of God's revealed will.

There was no way to know where the raiding Amalekites had gone, since they were a nomadic people. So God told David to go forward as best he could, just as God often will call believers today to obey him without a clear end in sight. David vigorously applied himself to obedience: "So David set out, and the six hundred men who were with him, and they came to the brook Besor, where those who were left behind stayed. But David pursued, he and four hundred men" (1 Sam. 30:9-10). David sets an example for new believers as well as those repenting from backsliding. A critic might say that David was heading into a trackless desert with remarkably poor odds of ever finding the Amalekites. David would reply that obeying God's clear commands was both his duty and his hope.

There are two reasons why obeying God's Word works out well in our lives. The first is that God's commands are good and obeying them is beneficial. The second reason why obeying God's commands works well is that God graciously blesses the obedience of his people.

⁵ Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King* (Ross-Shire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1998), 119.

This will be true for believers today, just as it was true for David as God's providence provided all that he needed for success.

In David's case, God's providential blessing came in the form of an Egyptian servant who had been abandoned in the desert by his Amalekite master. David's men found him and refreshed the Egyptian with food and drink (1 Sam. 30:11-12). When they questioned the man they learned that the Amalekites had been raiding into Judah and the "Negeb of Caleb," and they had also "burned Ziklag with fire" (1 Sam. 30:14). David asked if the man would lead him to the Amalekites and he agreed, providing that David did not harm or betray him (1 Sam. 30:15). Armed with this ideal reconnaissance, David was able to surprise his enemy, who were so secure in their false confidence that they were "eating and drinking and dancing," without having set a watch (1 Sam. 30:16).

David struck them down from twilight until the evening of the next day, and not a man of them escaped, except four hundred young men, who mounted camels and fled. David recovered all that the Amalekites had taken, and David rescued his two wives. Nothing was missing, whether small or great, sons or daughters, spoil or anything that had been taken. David brought back all (1 Sam. 30:17-19).

It is evident that David could never have found his enemies if God had not provided the Egyptian servant to lead him. Likewise, by trusting in God's Word we will learn the truth of Paul's promise: "my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). The same God who brought David low in order to restore his heart was fully capable of restoring to David all he had lost.

Like David, when we have turned our hearts to the Lord we should study his Word and aggressively put into practice all that God commands. Jacob DeShazer discovered this immediately after trusting Christ as his Savior. Up to this time, Jacob had been the most difficult prisoner, burning with a hatred for the Japanese. But he learned in the Bible that Jesus wanted him to forgive as he had been forgiven. That very day, a prison guard who DeShazer often antagonized trapped his foot in a doorway and physically abused him. Instead of responding with his typical venom, Jacob remembered Christ's Word and did not revile his tormentor. On subsequent days

he greeted the guard with kindness, which led to conversations and ultimately to a kind of friendship. In coming months, the once brutal guard went so far as to sneak food to the malnourished DeShazer, possibly saving his life. Jacob concluded that not only was God testing him for obedience but the Lord was also showing him how unexpected blessings arise from obedience to God's revealed Word.⁶

GRACE RECOVERED

The events that followed David's victory showed that by turning back to the Lord, he not only recovered his obedience but also his wisdom and grace. On the way out to pursue the Amalekites, a third of David's force, two hundred men, had been unable to continue in the harsh desert climate. These two hundred stayed to guard David's supplies along the river Besor (1 Sam. 30:10). After the victory, some of the four hundred who had continued to the end objected to the two hundred sharing in the spoils: "Then all the wicked and worthless fellows among the men who had gone with David said, 'Because they did not go with us, we will not give them any of the spoil that we have recovered, except that each man may lead away his wife and children, and depart'" (1 Sam. 30:22). David disagreed, saying: "'You shall not do so, my brothers, with what the LORD has given us. He has preserved us and given into our hand the band that came against us. Who would listen to you in this matter? For as his share is who goes down into the battle, so shall his share be who stays by the baggage. They shall share alike'" (1 Sam. 30:23-24).

David's opposition to the scoundrels' plan was based on two points. The first was the solidarity that is fundamental to believers as God's covenant people. Not all had run the same risks nor performed the same tasks, but all had contributed in his own way and therefore ought to share: "For as his share is who goes down into the battle, so shall his share be who stays by the baggage." This emphasis echoes the apostle Paul's teaching on the unity of Christians as the body of Christ: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable... If

⁶ Don Stephens, *War and Grace*, 144-5.

one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Cor. 12:21-26).

Second, and even more significantly, David’s attitude towards the victory and the spoils was marked by his gratitude for God’s grace. David’s key statement is seen in verse 23: “You shall not do so, my brothers, with what the Lord has given us. He has preserved us and given into our hand that band that came against us.” Their recovered spoils, along with the Amalekite property, did not come to David’s band by his or anyone else’s clever scheming. The key reality is seen in David’s words: “what the Lord has given us.” “All was of grace as far as David was concerned. The victory was not what he and his men had achieved, but what God had given. Because they had been the recipients of God’s grace in battle, they must now demonstrate that grace to those who stayed behind.”⁷

Not only has grace infected David’s reasoning – a sure sign that one has turned to the Lord in true faith – but his conduct as a leader is now marked by grace. A leader inspires confidence when his judgments reflect the precepts and principles of God’s Word. Notice as well the mildness with which David addressed the men described in Scripture as “wicked and worthless” (1 Sam. 30:22). He did not berate or insult them, but graciously addressed them as “my brothers” (1 Sam. 30:23), thus appealing to their best nature.

