

HEROES
2 Samuel 23:8-17

There was a point in Laurie's and my relationship when we were single where we had been good friends, but that it was becoming clear there was a lot more going on between us than just a nice friendship. But what it was definitely was not clear. At the time in addition to working and going to school full time, I was playing on a really good flag football team that had a lot of former college and even one former NFL player on it. Laurie actually came to watch several of our games. I knew that there was something real going on when she came to one particular game. A big storm hit that day and we had to play in a driving rain. Laurie stood in that pouring rain to watch, and I knew it wasn't because she was an avid fan of flag football. I knew at that point that it was because she was a fan of one of the players. The good news for me was that she got over that guy and married me instead. Just kidding. She was willing to suffer through a cold, wet experience to show loyalty and support to me. There were ups and downs in our relationship after that until she finally took the irrational step of agreeing to marry me, but I knew that whatever happened she cared about me and I mattered to her. I knew that because I couldn't think of anybody but her that I would go stand in a cold, miserable rain so I could watch them play a dumb, meaningless game.

You want to have someone care about you like that. All of us do. We want someone to be in our corner, someone who would do anything for us, someone who will say to us, "Loving you is more important to me than anything else in this world." Today we will learn that David had a number of people kind of like that in his life, and we will see what implications this has for us as we look at 2 Samuel 23:8-17.

DAVID'S MIGHTY MEN SHOWED GREAT COURAGE

This is part of a section of Scripture that many scholars think is kind of an appendix to the story of David's life. In the opening of the chapter there are some of David's last words. The message is that a king should be just and righteous and if he is he will be a blessing to his people. Then this section tells us about some of the people who were key followers of David. There are two groups of people highlighted in this chapter, "the three" and "the thirty." The exact position and relationship of these two groups is not clear, but we know they were famous groups of unusually fierce, brave and effective warriors who were exceptionally

loyal to David. They were sort of like his Delta Force or Seal Team 6, except they also had a strong personal tie to him, as we shall see in this passage. The numbers are used a bit loosely for at the end of the chapter 37 men are listed as members of the 30. That could have been due to individuals dying and others taking their place, or to using 30 as a round number.

These guys displayed astounding courage as shown by some of their feats that are recounted in this chapter. Josheb Basshebeth took on 800 enemy soldiers and defeated them. I suspect he didn't do it all alone, but he pulled off a victory against overwhelming odds. Eleazar also pulled off an absurd victory according to verses 9-10. David and his forces were doing battle with the Philistines, as was often the case early in David's life. The festivities started with some pre-battle trash talking. "You sons of pig-herders better run away while you have the chance. We're going to feed you to the vultures after we're done with you."

I've never understood the whole pre-game trash talking thing. Maybe the idea is to intimidate the opponent, trying to instill doubt and fear in them. Or maybe the idea is to sort of psyche oneself up. My dad didn't talk much about his experiences in combat in World War II. But I recall one conversation when we asked him what it was like when he first faced combat. In many old World War II movies they had guys who would talk about being anxious to get into the action and boast about what they were going to do to the Nazis when they got the chance. I saw it as a form of trash talking. I asked my dad if there were actually guys like that in his unit. He said there were, but that all that talk stopped the night they moved into a front line combat position. Once the bullets started flying there was no more boasting, no more trash talking.

All the boasting stopped when the first shots were fired the day that Eleazar made his stand. When the Philistines charged the trash talking Israelis broke and ran. All except Eleazar. Only he stood his ground. He single-handedly fought off the Philistines. He fought so hard that when the battle finally ended his grip had frozen on the handle of his sword. He couldn't let go and had to have help prying his fingers loose. The Israelis rejoined him, but only to strip the dead.

Shammah, another member of "the three" did something similar. But I want to draw your attention to a member of "the thirty" named Benaiah, whose exploits are mentioned in verses 20-21. He killed two of Moab's mightiest fighters, but then it says, "He also went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion." Why would you go down into a pit where there was a lion, and on a snowy day no less?

