

LET THE SUN SHINE
2 Samuel 24:1-14

In late August of 1776, less than 2 months after the American colonies had boldly proclaimed their independence from Britain, the British attacked the fledgling Continental Army on Long Island, soundly defeated them and drove them to the northern tip of Brooklyn where they had them completely pinned with no apparent avenue of escape. All the British had to do was press the attack and they could destroy the army, essentially ending the Revolutionary War. But thinking they had the Americans trapped against the water with the British fleet guarding the back door, they settled in for a siege, knowing the Americans were totally cut off with nowhere to go. If the Americans tried to sneak ships to their location to rescue them the British navy would cut them to pieces. A siege would cost the British way fewer lives, so that seemed an easy choice. On the night of August 29 American General George Washington ordered a clandestine evacuation of his entire army using small rowboats during the night. It seemed impossible, but all night an armada of small boats silently ferried soldiers to the safety of Manhattan Island with the British never catching a whiff of what was happening. But as dawn approached yet a third of the army remained trapped in Brooklyn, with another 3 hours needed to evacuate them. Just as the sun was about to rise a dense fog showed up. It was a curious fog, for in nearby New York it was totally clear with no sign of fog. The fog remained until every soldier had been retrieved without the loss of a single man. Only then did the fog lift, to reveal to the astonished British that the Americans had somehow escaped their trap. The Continental Army, almost miraculously, lived to fight another day. Without that evacuation and that fog we would be singing God Save The Queen before football games, chap.

Fast forward to June of 1942. A mere 6 months earlier the Japanese had inflicted grievous losses on the United States Navy with their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Now the Japanese were about to invade Midway Island, from which they could easily threaten the Hawaiian Islands. Actually Midway is part of the Hawaiian Island chain. The Japanese felt they could draw what they thought were the only 2 remaining American carriers into battle and destroy them. This would have removed the US Navy from the board as a viable factor in the Pacific, and it would have left Japan in possession of Midway, from which they could have invaded the main islands of Hawaii. The Americans actually had 3 carriers, though one had been pretty badly damaged in the Battle of the Coral Sea. But the Japanese

had twice that many carriers in their invasion force. The Americans spotted the Japanese fleet first, but were only able to launch their planes in piecemeal fashion. Some of the squadrons took wrong courses and couldn't find the Japanese fleet. Instead of an effective coordinated attack a few squadrons of US planes arrived one after another in a way that was a disaster. The planes that were expected to actually be able to inflict fatal damage on ships were torpedo bombers. However, between them Torpedo Squadrons 8 and 6 arrived alone and unescorted, so 25 of their 29 aircraft were shot down while scoring zero hits. But their attacks drew the Japanese fighter patrols out of position. Beginning at 10:22 on the morning of June 4 3 squadrons of American dive bombers attacked the Japanese carriers. In the space of 6 minutes they destroyed 3 of the carriers, with a 4th to follow soon thereafter. The Japanese had to withdraw. It was a near miracle, and a decisive victory for the Americans that was the turning point in the war. From that moment on the Japanese were in retreat.

One more story. In October, 1944, allied forces invaded the Philippine islands of Leyte, Samar and Luzon to free them from Japanese occupation. Admiral Halsey, who commanded the powerful naval force charged with protecting the vulnerable transports of the invasion fleet, was fooled by a Japanese feint, and took his entire force off in pursuit of a phantom carrier fleet. He made the grave errors of leaving one entrance to the invasion area completely unguarded and leaving the vulnerable and vital invasion fleet with no protection. A powerful force of Japanese battleships under the command of Admiral Takeo Kurita steamed through that unguarded strait into Leyte Gulf and had the invasion forces completely at their mercy. Kurita had the opportunity to inflict enormous damage and essentially thwart the invasion. For the Americans it was certain and utter disaster. They had no defense. But after gaining that crucial advantage and having sure victory within his grasp, Kurita, for reasons not known to this day, suddenly turned his ships around and steamed out of the gulf, leaving the invasion fleet intact.

In each of those battles American forces should have lost. But what should have happened did not. Inexplicable events took place that turned the tide in favor of the American forces. The point here is not that God is on our side. The point is that battles don't always go the way we think they should. Sometimes they turn on totally unexpected events. Perhaps even God might have a hand in how they go. That is a message that underlies the story we see in 2 Samuel 24:1-14.

DAVID MADE A BAD DECISION

The passage starts by telling us that the Lord was again angry with Israel. We don't know why he was unhappy with Israel, nor exactly when he had previously been

angry at them. We can reasonably gather from this that we do not need to know in order to get the point of the story in this passage. The author revealed that fact to help us see a point he wants to make.

