

Mr. Six-Digit

2 Samuel 21:15-22

By Dr. Derek W. H. Thomas

Now turn with me if you would to 2 Samuel chapter 21, 2 Samuel chapter 21, and we're going to look at the closing section. Last week we were watching David and following him as he made his way back into the city of Jerusalem, and then we noted that these last four chapters contain six stories that are out of chronological sequence. All of them refer to incidents in David's earlier life and ministry and it looks as though the author of 2 Samuel, having perhaps given us a portrayal of David from the Bathsheba incident onwards, in which we've noted David spiraling downwards and downwards, rather than end on that note, the author seems to have pulled some stories to make a very deliberate theological point about David and about his ministry and about his significance. And tonight especially, in four episodes, four war stories with the Philistines, how God saved David's life when it looked as though he was almost taken. And it begs us to ask the question, "Why? Why did God spare David? To what end and to what purpose?"

Now before we read the passage together, let's look to God in prayer. Let us pray.

Father, we would still our hearts now before You. We are a needy people, in need of the food which is Your Word, the food which is Your Gospel. We ask as we read and attempt to understand that which we read, we pray for the Spirit's ministry and blessing. Open us the Scriptures to us. Grant us to see and behold wondrous things in Your Law. Help us through these narratives to see beyond what is on the surface and to see that which the Holy Spirit intended as these stories were written down for our instruction and edification. We thank You that all Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for doctrine and reproof and correction and instruction in the way of righteousness that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto every good work. Furnish us then and enable us to be Your servants, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

2 Samuel chapter 21 beginning at verse 15:

There was war again between the Philistines and Israel, and David went down together with his servants, and they fought against the Philistines. And David grew weary. And Ishbi-benob, one of the descendants of the giants, whose spear weighed three hundred shekels of bronze, and who was armed with a new sword, thought to kill David. But Abishai the son of Zeruiah came to his aid and attacked the Philistine and killed him. Then

David's men swore to him, "You shall no longer go out with us to battle, lest you quench the lamp of Israel."

After this there was again war with the Philistines at Gob. Then Sibbecai the Hushathite struck down Saph, who was one of the descendants of the giants. And there was again war with the Philistines at Gob, and Elhanan the son of Jaare-oregim the Bethlehemite, struck down Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam. And there was again war at Gath, where there was a man of great stature, who had six fingers on each hand, and six toes on each foot, twenty-four in number, and he also was descended from the giants. And when he taunted Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimei, David's brother, struck him down. These four were descended from the giants in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants.

So far, God's holy and inerrant Word. May He add His blessing to the reading of it.

There's not a whole lot here, is there? These are lean pickings. Four, almost random war stories with the Philistines. It belongs at an earlier period, sometime after 1 Samuel 17 when Goliath was stuck down. We'll come to the problem of verse 19 in a minute. Well obviously it took place somewhere after 1 Samuel 17. David's war campaigns against the Philistines. At one level, this reads a little like soldiers, heroic soldiers mentioned in dispatches after a campaign, recognized, being given medals of honor and valor. Well, we imagine something of this nature takes place today. Battles in Iraq or Afghanistan or some part of the world and somewhere there are occasions when war heroes, brave men and women, are mentioned for some courageous deed that they have done and a medal is pinned upon their breast.

At another level, you have to ask yourself, "Why is the author putting this here?" It's the end. We're almost at the end of 2 Samuel. And he wants to say something to us about David, about King David, about how he did certain things and how God spared him in battle when he was almost taken. And why? What if David had not been spared? What if David has been taken by this descendant of the giants? A certain section of the Philistines were obviously tall people and Ishbi-benob is one of them. And he almost, he almost had David. He almost killed him. David went with his troops into battle and this man almost killed him. What if David had been killed? And the author of 2 Samuel wants you to see that everything hangs in the balance here. It's absolutely crucial that David survive because God has made a promise to David. He's made a promise in relationship to you and me. He's made a promise of redemption. He's made a promise of Gospel grace that will flow through David. Yes, Jesus, and the lineage of Jesus, is in this story. You open up Paul's letter to the Romans and you're only in the third verse of chapter 1 and Paul is making a very deliberate point that Jesus is descended, according to the flesh, from David, that the ancestry of Jesus is in

David. The birth of Jesus, the coming of the Savior, the coming of Messiah, hangs in this story.

Some of you tonight, perhaps, are wondering what's happening in your life. Dr. Story led us in prayer tonight and mentioned that. One on every pew perhaps. That's a lot. That's a couple of dozen. Thirty or forty people here tonight who are pressed down with trials, problems, concerns, wondering what God is doing. Is God in control? Can I trust Him? Is His sovereignty such that I can trust Him, trust Him with my life and my affairs, with the promises that He has given to me — salvation promises, redemption promises? So I want you to look at this, you know, rather odd passage here, and I want us to see perhaps three things.