A little over a year ago we went to the San Diego Safari Park with Michael and Carissa. It was kind of cold so the animals were mostly just trying to find a way to keep warm. But we did get to see a lion in the lion enclosure. Here is what I concluded from that experience. I don't want to get anywhere near a pit with a lion in it. Lions are not warm cuddly animals. They are huge, powerful and scary. For whatever reason Benaiah felt that this one needed to die. The mention of it being in a pit is a detail we are given to tell us that he didn't ambush the beast out in the open. He deliberately went into a confined space that made it mano y leon, man against lion. This was a cage match with the king of beasts, the predator at the top of the food chain. How much intestinal fortitude does it take to do such a thing? I don't know, but it is quantum levels beyond anything I've got.

Benaiah also took on an enormous Egyptian warrior who was armed with a spear, while all Benaiah had was a club. It was an ancient ironclad rule that it is a bad idea to bring a club to a spear fight. That is a good way to end up with some excess unwanted ventilation in your body. But Ben figured why have two spears in the fight when one is all you need? He somehow snatched the huge Egyptian's spear from him and then ran the big guy through with it. If Benaiah had been a professional athlete he would have been a walking highlight reel.

When David was on the run from murderous, only marginally sane Saul, he hid out in a wilderness area and disaffected men began streaming out to him. Many of these fierce warriors were among them. They stuck with David through many difficult times. They had fought many battles by his side. It is clear that these men were not lacking in courage. As this passage shows they did some astounding things in situations that would cause other men to exit the scene with all possible speed.

Are these just myths, designed to make the Israeli fighters sound more fierce than they really were? There certainly are ancient examples of that kind of thing happening. Yet there are modern examples of that kind of astounding courage. The bloodiest battle in the Pacific in World War II was the battle for Okinawa. At one point B Company, First Battalion of the 77th Infantry Division of the Army was ordered to assault the Maeda Escarpment, a 400 foot high cliff that ran across the entire width of the island. The top 60 feet of that escarpment were completely vertical. Two divisions had already attacked it and failed. B Company gained the top of the ridge onto the plateau, but then a protracted battle began as the Japanese forces on the plateau sought to shove them back down the ridge. At one point all the able American soldiers were forced back, scrambling to safety, leaving a hundred wounded Americans up on the plateau. One medic determined to help

those men. His name was Desmond Doss, a 26 year old Virginian. All day he refused to leave those wounded men on the battlefield. The enemy forces took aim at him, but despite the barrage of bullets and mortars he went from one wounded man to another, continually exposed to the lethal fire. He would treat them, drag them to the cliff, then use a rope sling to lower them to relative safety below. By nightfall he had saved the lives of 75 men. One officer said of him, "I can state without reservation that the actions of this man were the most outstanding display of bravery I have ever seen." One veteran of the battle was astounded by the fact that despite hours of constant exposure to withering enemy fire that specifically targeted Doss he was never hit. He said, "It's as if God had his hand on his shoulder. It's the only explanation I can give." The recent movie *Hacksaw Ridge* was based on the exploits of Private Doss that day. He demonstrated that men of tremendous, inexplicable courage do exist. David was blessed to have dozens of them.

DAVID'S MIGHTY MEN SHOWED REMARKABLE LOYALTY

The writer of 2 Samuel wanted us to get a feel for the fierce loyalty these brave warriors had for David, so in verses 13-17 he related one little vignette that depicted it. David was at the cave of Adullam. 1 Samuel 22:1 tells us at one point as David was hiding from King Saul he escaped to the cave of Adullam and verse 2 says, "all those who were in distress or debt or discontented gathered around him." Among them were three warriors whose exploits are described in our passage.

At the time as David was constantly dodging the forces of King Saul who were always trying to track him down and kill him, he was also still battling the Philistines, Israel's sworn enemy. When this episode occurred there was a Philistine force occupying Bethlehem, David's home town. David apparently was tired of living on the run, being hunted and hounded by his own king as well as always having to do battle with Philistines. In a moment of weariness and sadness according to verse 15 he said, "Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem."