How different David was, once restored to faith in God, from both the pagan Philistines and tyrannical king Saul. John Woodhouse comments: “David was a peacemaker among his people. The authority that David was beginning to assume was not that of a tyrant. This people, even these troublesome ones, were his ‘brothers’.”⁸ So agreeable was David’s policy that in later years it formed the basis of a standing rule under his reign (1 Sam. 30:25). Matthew Henry suggests David’s gracious conduct as a fixed rule for all Christian leaders: “Superiors often lose their authority by haughtiness, but seldom by courtesy and condescension.”⁹

⁷ Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King*, 121.

⁸ John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 539.

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:345.

GENEROUS GIVING

The chapter concludes with a depiction of one additional result of David's return to the Lord in faith: his generosity in giving gifts to those in need: "When David came to Ziklag, he sent part of the spoil to his friends, the elders of Judah, saying, 'Here is a present for you from the spoil of the enemies of the LORD'" (1 Sam. 30:26).

While each of David's men recovered his family members and property, it seems that David reserved for himself most if not all of the Amalekite goods seized in the attack (see 1 Sam. 30:20). With these flocks and herds David made gifts to his fellow Jews. After sixteen months of self-imposed exile, in which David fended mainly for himself, his restoration to God has resulted in a restoration of his compassion and love for the people of God. So it will be with us.

David's gifts went to "his friends, the elders of Judah, saying, 'Here is a present for you from the spoil of the enemies of the Lord'" (1 Sam. 30:26). Some commentators see this gift as a crass political maneuver to strip support from Saul or an example of cronyism, since the Bible cites David's friends as the recipients. Undoubtedly, David was remembering God's anointing as Israel's true king and was acting in response to that calling. Moreover, it is most likely that David did not name the elders because they were his friends, but David named them friends because they were the elders of God's people. Robert Bergen comments: "As would be expected of the Lord's anointed, David had fought the Lord's enemies. As would be expected of the Lord's anointed, he was now bringing blessing to the Lord's people."¹⁰

David had thus been liberated not only from his sin and the danger of his circumstances, but also from the soul-poisoning effects of living only for himself, instead putting his mind on the needs of God's people and kingdom. Since the cities cited as receiving gifts from David are all located in the southern region of Judah, where David had so long sought refuge from Saul (1 Sam. 30:27-31), David had probably been helped by them in his need, so that he thinks of their

¹⁰ Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 280.

needs in his time of plenty. This is precisely how those who have come to God in faith should act towards one another.

Notice that, having lost everything through willful unbelief, David now has all that and more restored to him once he walks with God in faith. David's experience is mirrored in the lives of God's people in all times. Like David, whenever we turn away from the Lord, neglecting worship and God's Word, giving rein to our sinful passions, our descent into misery and despair can be far swifter and steeper than we ever imagined. How far David had fallen while in Philistia, ending with the disaster at Ziklag! How far and how fast any Christian may fall if we harden our hearts to the Lord! But, also like David, when we lay hold of the Lord in new or renewed faith, seeking and obeying God's Word, our progress in godliness and blessing can be surprisingly rapid. Many people, having turned to God in a living faith and attending diligently to faithful preaching and engaging in private devotion to God's Word and prayer, have seen their faith and godliness grow dramatically changed in a mere span of months, all by God's power. Turning to God in obedient faith, David not only gained many blessings for himself but was made by God into a blessing for many other people.

GIFTS FROM THE KING

There are a number of ways that David in this passage reminds us of Jesus Christ. As David strengthened himself in God, so also Jesus fortified himself in prayer as he prepared to take up the cross. Like David in his sweeping victory over the Amalekites, setting free the woman and children of his people, so also has Jesus has overthrown our strong captor and set us free from the domain of sin and judgment. Finally, as David took from his own share and gave to the needy in Judea, so also did Jesus give gifts to his church after his resurrection and ascension. Paul wrote: "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men" (Eph. 4:8). In that context, Paul cites Christ's gift of faithful spiritual leaders for God's people (Eph. 4:11f). But Christ's greatest gift is eternal life, granted through faith by the power of the Holy Spirit whom Christ has sent from heaven (cf. Gal. 3:14). In both the ancient world and today, kings give gifts to their people when they are

crowned, and Jesus' most precious gift is the salvation he purchased with his own precious blood (1 Pet. 1:18-19), a salvation any sinner can receive through simple faith.

This is what Jacob DeShazer discovered when he surrendered his life to Jesus in his prison cell. He also discovered that Christ wanted him to give gifts to those he had formerly hated. The first was the gift of his prayers, as he spent much of his time in his cell praying for the salvation of his guards and for the Japanese people as a whole. Then, when the war ended, Jacob enrolled in a Bible college to prepare himself to return to Japan as a missionary, enabling him to give the best of all gifts, a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, so that others could receive God's gift of eternal life through faith in him. In the years to come, DeShazer would start a church in Nagoya, the city he had bombed just a few years earlier, and he wrote a tract describing his conversion that was greatly used to lead Japanese people to faith in Christ. One man who picked up the tract and believed in Jesus was Mitsuo Fuchida, the Japanese air commander who led the air raid against Pearl Harbor, and who had fallen into despair after his nation's defeat. DeShazer and Fuchida went on to hold evangelistic meetings together, taking the blessings God had graciously given to them in Christ and giving the gospel message of salvation to many others who believed and were saved.

In giving gifts to his people out of the treasure of his own spoils, David foreshadows the kind of king Jesus is to believers. Like David with his followers, Jesus calls us his "friends" (Jn. 15:15), and he pledges to meet all of our needs, especially our need of forgiveness and eternal life. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep," Jesus said (Jn. 10:11). Most marvelously, Christ's gospel gift is such that when we give it to others we do not lose it but possess it more strongly and richly for ourselves. What an incentive for us all to strengthen ourselves in the Lord and start following his Word in renewed faith. Who can tell what God will do in and through any of us if we yield ourselves unreservedly to Jesus?