There is an unsettling comment in verse 1 that the anger of the Lord incited David against Israel. The idea was that God moved David to do something contrary to his will that would have had consequences for Israel. This is a problem for two reasons. James 1:13 says, “When tempted no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.” So God never tries to get people to violate his will, yet our passage seems to suggest that God did try to get David to make a bad choice. 1 Chronicles 21:1 presents an even worse problem. It says, “Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census of Israel.” It claims Satan was behind this incident, not God. Ah, we have found one of those much ballyhooed contradictions in the Bible. How are we to understand this? For the moment I will just tell you that this has to do with the theology and worldview of the author, as well as the point he is making in this story. So let’s reserve judgment and we will come back to this point.

In this story David decided to take a census in order to determine how large of an army he could raise. He sort of had all the young Israeli men register for the draft. The curious thing about this story is that this was seen as a terrible act of disobedience to God. This can first be seen in the fact that this was an action taken “against” Israel in verse 1. The second indication of a problem is that Joab, David’s top general, wanted no part of this. He asked David why he would do such a thing. Verse 4 tells us that all of David’s top military men sided with Joab in opposing this decision, but David overruled them. It is explicit in verse 10. After everyone had registered for the draft David was “conscience stricken.” He said, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done.” He didn’t just sin, he sinned greatly. Finally God punishes him for his choice. It is a terrible punishment that takes the lives of 70,000 people.

WHAT WAS SO WRONG WITH THIS DECISION?

This is mystifying. What’s the big deal? How is taking a census sinning greatly? Wasn’t David just being prudent? I just read *Killing the Rising Sun* by Bill O’Reilly and Martin Dugard. It is a history of the defeat of Japan in World War II. While reading it occurred to me that someone in Japan before their attack on Pearl Harbor should have said, “The United States will be able to have more ships, more submarines, more tanks, more airplanes, more men, and more resources by far than we do. We cannot win a war with them, and when we lose we will lose big.” Had

someone done that maybe millions of lives could have been spared. It would have been wise to consider their resources as well as those of their potential enemy.

Why, then, was it so wrong for David to count how many men he could muster for his army? Oddly we are not told specifically why this was seen as being terrible. But it is not hard to figure out what the problem was. Think back to one of the first episodes in the record of David's life. It is the most famous story from his biography, the account of his fight with a huge, fierce Philistine warrior named Goliath. That guy was so intimidating his name is now used to denote any person or enterprise of overwhelming power or size. This guy was so fearsome that not a single man from Israel would take him on. They cowered and ran in terror before him. They took the measure of him and did the math. He's huge, much bigger than me. He's way stronger than me and has a far longer reach than I, and he is more fierce and more experienced in combat than I. If I try to fight this guy I'm going to lose big time. Those were the unpleasant facts, even for Israel's biggest, toughest battle-hardened warriors.

But one day a young upstart shepherd boy named David showed up and started popping off that he wasn't afraid of some unwashed Philistine. He'd take the guy on in a heartbeat. Everyone thought that was the stupidest thing they'd ever heard. But a desperate King Saul gave him his chance since no one else was dumb enough to volunteer. Vegas wouldn't even take bets on the match, except over/under bets on how long it would take Goliath to dispatch the young fool. Most everyone covered their eyes because they could not bear to watch the slaughter.

David apparently wasn't even slightly afraid. He confidently told Goliath, "You're going down, big guy." But observe his words in verse 46. "This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I will strike you down and cut off your head." How would this happen? Would it be by superior strategy or strength on David's part? No, **the Lord** would cause Goliath to fall to David. In verse 47 David said, "All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's."

By human calculation, by any tangible measure humans could use, David had exactly zero chance. But David wasn't using human calculation. He believed that the battle is the Lord's. If God wanted Goliath dead then he was going down, regardless of how small or insignificant his opponent might seem to be, because the battle and its outcome belong to the Lord.

When David ordered everyone to register for the draft so he could determine how big his army was, how did he think battles are won? By the size of his army. He was no longer believing that the battle is the Lord's. If God told David to go to war with a country did he tell him to check with his intelligence people to see how big the enemy's army was and compare that to the current troop levels for Israel? No, David was to obey God and trust that the battle belonged to the Lord. God doesn't save with human superiority, strength, cleverness or ability, but with his mighty hand. That is a profound, hugely important truth behind this story. God is active in the events of this world. We do not always know exactly what he is doing, but the battles all belong to him. He is not dependent on Human Resources to determine the outcome.

In making the choice that he made David was making the same mistake that Israel made when they stood at the border of Canaan after God rescued them out of Egypt. They looked at the people living in Canaan, they saw their size, their numbers, their combat readiness and fierceness, and said, "We're like a bunch of grasshoppers to these people. We can't beat them. If we try we'll get killed." They used purely human calculus to decide whether to obey God or not. And they disobeyed. David did the same thing.