Was the water in the well at Bethlehem somehow better tasting or more refreshing than water from other places? Was it the best water ever? Did it supposedly have some unusual restorative power? No, I don't think that was what David was suggesting at all. I think David was longing for the days when he could safely wander around his boyhood home without fear. He could stop and get a drink of water from the well whenever he wanted. I recall when I was a kid enjoying lazy summer days of playing baseball, swimming, sitting in the shade of the plum tree

in our back yard picking and eating plums until we could eat no more. I remember having no stress beyond trying to resolve the conversation, “What do you want to do now? I don’t know, what do you want to do?” No worries about money, or kids, or demanding schedules, or saving for retirement. David was remembering the carefree days of his youth. He was reflecting a desire just to be safe and free to walk around the country without fear of being ambushed. He was soul weary, tired of stress, fear, struggle, war, the hardships of the wilderness, of being falsely accused and hounded.

Three of his men heard his comment and it saddened them. They understood what he meant. They wished they could fix his problem, but they couldn’t. But sometimes being a friend means you do something that shows you care even though it won’t make the real problem go away. You want to do something to encourage your friend, give them some sort of reminder that they are not alone. And that’s what these three guys wanted to do. I imagine them sitting in the camp and one guy says, “I feel so bad for David. It’s so unfair that Saul is trying to kill him and I know he wishes he could just go home and be safe. I wish we could do something for him.” A second guy says, “Yeah, me too, but we’re doing all we can just by being with David and fighting alongside him.” There’s a lull, then the third guy snaps his fingers and says, “Hey, I’ve got an idea. David wants water from Bethlehem? Then let’s go get him some. I’ll bet he’d really get a kick out of that.” The other two decide this is a terrific idea.

So the three of them went to get some water from Bethlehem’s well. The problem, of course, was that there were Philistines occupying the city and to get the water they had to get past them. This was not a clandestine raid where they snuck by the guards in the dead of night. Verse 16 says they “broke through” the Philistine lines. According to *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* the root of the Hebrew word used there means “a strenuous cleaving.” It stressed the forcefulness of the splitting action. It was used to describe splitting wood with an ax. Have you ever done that? It is not a delicate chore. If you just give that block of wood a polite tap with the ax you accomplish nothing. You have to raise that big ax over your head and smash it down on the wood to drive it all the way through. That’s what these guys did to the Philistines. They smashed into their line and hacked their way through, killing Philistines left and right, retrieved the water, then fought their way back out. This was like something out of a Rambo movie, except with swords instead of guns. I suspect the Philistine survivors, in addition to being relieved to have lived through it, were puzzled. What was that all about? Three maniacs come roaring in here, create chaos like violent killing machines, get some water and then leave? What was that?

Those three men literally put their lives in jeopardy just to bring a little encouragement to David. I basically don't drink sodas. I've never liked them. Especially colas. It always was a problem for me when at events they had Coke or Pepsi, iced tea and coffee. I don't like any of them. I still don't. There was one soda I actually liked as a kid, and that was minimally carbonated orange soda. In particular I liked Nesbitt's orange soda. A couple of years ago Toby and Anna for my birthday gave me a bottle of Nesbitt's orange soda. I was really touched. I hadn't even seen a bottle of Nesbitt's in many years. Probably not since I was a kid. That stuff isn't easy to find these days. The Nesbitts brand was sold to Clorox in the 1970's, which is a bit disturbing. A bleach company bought it? The brand has been sold and resold a number of times since, but a retro soda producer now puts out a bottled version. The point is, you don't see it everywhere. So it was touching to me that they even knew I liked it, which is surprising because I don't recall ever talking about it, and they made the effort to go find it.

However, as touching as it was for me, they didn't have to risk their lives to buy a bottle of soda. This story would be like Toby and Anna fighting their way into Isis territory to get a bottle of Nesbitt's and then giving it to me. How do you think that would affect me? Those three men would have been hard pressed to find a more powerful way of expressing their love for David because they put themselves seriously in harm's way not to protect David, not to win a battle, but just to give him encouragement that was derived from a passing unguarded whimsical comment.

David couldn't believe it. He was totally dumbfounded when they brought that water to him. As you can imagine he was so humbled by their devotion to him that he refused to drink the water. He just poured it out on the ground. That seems like a waste to us. Hey, they went to all that trouble, David, the least you could do is drink the water. I saved the bottle of Nesbitt's that Toby and Anna gave me for a special occasion and then Laurie and I shared it. I sure didn't just poured it down the drain.

