“THE BATTLE IS THE LORD’S”

2 SAMUEL CHAPTERS 23-24

Today we’re going to finish our study in Second Samuel. The last few weeks we’ve focused our attention on King David’s lasting legacy. The hallmark event in David’s life, what he is most known for and what launched him into the public eye was his encounter with Goliath. This happened early in David’s life, when he was still a teenager. As Goliath approached David, David looked him square in the eyes and made this declaration -- to Goliath and to the entire army of the Philistines: “You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hand.”

Well, you all know the rest of the story. David does exactly what he said he was going to do. He hurls a stone from his sling, it strikes Goliath in the forehead and the giant falls to the ground face first. David takes Goliath’s sword out of its sheath, runs it thru Goliath and kills him. Finally David cuts off Goliath’s head. The Philistines flee with the army of Israel in pursuit. David’s legacy begins.

So how is it that, at such a young age, David could make such a bold statement and then back it up? Here’s why – and it has nothing to do with David. David understood the covenant relationship between God and His chosen nation Israel. You see, God had promised repeatedly that He would fight for Israel and that He would be right there with His people as they battled against their enemies. This is a promise in Exo 14:14, Deut 1:30, Deut 3:22, Deut 31:6, Joshua 1:5. In other words David realized early on that it was not the might of Israel’s army that mattered, but victory depended solely on their reliance upon Israel’s great and mighty God. And as you read about David’s military exploits you realize that David lived out this truth over and over again. David trusted in God. He believed God and God in turn gave David and his army great success.

In 2 Samuel Chapter 23 (and the parallel passage 1 Chronicles Chapter 11) we have a listing of David’s mighty men. The thing that characterizes these men is that they are attracted to David’s person (he’s a man after God’s own heart, he fears God, he relies on God). And they’re committed to David’s cause (to defeat God’s enemies, to firmly establish the nation within the borders God had promised them). David has a tremendous influence on these men, not just as their military leader and later their king, but as their spiritual leader. When we read David’s life we often see him operating in the role of prophet and priest. David effectively passes along to all of his men the same trust and confidence in God that he has. And as a result his men are able to accomplish incredible things on the battlefield.

The list of David’s mighty men begins with 3 champions. They are known simply as “the three.”

READ 2 Samuel 23: 8-12.

So their you have the three, Jashobeam, Eleazar and Shammah and their exploits.

 And then you have the “thirty chief men,” v 13-39. Highlighted among this group are three unnamed soldiers. These three guys did something truly amazing. The setting is probably around the time of 1 Samuel 22 when David is held up with 400 of his men in the Cave of Adullam (when David was on the run from King Saul). Listen to what they did…

READ 2 Samuel 23:13-17.

David is so overwhelmed by the action of these three men that he refuses to drink the water they had risked their lives to bring him. Instead David pours it out as a drink offering to the Lord. This is an act of worship.

Before we get to the long list of the thirty chief men, both the writers of 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles draw our attention to two men in particular, Abishai and Benaiah. These two guys are renowned among the thirty but did not attain to the three, those 3 champions mentioned at the beginning. So you could say they rank 4th and 5th on the list overall.

Abishai, v 18-19, is Joab’s brother, one of David’s commanders and most honored of the thirty chief men. He was one of the two guys who dared to go with David into the camp of Saul in the middle of the night. Abishai wanted to kill Saul, but David restrained him (1 Sam 26:6-9). He was also the one who wanted to kill Shimei (who was cursing David and throwing stones at him, 2 Sam 16:9-11) – Abishai said, “Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head.” Again David restrained him. On the way back to Jerusalem after Absalom’s death, David crossed paths with Shimei again. Abishai again proposes to kill Shimei (2 Sam 19:21). And again David restrains him. Abishai was the one who saved David’s life from one of the giants who sought to kill David (2 Sam 21:16-17). So we know quite a lot about Abishai. But the writers of 2 Sam and 1 Chron only mention that he wielded his spear against 300 men and killed them and thereby made a name for himself.

Benaiah, v 20-23, was the captain of David’s bodyguard. He killed 2 Moabite heroes, an elite Egyptian soldier (1 Chron 11:23 says this Egyptian was a 7 ½ ft tall giant). He also killed a lion. Sidenote: Later (after David’s death) Benaiah will help Solomon secure the throne. He will also be the one who Solomon commands to put Joab to death.

