

David's Mighty Men *2 Samuel 23:8-39; 2 Chronicles 11:10-47*

Only one man can be king. There's only one desk in the Oval Office. And normally the Nobel Prize is given to only one person at a time. So where do the rest of us fit in—especially those who are greatly gifted, perhaps even more than the ones with titles and positions? That is the issue for every employee who never becomes CEO, for every colonel who never makes it to general, for every spouse married to someone who is successful . . . and for all who live in the shadows of others who stand in the spotlight.

Let me tell you the story of Josheb, Eleazar, Benaiah, Shammah, Abishai and three dozen other men you've probably never heard of before. They were all mighty men who served a very famous king whom just about everyone has heard of. It is the story of King David and the mighty men who were friends together in shared success.

While David eventually became a great king of Israel, it was not always easy. God's anointing led him down a difficult and dangerous path. Long before he sat on a secure throne in Jerusalem he was engaged in a civil war that tore apart the ancient nation of Israel. At first he gathered around him only a comparative handful of soldiers. They were not regular troops out of the Israeli army, but rather those who were sometimes described as the dregs of society. Others ended up being the heroes of the nation.

David honored the heroes by naming them his Mighty Men. There were two divisions to the mighty men: the Three and the Thirty. The Three were the greatest leaders of them all, but the Thirty were themselves truly mighty men. Over the years there were actually more than three men among the Three and more than thirty men among the Thirty. That's because some of them died in battle and were replaced (much like the King Arthur replaced knights at the Round Table or the President of the United States may

have a succession of chiefs of staff or members of the presidential cabinet).

We first meet these heroes in 2 Samuel 23. It is there that the marks of the mighty men are listed. First we learn that these mighty men were strong and successful in their own right as individuals in 2 Samuel 23:8:

These are the names of David's mighty men: Josheb-Basshebeth, a Tahkemonite, was chief of the Three; he raised his spear against eight hundred men, whom he killed in one encounter.

If you think that's impressive, cross over to 1 Chronicles 11:11 where it says that Josheb killed 300 men in one encounter. Some people have difficulty because there seems to be an inconsistency between the 800 and the 300. Some say that a scribe scrambled a digit. Others think he single-handedly killed 1,100 of the enemy. Regardless of the exact number, Josheb was one ferocious soldier. Formidable! An ancient Jewish Rambo! He was so strong, so skilled, so dangerous that he was "top gun" ("top spear") in the entire Hebrew army.

The point I make is that he could have been a king himself. At least militarily, he was as strong and successful as they come. There is no record that David ever single-handedly killed so many men in battle. So, at least on this point, it could be argued that he was

mightier than the king himself.

What could be said about Josheb could be said about all the mighty men. They were all super strong and super successful. They didn't need to be #2.

This is a repeated pattern today. In business, government, home, church, school and every other place there are mighty men and women who are strong and successful in their own right. There are those who can write better than the editor, teach

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better than the principal, govern better than the governor and lead better than the leader. They are the mighty men and women because they are good at what they do!

But that's not all there was to these mighty men because a second of their marks was that they were empowered by God. This is described in 2 Samuel 23:9-12:

Next to him was Eleazar son of Dodai the Ahohite. As one of the three mighty men, he was with David when they taunted the Philistines gathered at Pas Dammim for battle. Then the men of Israel retreated, but he stood his ground and struck down the Philistines till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword. The Lord brought about a great victory that day. The troops returned to Eleazar, but only to strip the dead.

Next to him was Shammah son of Agee the Hararite. When the Philistines banded together at a place where there was a field full of lentils, Israel's troops fled from them. But Shammah took his stand in the middle of the field. He defended it and struck the Philistines down, and the Lord brought about a great victory.

Josheb was not the only effective soldier. The other two, Eleazar and Shammah, both found themselves in battles against the neighboring nation of Philista. Because they were losing, all the other troops fled. They retreated. So Eleazar and Shammah had to decide whether to join the retreat and flee from the enemy or do something brave.