However, this was a cultural statement. The Hebrew word used here of pouring out the water was used of drink offerings to the Lord. By doing this David said what they had done was so precious it was like an offering of worship to God and that David was unworthy of receiving it. He said it was like the very blood of these men, for they put themselves at risk of having their blood spilled just to bring it to him. What they would have gathered from David's action was that he felt utterly unworthy of such a gift, but that he was filled with gratitude and wanted to praise

God for them and their love for him. His reaction told them loudly and clearly that if they wanted to encourage David, it was mission accomplished.

This is, for me, a powerful story. I think there lies in all of us a desire to have people who are that devoted to us, but that we mostly never do. We have good friends, but they are busy with their lives, have their own agenda, and at some point we understand that they may drift out of our lives because their agenda causes them to move to a different city so that we have little contact with them. We don't often and may never have friends who say, "I'm with you, wherever you go, whatever you have to face, we will face it together. I'm not leaving you." We don't have it, but down deep that makes us a little sad because we want it.

I know that because of what shows up in movies. In the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, the good one, at the very end Will Turner tries against all odds to save his friend, Jack Sparrow from hanging. In the end the two of them are surrounded. Will says that Jack is a good man, and that perhaps all he has achieved is to give the hangman two victims instead of one, but it is worth it. Commodore Norrington, holding him at sword point, says, "You forget your place Turner." Turner replies, "It's right here, between you and Jack." In other words, his place is protecting his friend even if it costs him his own life.

That kind of scene is repeated often in movies. It shows up often because it is a longing of the human heart. In John 11 when Jesus determined to go to Bethany near Jerusalem because of the death of Lazarus even though he knew it would put him in serious jeopardy, Thomas said in verse 16, "Let us also go, so that we may die with him." We admire that because we long for that kind of devoted relationship.

IMPLICATIONS

The men in this passage were heroes. They were renowned because they displayed two traits that we all admire, courage and loyalty. All of us look for heroes. We want there to be noble heroes in our world. I just read a book titled *Miracle On The Hudson*, which relates the experiences of passengers on the US Air flight that landed in the Hudson River in 2009. Honestly the account was in part a bit dismaying. In the first couple of minutes after the plane came to a rest while there was not total panic, there wasn't much heroism either. People were looking out for themselves mostly, and some of their behavior was disappointing at best. However, there were a few who came through. One woman, Claudette Mason, said, "There were some real men on that plane. Their own safety seemed secondary to them."

Isn't that what we wish for in this world? Isn't that what we hope would show up in ourselves?

The brief stories in this chapter tell us that such heroism was characteristic of David's mighty men. However, they are not the perfect embodiment of those character qualities. Those traits were perfectly displayed by our Lord Jesus. He showed incredible courage in his life. He never backed down from those who opposed him. In fact, at times he deliberately confronted them in ways that were certain to enrage them. He did this knowing that they were bound and determined to kill him. He never flinched, even when it meant going through extreme torture and death. And the loyalty he displayed is beyond astounding. His followers repeatedly failed to understand who he was and seemed to continually be pre-occupied with themselves and their status. Their faith failed repeatedly, and in the worst moments of his life they withered like a dead weed. Yet never once did he even hint that he would abandon them. Even after their colossal failure when he was arrested and executed he welcomed them back. But most of all, he went to the cross to save them. He displays that same incredible, unbreakable loyalty to us. Nothing, Paul tells us, will ever separate us from his love and loyalty.

Then Jesus did something astounding. He called on us to become like him. He wants us to have the same courage and loyalty that he has. He calls on us to be heroic. We have seen that all of us want to have friends like these mighty men. We want courageous friends who will be devoted to us. But you will look a long time for the passage of Scripture that commands you to have friends who are courageous and totally devoted to you. The Scriptures tell us not to *find* such people, but to *be* such people. They challenge us to be the ones who are courageous and loyal to others. For most of us, that is not natural. That leads us to wonder how we can obey that command.

WHERE DO THESE TRAITS COME FROM?