And that brings us to the thirty chief men. “The thirty” is a military term used to describe a small squad of soldiers which was generally about 30 men. So it is not intended to be a firm number. Actually 2 Samuel 23 lists 35 men by name. 1 Chronicles 11 lists 50 men by name. The list in 2 Sam 23 includes a reference to “the sons of Jashan,” v 31, so we don’t know for sure how many sons there were. The bottom line is that there were more than 30 chief men. More like 50. I’ll just mention 4 from this list that stand out…

Asahel, Joab’s brother, a very fast runner described in scripture as being “swift of foot as a wild gazelle.” He was the one who was chasing after Abner (former commander of Saul’s army) and who Abner accidentally killed (2 Sam 2:18-23).

Sibbecai and Jonathan, two of the giant killers listed in Ch 21

Uriah the Hittite. We all know him, Bathsheba’s husband, the man whom David had killed to try and cover up his sin of adultery even though he was one of David’s best soldiers.

So here is a list of David’s mighty men, the elite among David’s army. Oh and by the way 1 Chronicles 11 mentions another 30 led by Zadab the Reubenite. So what you need to see is that David had many, many loyal soldiers whose brave stories only God knows.

There are a lot of names mentioned here in this passage. But there’s one soldier’s name notably absent from this list. Who’s that? Hint: he is one of David’s field commanders. He is prominent in both 1 and 2 Samuel. A couple of his brothers are listed among the mighty men. JOAB. So why didn’t Joab make this list? Well, remember that Joab, even though he is still operating as one of David’s commanders, is on very shaky ground with David. In modern terms we would say that Joab was on David’s black list. Joab is the one who killed Absalom (disobeyed David’s direct order). He is also is the one who killed Abner (vengeance, violated God’s law). And he killed Amasa (jealousy, again violated God’s laws). And for these actions David never forgave Joab. At the end of his life David instructs Solomon, “Act according to your wisdom, but do not let Joab’s gray head go to the grave in peace.” (1 Kings 2:6) So even though Joab was a tremendous military officer and had faithfully served David as his #1 commandeer for many years he doesn’t make this list because he had other issues. But don’t feel too sorry for Joab. He was not a good guy. In the end Joab gets exactly what he deserves and is put to death for his wicked actions (1 Kings 2:34).

So to wrap up our discussion of David’s mighty men, these men are committed to David. They overcame great odds by their faith in God, which was instilled in them by David. These mighty men faced what seemed to be insurmountable odds. But note 23:10: “And the Lord brought about a great victory that day...” And again in 23:12: “And the Lord worked a great victory.” These men never considered the odds of victory. Instead, like David, they trusted God for the victory.

They were committed to David and to David’s cause even though there were giants in the land; even though the enemy was fierce and well-armed and well-trained; even though in many cases they were outnumbered.

They were committed to David and his cause even though the battles were often long and hard and exhausting.

These mighty men were committed to David and his cause even when the majority ran away or when there was open hostility against them. But these mighty men ignored the majority and they stood strong for God.

These mighty men took the initiative. They weren’t passive. They risked their very lives for David and for his cause. Just like David they firmly believe that the battle IS the Lord’s! That’s the legacy that David passed on to them.

Application: God wants us to have that same level of commitment to our King, Jesus Christ. Committed to His person (who He is, the Son of God who loved us enough to leave heaven and come to earth to pay our sin debt so that we might have a relationship with Him). “Love so amazing so divine demands my soul my life my all.” Committed to His cause (to taking the gospel message to the world darkened by sin, shining the light of Jesus for all to see).

Chapter 24, part 2 of today’s lesson. You would think David would know better. We just mentioned the legacy that David passed on to his men, trusting in the Lord God of Israel to fight their battles. So why does David do what he does next?

READ 2 Samuel 24:1-2

The Lord is angry with Israel. We’re not told the reason for God’s anger at this time. We know from reading on further that this numbering of Israel, this census, is a sin because 1 Chron 21:7 states that “God was displeased with this thing.” V 1 says, “he incited David against them.” The “them here is Israel. Who is the “he”? We know God didn’t tempt David to commit this sin. How? Because James 1:13 says, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God,’ for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one.” So it wasn’t God. The parallel passage, 1 Chron 21:1, says, “Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.” So what is happening here is that Satan tempts David to number the troops. The old devil probably appeals to David’s pride and God in His sovereignty allows this because it will fulfill a divine purpose later.

David’s reason for numbering the people is to determine how many fighting men he has. If God is the one doing the fighting, the obvious question is, why does it matter how big Israel’s army is? It doesn’t. It’s a complete waste of time. Joab goes to David, v 3-9 and, even though Joab is a bad man in many ways, in this instance he’s actually the voice of reason. “Why do you want to do this David? Is it really necessary?” But David ignores Joab and insists on numbering Israel and Judah. So Joab does as he’s been directed even though he hated doing it. First Chron 21 says that “the king’s command was abhorrent to him.”