War is terrible and this ancient war between Israel and Philistia as no exception. Battles were fought hand-to-hand. They lasted all day for days without a break. Weariness increased the danger. Even the best of soldiers could become vulnerable when tired.

These mighty men were heroes. Eleazar fought until his hand was stuck to his sword. Shammah stood his ground even when his fellow troops retreated. Both of these men were enormously successful.

In both cases we are clearly told that it is the Lord who gave them the victory. There was more than muscle and guts. Their power came from

God. That adds a whole new dimension to understanding who these mighty men were. They were mighty with God. God was on their side.

If you can forgive the comparison, they were sort of ancient Jewish Rambos. Here they were, taking on all these people, but at the same time they were men of God Rambos. I know that sounds like an oxymoron. Those things don't quite fit together. But that's what they were. They were formidable soldiers empowered by God. They were genuinely godly men. They were the instruments through which God's spirit accomplished great victories. Some could even argue that they showed more evidence of godliness than their sometimes sinful leader, David!

But what bound these men together were not so much the victories they experienced but their loyalty. They were absolutely devoted to David, the one whom God had anointed to be king. These mighty men were loyal enough to take their significant skills and accomplishments and devote them to someone else. It is an incredible thing when compared to the cutthroat competition which characterizes many capable persons.

They were loyal to the point of love. It was their leader David who bound them together. I find that amazing as well for often those who are so capable are entrepreneurs who want to head up their own organizations or their own armies. But we are told in 2 Samuel 23:13-16:

During harvest time, three of the thirty chief men came down to David at the cave of Adullam, while a band of Philistines was encamped in the Valley of Rephaim. At that time David was in the stronghold, and the Philistine garrison was at Bethlehem. David longed for water and he said, "Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!" So the three mighty men broke through the Philistine lines, drew water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem and carried it back to David.

David was tired and discouraged and reflective. As a whim, he wished for a drink from the well of his hometown. His loyal friends sneaked out of camp and broke through enemy lines to get

their leader a drink of water. David certainly didn't expect any response to his comment. He wasn't dying of thirst. They just did it to make him happy. David's friends risked their lives for the love of their leader and for a glass of water.

But that's not all. In 2 Samuel 21:15-17 you read:

Once again there was a battle between the Philistines and Israel. David went down with his men to fight against the Philistines, and he became exhausted. And Ishbi-Benob, one of the descendants of Rapha, whose bronze spearhead weighed three hundred shekels and who was armed with a new sword, said he would kill David. But Abishai son of Zeruiah came to David's rescue; he struck the Philistine down and killed him. Then David's men swore to him, saying, "Never again will you go out with us to battle, so that the lamp of Israel will not be extinguished."

David was tired. He was in the middle of battle and someone in the enemy lines decided he was going to be a hero. He had a new spear and a new sword and he saw himself as a hit man who was going to kill David. The mighty men, specifically Abishai, committed to save David's life. But they also resolved that he would never personally go into battle again. They would fight his battles for him. They recognized that he was "the lamp of Israel". He was the one God had chosen to light and lead the nation. He could not be recklessly risked.

I look at these men and I am impressed. They were fantastic. No wonder David was so successful when he was surrounded by a cadre of capable, godly and loyal lieutenants like these.

And so it is today! Where there are no mighty men and women there are no Davids. It takes far more than a good leader. It takes mighty men. That is true for every layer of life from family to business to church to politics to everywhere else.

I think sometimes we miss out on the fulfillment of God's dreams, not because we lack the

resources but because we do not depend on mighty men like these. And I think God's dreams sometimes do not come true because the mighty men and women of modern times are more bent upon their own agendas than they are in following with loyalty the leader God has appointed for them. I suspect that David never would have won the battles, united the kingdom, established the dynasty or gone down in history as he did were it not for the mighty men.

But what about the man the mighty men made great? What was his response? I regret to say that there are some pictures of David that show him at his very worst.