Keep your eye first of all on God's anointed king. Focus your eye on God's anointed king. This first battle scene with Ishbi-benob — the Philistines saw David in the battle, they concentrate their forces, they focus on him, and David, we're told, grew weary. He grew exhausted. He's pinned down, fighting for his life now. If this were a movie in 3-D, this would be one of the major battle scenes in this movie of David's life and the music would be such to dramatize that David is fighting here for his life. There's a moment when the camera, the lens, focuses on Ishbi-benob and this huge spear with its great big bronze tip, and it's coming in the direction of David. You can see the camera focusing on the intent of this man and the intent of this man is to kill David. And "Abishai, the son of Zeruiah, came to his aid and attacked the Philistine and killed him." Out of nowhere comes Abishai. This man who, no doubt, was honored, given the place of honor because of his valor, came into the thick of the battles, saw what was going to happen, and killed him! He's one of the giants, Ishbi-benob. Perhaps the Hebrew word here is a little difficult to be certain about. Perhaps some have thought these are members of some kind of elite and military squad with formidable weaponry and Abishai kills him. David is God's anointed king. David is the one whom Samuel had been sent by God to anoint him, to set him apart. We've seen David as he has fought against the rebellion of King Saul and against the rebellion of Absalom. We've seen King David plummet with Bathsheba and spiral downwards in the chapters that follow, but here the men of Israel say to him, "You don't go into battle anymore because you are too important because you are, you are the light, the lamp of Israel." Verse 17 — "the lamp of Israel, the light of Israel."

And I think our minds begin to hear echoes down the corridors of time and generations and we come into the New Testament and here is one who is descended from David according to the flesh who is the light, not just of Israel, but the light of the world. David, keep your eye on him. There's something about David that is important, despite all of his failures, despite all of his colossal, moral failures in his own household. Some of you have been commenting over the last couple of weeks the tremendous failure of David in his own household, with his family, with his sons, with the concubines that we brushed over last week. Tremendous failure but yet he's God's anointed. Keep your eyes here on the

anointed king because there's something special here.

Keep your eye, too, in the second place, on God's enemies. There are four of them here — Ishbi-benob, Saph, Goliath, and an unnamed individual with six digits on both hands and both feet. Now let me just get something about verse 19 out of the way. “Elhanan the son of Jaare-oregim, the Bethlehemite, struck down Goliath the Gittite.” And you all know that David was the one who struck down Goliath the Gittite. And I'm perfectly certain that the author of 2 Samuel knew that too. So what do we make of this? We've got some choices here. We can adopt a position that what you have here is a transmission problem. We believe the Bible is inerrant. It is without error in its original autographer, as it was originally written, but we don't have copies of the original. What we have are copies of copies of copies of copies of copies and somewhere down the line something has gone wrong in this particular text. That's the view of some, even some whom we would respect and hold in high esteem who hold to the inerrancy of Scripture would maintain a view along that line.

Or, that Elhanan is an alternative name for David, that David is the name of his office as a king. It's a regal name like Elizabeth R., but she's from the house of Windsor. And she could be called by something else. Actually there are German names that she could be called by, but her regal name is Elizabeth R. I'm British, you understand. I hope this illustration is translating. (laughter) Elhanan then would be an alternative name for David. There are many commentators, ones that we would respect and hold in high esteem, and again who hold the doctrine of inerrancy, who would take that view.

Then, there are some, few, very few, who say there are two Goliaths and this is just a different Goliath. I don't know what the answer is. This is one of those instances where this is a test of our faith and our commitment in what the Bible says about itself. It's a test for us as to what Jesus says about the Bible, that not a word of it can be broken.

But let's look at these enemies. Keep your eye on these enemies. The fact that there are four of them, the fact that there's — let's focus on the last one, this “Mr. Six-Digit” whose name isn't given to us. We're told that he taunted Israel, verse 21. He taunted them. The word is, he mocked them, like Goliath mocked Israel. He derided Israel. You trash-talk the Lord and this is what you can expect. You can expect Goliath dead on the floor. That's what this passage is saying. This isn't warm and cuddly stuff. This is Christianity, Old Testament style to be sure, but it's saying, if you trash-talk the Lord, ultimately, ultimately this is what you can expect. This descendent of the giant never lies, at least not when he's dead. And when he's dead, this is what he's saying. He's saying, “When you trash-talk the Lord, when you mock the Lord, when you hold the Lord in derision, one day you'll be held to account. One day you'll be held to account.”

Keep your eye on the enemies of God here. There are always enemies in the

kingdom of God. It's the principle of Genesis 3:15 — the seed of the woman and there's the seed of the serpent and these are in opposition to each other. There is rivalry. Jesus, in Caesarea Philippi, says to the disciples, "I build My church, and I build My church in enemy occupied territory. I build My church right up next to the gates of hell." Paul tells us on his first missionary journey, the first lesson that Paul learned on his first missionary journey was that it's through many tribulations we enter the kingdom of God. Acts 13 — through many tribulations we enter the kingdom of God. Calvin says, in his commentary on 1 Peter, that God has so ordered the church from the very beginning that death is the way to life and the cross the way to victory. This dead descendent of the giant is a testimony of what happens to God's enemies. God's enemies can expect to be defeated. God's enemies can expect to be conquered.