Courage is rooted in a cause

Assume for a moment that David was not chosen by God to be the king of Israel and that he was nothing more than a renegade who lived out in the wilderness. He might well have drawn men to himself because he was apparently a charismatic leader. Those men might have followed his lead and been pretty loyal to him. But for them to put themselves at risk merely because he had a whim required something much greater. They had to see him as the rightful king of Israel, as a man of godly character who stood for something noble and good and righteous. They had to believe that standing with him and serving him was more important than even their own safety.

At the Battle of Okinawa Desmond Doss had to believe in a cause much bigger than himself in order to put himself at risk the way he did. He had to believe that the Japanese had to be stopped and that he and his men were fighting for a noble cause. There actually is a rather straightforward equation in this matter. If I do not have a cause that is bigger and more important than me then I am not going to risk harm or death to myself. The math doesn't work. If I am the most important thing to me then I am going to take care of myself before I do anything else.

In my misspent youth I desperately wanted to be an athlete. My misguided and futile efforts narrowed in on baseball because my parents wouldn't let me play football and I didn't play basketball in my formative years, so baseball was it. I was not blessed with either size or ability, so all I had was heart and hustle, so that's what I brought to the game. I would dive, scramble and hustle all the time. This resulted in a plethora of minor injuries. There were lots of scrapes, bumps, bruises and broken fingers and hands. Illustrative of this was my last year of organized baseball, my sophomore year in college. Early in the season I got a nasty scrape on my left hip from sliding while stealing second base. I had that scrape the entire season from February into May. Every game I would rip it open again in my efforts to win the game. I was on a crusade. I had a cause. The cause was earning the right to make the team and be able to play. The only way I could achieve that was by sacrificing my body to help my team. If some minor injuries were the cost of the cause so be it. Contrast that with many years later when I was playing in a church league softball game and I was trying to score. It was going to be a close play at the plate. I didn't slide and I was tagged out. I wanted to win, but I was no longer playing for a cause. I didn't want to risk getting hurt by sliding. In a conversation with a friend I said if it comes to a choice between sliding and winning on one hand or not sliding and losing on the other, I'd rather lose. I didn't really have a cause that mattered that much, so I wasn't interested in sacrificing myself.

I recently happened to see a bit of the old *Jurassic Park* movie. In the scene I saw the T. Rex has gotten loose and is attacking the cars holding the main characters who were on a tour of the park. In the scene as the beast starts to attack the car holding the lawyer Gennaro as well as Tim and Lexie, the two kids, Gennaro runs away and hides, leaving the two kids to their fate. It was blatant cowardice. But if his own life was more important to him than anything else, including the lives of two children, then his actions made perfect sense. It was the reasonable thing to do. Of course in that instance it didn't work out very well because the T. Rex found him and ate him anyway.

At the heart of every cowardly act is the decision that nothing is more important than self. At the heart of every act of courage is a determination that something is more important than even my own safety and well being.

We all need courage. There will be times when we will face a temptation to compromise our convictions, to take the easy way because the hard way will be costly. There may be times we will be tempted to back down from our loyalty to our Lord. 1 Corinthians 16:13 exhorts the Corinthians and us, “Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong.” In order for us to stand firm in the faith it will require that we be courageous. There may be times when it will take courage to treat another person with the kindness and grace God calls us to show. There may be times when it will take courage to get up in the morning and just keep going.

If you are to have the courage necessary for all these things you must have a cause. This cause will have to be more important to you than life itself. Do you have such a cause? Do you know what your cause is? In that familiar verse, Philippians 1:21, Paul wrote, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” That was Paul’s cause. He lived for Christ. He lived to tell people about Jesus, to bring honor to the name of Jesus and to serve Jesus. That verse tells us that cause was more important to him than life itself.

That is a cause worth living for. I suspect that most of us wonder if we could honestly say that. Do I live for Christ? Is it more important to me to serve Christ and honor him, to let others know about him than even to take care of myself? That is a challenge. But inside of us somewhere we respond to that challenge. We want our lives to count for something, specifically for Christ. What we need to do is keep our minds centered on the truth that this really is what we live for. We will not be happy if we make the cowardly choice and compromise our cause for some selfish motive.

Inside you there is a hero trying to get out. All of us want to be mighty men and women. We can be if we will keep our hearts and minds focused on the cause that our lives are about. For us, to live is Christ. Nothing else compares, so let nothing else compete.