READ 2 Samuel 24:8-9

So the final tally comes to 1.3 million strong (1.57 million in the 1 Chronicles acct). In either case a pretty big number. But like I said, does it really matter? God plus any number is a majority, right?

I have already made the point that David’s numbering of the troops is a sin. So why is it a sin? Several reasons. First, God never directed David to do it. Second, which I just pointed out, God is the one who fights for Israel. So the size of Israel’s army is irrelevant. Third, it is a sin because numbering the troops appeals to David’s ego as he can see just how big the army at his command really is. “Look at what I have!” This reminds me of the pride that consumed King Nebucchadnezzar the day he walked on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon. Daniel 4:30 tells us what that king thought: “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” Sometimes our pride can get the best of us and God has to humble us. So David’s sin isn’t so much a willful rebellion against God as much as it’s a lack of faith and trust in God and placing his focus and dependence on himself (David) and what he controls. The root of his sin, as with most sins, is pride.

Well, David realizes almost immediately after Joab’s final report has been given to him that he has messed up big time. The Holy Spirit convicts David of his sin.

READ 2 Samuel 24:10

David recognizes his sin, confesses it and asks for forgiveness. This time David doesn’t need a prophet of God to come to him in order to expose his sin. He acknowledges it right away. His assessment is absolutely correct when he says, “I have done very foolishly.”

So God gives David his choice of three punishments: (1) 3 years of famine in the land (1 Chron 21:12 says 7 years); (2) 3 months fleeing from his enemies while they chase him; or (3) 3 days of pestilence in the land. God is going to strike the people of Israel (punishment for their own sins, referenced in v 1). Death will come either by famine, by sword or by plague – David gets to choose which one. David throws himself upon the mercy of God and basically says not number 2 – “don’t let me fall into the hand of man.”

READ 2 Samuel 24:15-17 *[emphasize last sentence of v 16]*

God sends pestilence for 3 days and we’re told that 70,000 people die. Yet right in the middle of this awful tragedy we see God’s hand of mercy. The Lord relented and stayed the hand of the angel, His instrument of death. Notice David’s heart for his people. He refers to them as “sheep.” “These sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and my family.” So David pleads for mercy and calls down God’s wrath on himself and his family. “We deserve it. They don’t.” But God relents. He is merciful to Israel. And He is merciful to David and his family.

David is told to build an altar of the Lord at a specific location – the place where God had restrained the angel of death, the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. This was a location just to the north of the fortified city of Jerusalem, the City of David. It is located on a hill, formerly known as Mt Moriah. It’s the same location where Abraham had been told to offer up his son Isaac. It is now privately owned by this man Araunah. So David goes to him to purchase the property so he can build the altar. Araunah’s response to David is quite generous. He offers to provide the oxen and the wood. Not only that he even offers to give David the piece of property. David’s response to Araunah and his kind offer reveals David’s heart for God:

READ 2 Samuel 24:24-25

David’s last public act is not as a military commander but as a priest. After David makes the sacrifice we’re told in 1 Chron 22:1 “Then David said, ‘Here shall be the house of the Lord God and here the altar of burnt offering for Israel.’” So it’s on this very site that Solomon will later build the Temple of the Lord. So the one good thing that results from this otherwise tragic narrative is that the site for the future Temple is acquired.

Those words David spoke, v 24, are so profound and convicting: “I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing.” David understands an important principle about worship. Sacrifice is an essential part of worship and by definition sacrifice must cost the worshipper something of value to them. “I am taking this \_\_\_ and I am giving it to God. It is no longer mine but God’s. I give my best to Him.”

Remember, it was on this very same spot that Abraham years before had been obedient to God and willing to offer up his son Isaac, the son of promise, to God on an altar. But God spared Isaac that day. In very close proximity to this spot some 2000 years later God will NOT spare His Son, Jesus – “the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son…” (Jn 3:16). “God did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all…” (Rom 8:32). No, on that day God allows His Son Jesus to die on a Roman cross for the sins of the world. And Jesus willingly submits to His Father’s will and “give[s] Himself a ransom for all.” (1 Timothy 2:6) The writer of Hebrews says that Christ through His blood, his death on the cross “thru the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God.” He became our perfect sacrifice. How fitting that Paul tells us Christians in 1 Corinthians that we “were bought with a price.” Our salvation came at a tremendous cost to God. It cost God something very dear.

So are you trusting in Jesus this morning – in His person and in His cause. How committed are you to Him? Are you willing to give Him your very life. Let’s close by worshipping our wonderful Savior with a couple of verses from an old hymn. As you sing make this your declaration of praise and commitment to Him.