I don't know when 2 Samuel was written and nor do you. We think that it was probably written some time after the split of the kingdom — Israel in the north and Judah to the south. Perhaps there were people, you see, perhaps there were people in those days who were pining for the good old days when there was a united kingdom, the good old days when David was on the throne. And perhaps the author is bringing in a little bit of realism. You know we're all adept at idealizing the past. We do it all the time. "It wasn't like that in my day." You know I've reached that age where I find myself saying that. I find myself comparing the seminary in the 1970's to what it is in 2011 and I find myself sounding like my parents. You know, "It wasn't like that in my day because in my day things were just wonderful and glorious and just idyllic." And perhaps the author, who's writing this for another generation after David and they're looking back to the time of David and saying, "Oh, how I wish I could go back to those glorious days!" and the author is saying, "Let me remind you that King David had to fight against enemies, against Philistines, because that's how the church always is." And here, in between the two comings of Jesus, there is always tension, there is always opposition, there is always war and rumor of war. Keep your eye on God's enemies and be realistic.

But keep your eye too on God's purpose. Keep your eye on God's king, keep your eye on God's enemies, but keep your eye on God's purpose because this little cameo is telling us that the God of history, the Lord of history, the Lord who holds the universe in the palms of His hands is at work here. This principle of opposition that you see that begins in Genesis 3 with a slithering serpent and in Revelation 12 has grown up to a great fire-breathing dragon, and then you turn the pages to Revelation 20, the close of that chapter, and he's thrown into the bottomless pit forever and ever and Jesus is victorious.

Why do we keep our eye on God's king? Why do we keep our eye on God's enemies? So that we might get a perspective that in all of this God is at work fulfilling His promise, fulfilling His Gospel promise. He's going to establish a kingdom and that kingdom is going to come through the descendancy of David. The Gospel writers will record Jesus' Davidic descent. The prophets — Isaiah,

Jeremiah, Ezekiel — all of them, at some point in that prophecy, remind the readers who are heading into exile in Babylon, “Don't forget the promise I made to David, that Jesus shall reign where'er the sun, doth its successive journeys run; His kingdom stretch from shore to shore, till moons shall wax and wane no more.” What did Jesus say at Caesarea Philippi? That the gates of hell, yes there'll be gates of hell, yes there'll be opposition, yes there'll be descendents of giants, but the gates of hell will not prevail. They will not prevail because a descendent of David, great David's greater Son, will spoil principalities and powers and make a show of them openly, triumphing over them in the cross.

The apostle John will write a letter and he'll say, “This is the reason the Son of God appeared.” This is the reason the Son of God appeared. What's the answer? Pop quiz. What is the reason the Son of God appeared? And John says, “to destroy the works of the devil.” 1 John 3:8 — “to destroy the works of the devil.” The gates of hell will not prevail. In the fullness of time, the Lord of history will bring about the fulfillment of the promise to King David that He is protecting here against His enemies, and in the fullness of time, He will be born, born of a woman. Isn't that a strange thing to say? Born of a woman — I mean, how else was He going to be born? But Paul is reminding you of that promise, that the seed of the woman will crush the head of Satan. He is that seed of the woman. He is God's promised Messiah. Keep your eye here on the anointed king. Keep your eye on the enemies that surround him, but keep your eye on the purposes of God and the final purposes of God, the victory of God. “And though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear for God hath willed His truth to triumph through us. The prince of darkness grim, we tremble not for him. His rage we can endure, for lo his doom is sure; one little word will fell him.” Jesus is Lord will fell him.

This coming week, as we celebrate Easter, I ponder a lot what Satan was thinking between Friday afternoon and Sunday morning. I wonder if he thought, I wonder if he thought he'd gotten the victory, he had triumphed, if he had triumphed, if he believed that he was responsible for the death of Jesus and interpreted that death in his own wicked way. And what an appalling shock it must have been for him. You know he's not omniscient. He's a creature. He doesn't know everything. And I imagine when he saw that stone rolled away on that Sunday morning and Jesus walks out into the garden, resurrected from the dead, proclaiming that He has spoiled principalities and powers and made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in the cross, how Satan must have trembled and slunk away in his rage. My friends, don't be timid about your faith. Don't be timid about your faith. It can move mountains. It can move mountains, it can overcome the world. The church is built on what this story is proclaiming, that God's promise can never fail. It can never fail. Everything that God has promised to you and me will come true.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank You for the Scriptures. We thank You for the promise of redemption. We thank You for the promise of a people gathered to Yourself, of a Messiah who triumphs over all the forces of darkness, who rescues us to Himself and unites us to Himself and says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Grant us courage and boldness as we assert together that Jesus is Lord. Hear us, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction. Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

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