Loyalty Requires Unconditional Love

There is no doubt that what initially drew these courageous men to David was his character and leadership. However, it is crucial to remember that David was not

perfect. As we have studied his life we have seen him lie, give in to fear and make some terrible compromises. At one point, due to his fear, David made some questionable decisions that led to the families of his men being captured by raiders. His men weren't stupid. They knew exactly who to blame for the situation, and it was David. This caused the beginnings of a mutiny. According to 1 Samuel 30:6 some of his men talked of stoning him to death. They were mad.

I suspect that these guys we are looking at today stayed faithful to him even in that episode. But the larger point is that they could see David's faults as well as the next guy. But they didn't abandon him. They stayed loyal to him. They stuck with him even when he made some horrendous decisions and showed some hideous character flaws. That kind of loyalty in the end comes down to unconditional love. It comes down to committing to stay with a guy even when he does not deserve it.

Unconditional love is a constant. It is like the sun. There are days here when it is cloudy or foggy and we cannot see the sun. But the sun never stops shining. Could we get above the clouds we would see brilliant blue sky and bright sunshine. This is the only kind of love that will produce the sort of loyalty we see in these men. If our love is embedded in some ability of a person to deserve it, we will at some point abandon that person. We will join the mutiny because David's fear-driven scheme has led to personal loss as our family has been kidnapped by some vengeful raiders. At that point we will say, "I'm out. I won't follow him anymore." The only way we can be truly loyal is if we love unconditionally. Then nothing will shake the bond we have with the one we are loyal to.

This kind of loyalty driven by God's unconditional love comes into play everywhere in life. John Ortberg wrote a book years ago whose title we should continually remember. The title was *Everybody's Normal 'Til You Get To Know Them*. That is true. No matter how perfect or wonderful a person might seem, no one actually is perfect, and eventually you will encounter some odd quirk, some irritating trait in everyone. The only way we can be loyal to anyone is if we love them regardless of those quirks.

In his book, *Befriend*, Pastor Scott Sauls relates an incident that occurred at his church. A woman named Janet was a first time visitor at his church. After the service while she was waiting to pick up her young boys from their Sunday School class one of the workers pulled her aside and gently let her know there had been a problem. Both of her boys had picked fights with kids in the class and they had broken some of the toys in the room. Janet reacted in front of children and parents

by loudly scolding her children, ending by shouting a swear word. She slunk out of the building ashamed of her kids and herself, thinking she'd never go back. But that volunteer worker called Sauls the next week and asked if Janet had given her contact info. She had, and that woman wrote her a note. She told her how glad she was that Janet had visited. She referenced the interaction they had and said she really appreciated that Janet was just real and honest. She said she really valued honesty in people and hoped that would come again and that they could become friends. Janet did go back. And she kept on going back. The two did become friends. And Janet did start following Jesus. She would eventually become the nursery director at the church. It turned out that when she first came to the church Janet was a recovering heroin addict.

God's Love Is Imperative

If we just grit our teeth and set our mind to be courageous and loyal with unconditional love we will almost certainly fail. The key here is remembering that Jesus is the perfect embodiment of courage and loyalty. And he is also the perfect source of those two elements.

If we live in him, trust in him, ask him to give us his courage and his love we can let that perfect love and courage flow through us to others. That is the only way we can do that. He gives us the strength to be courageous and the unfailing love we need to be loyal. Only as we are safe in him will we feel secure enough to be brave and to be loyal to flawed people.

Private Doss was a medic because he was a follower of Jesus who believed that God told him he should not kill. He knew the evil of the Japanese empire that had to be stopped, so he volunteered to fight against it without killing, by being a medic. Initially he was despised, mocked by his colleagues and his superiors and called a coward. His company commander even tried to have him discharged on grounds of mental instability. Some in his company would throw shoes at him when he prayed. But Private Doss persevered, and became admired and loved by all the men in his company. He was awarded two Bronze Stars even before Okinawa because of his bravery. For his actions on Okinawa he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, our nation's highest honor. The company commander who had tried to get rid of him was one of the men he saved that day on Okinawa. Doss did what he did because he believed in Jesus.