In 2 Samuel 23 there is a list of the mighty men. At the end of the list is a man who was not a Hebrew. He was a Hittite. He must have been most extraordinary. He was a foreigner who converted to Judaism and a soldier who was such a hero that he was named to the mighty men. Like the others he was strong and godly and intensely loyal to David. His name was Uriah.

During one of the battles with the Ammonites David was at home in Jerusalem. He was there because the mighty men didn't want to risk his life; they were risking their lives for him. In the evening David went up on the roof of his palace to cool off. While there he became a "peeping David", leer-

ing at the naked body of the woman next door. The leer became lust and David sent for her and brought her to his house and to his bed and impregnated her.

Bathsheba was a married woman. Since her husband was a soldier away at war and

she was pregnant, their illicit affair would become known. So David concocted a fascinating scheme whereby he sent for her husband and asked that he be brought back to Jerusalem in order to give David an update on the progress of the war. David assumed that Uriah would then go home to his wife and have sex with her, return to the battle and think that the child was his.

Take the gifts God has given to you and be strong and successful in your own right. Get your power from God.

What David never counted on was that this soldier was a man of very high ideals. He reasoned that he should not enjoy a soft bed or his wife's body while his fellow soldiers were fighting for God and the king. So he slept with the servants at the palace gate.

When David found out the next morning, he decided to try again. He invited the soldier for dinner and purposely got him drunk, figuring that he'd go home drunk, go to bed, have sex and think he had impregnated Bathsheba. But even drunk Uriah hung to his ideals.

David then decided to do in this amazing soldier. In order to cover his own sin David sent secret orders to General Joab. David even had the soldier carry the orders. The soldier was to be assigned to the most dangerous part of the battle and all other troops were to be withdrawn so the soldier would be killed in battle.

Joab was loyal to the king although he could not have understood why David would order such a thing. He followed the orders and the next day when the battle was at its worst they all retreated and Uriah the Hittite, one of the mighty men, died.

Three thousand years have passed since then and I am still appalled that David could ever treat anyone the way he treated Uriah. Uriah loved him. Uriah was loyal to him. He was willing to give his life for David. And David had him killed. Then he took his wife. If sins are rated, I am not sure which of David's sins is greatest—adultery, murder or the betrayal of a friend.

I confess to you that I find it hard even now to forgive David. I do not excuse him. I am disgusted by his behavior. But I am amazed at the grace of God who forgave him and at the mighty men who remained loyal to him.

But, David who was guilty of the worst was also capable of the best! Do you remember at the cave of Adullam when David had the whim for a glass of water and the men went and got it and brought it back to him? David faced an awful dilemma. What was he to do with this drink of water? How should a leader handle such loyalty? If he accepted the gift it would almost deprecate the worth of his friends making their lives less valuable than a few drops of water. But if he re-

jected their gift, wouldn't that also reject them and their loving sacrifice?

That night in the Cave of Adullam David was at his very best. He refused to drink the water; instead he poured it out before the Lord. "*Far be it from me, O Lord, to do this!*" he said. "*Is it not the blood of men who went at the risk of their lives?*" And David would not drink it."

With sensitivity, with spirituality, with returned loyalty and love David accepted their costly gift and gave it to God rather than keep it for himself. David turned the attention from himself to God. We would say he glorified the Lord. He made God look good.

I wish David had always been at his very best. I wish he had always been that good to the mighty men. I wish that all leaders were that good to their followers. I wish all followers were like the mighty men. But we live in a world where our wishes cannot control the behavior of others.

What that leaves is us. The only behavior over which we have much control is our own. Are you a leader or a follower? Are you an employer or an employee? Are you the boss or the bossed?

If you are a Mighty One, be just that. Excel at what you do. Take the gifts God has given to you and be strong and successful in your own right. Get your power from God; don't be self-absorbed. Don't claim all the credit. And, be loyal to your leader, even if your leader isn't always as loyal to you.

If you are a king, resolve to be like David at his best and not at his worst. Be like David in the cave and not like David in the palace. Then together, mighty ones and kings alike, let us build the kingdom in mutual loyalty to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords . . . Jesus Christ himself.

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