After all these years he had forgotten the lesson of his victory over Goliath. He had forgotten how God had rescued him from Saul so many times when he had no human hope. We have seen that on several occasions in his life David forgot that the battle belongs to God and thought it depended on his ability or cleverness, and every time it happened disaster followed. That is exactly what happened in this chapter. By measuring the size of his army David was sending a clear signal that he did not believe that what God supplies would be enough.

Listen to these words from Psalm 20:6-7. "Now this I know: The Lord gives victory to his anointed. He answers him from his heavenly sanctuary with the victorious power of his right hand. Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God." David wrote that. But in a weak moment he forgot his own words. He started to trust in the size of his army rather than in the name of the Lord his God.

Throughout the Bible there are reminders that the battle belongs to the Lord, that what God supplies is enough, even against a far superior enemy. Israel is trapped against the Red Sea with the Egyptian army closing fast and no way out for Israel. There was no human plan whatsoever for their escape. According to Exodus 14:11 the Israelis cried out, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you

brought us to the desert to die?” In other words, “we’re all going to die!” In verse 13 Moses responded, “Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today.” You know what happened. God actually parted the sea. Israel was saved, the Egyptians were defeated, and no human action could ever have accomplished that. The battle belonged to the Lord. What God supplied was more than enough.

In Judges 6 Israel was suffering terribly at the hands of raiders from other countries, but especially Midian. God picked a guy named Gideon to lead the battle against them. Gideon’s response to this news was, “Who, me? No, who is it seriously?” He was an unlikely military leader, to say the least. But the battle belongs to the Lord. The Midianite invasion force was enormous. The writer says trying to count their camels would be like trying to count the grains of sand at the beach. Gideon gathered a force of 32,000 to fight against them, which was a huge force, though they were still badly outnumbered. Gideon was expecting God to tell him he needed to find more guys. Instead God said he had too many! He gave his men the chance to bail out if they didn’t like the odds. 22,000 of his men left, more than two thirds. The fact that so many of his men chickened out tells you long they thought the odds were. But now down to only 10,000 men Gideon was hopelessly overmatched. And God said, “You still have too many.” Gideon ended up with 300 men. To fight against possibly 100,000 raiders. Why did God whittle Gideon’s force down to such a pitiful and hopeless number? Precisely because it was hopeless. There was no human plan or ability that would win the day for Israel. Yet God used those measly 300 men to decisively defeat Midian. It was a vivid, scary reminder that the battle belongs to the Lord. God won in a situation that was by all human measures totally hopeless.

In 2 Chronicles 20 Judah under king Jehoshaphat Israel was again being invaded by a coalition of forces from Moab, Ammon and Mount Seir that vastly outnumbered the forces of Judah. Jehoshaphat prayed because he knew that disaster was staring them in the face, But God inspired a man named Jahaziel with these words in verse 15. “Do not be afraid or discouraged because of this vast army. The battle is not yours, but God’s.” Sound familiar? Don’t even be discouraged by this invading horde because no matter how enormous that army is, Almighty God is going to decide the outcome, not them. The next day when they marched out to face the invaders, the king put singers at the front of his troops. Oh great, lead with the choir. What a terrific idea. Why didn’t I think of that? Before the first choir member could be killed dissension broke out in the coalition forces arrayed against Judah. The former allies turned on each other, and as the Judean

army watched in amazement they completely destroyed each other. Judah won a huge victory without ever firing a shot.

Remember the strange first verse? The writer did not literally mean that God moved David to do something against God's own will. Throughout 1 and 2 Samuel we have seen that this writer doesn't bother with immediate causes of things. He sees everything as ruled by God. In his mind however it comes about, God must allow it, because he is sovereign over every single thing. Even when Satan acts, God is giving him a little leash. That is what he is saying here. His perspective strengthens the point of this story. The battle belongs to the Lord because everything belongs to the Lord. Nothing we ever face is beyond his sovereign power. David's failure here reminds us that whenever we forget this truth, whenever we act as though what God gives will not be enough we are making the fundamental mistake in all of creation. It is the same mistake Adam and Eve made in Eden, and it is the same mistake Israel made when they refused to enter Canaan because they didn't believe the battle belonged to God. The results of that mistake are always disastrous and deadly as we see again in this incident.

APPLICATION

NEVER DOUBT THE GRACE OF GOD

We recently were visited by Lloyd Milligan, a missionary with Wycliffe Bible Translators who served for years in the jungles of Papua New Guinea. There is now a thriving church there, but he shared how in a recent visit there he asked some of the locals how they can be sure God loves and accepts them. After a pause they said they needed to do good deeds, not commit sins and go to church.

Even people who have put their faith in Jesus have a nagging tendency to believe that the battle to get God to love us and approve of us is ours. We must do something to win his favor. We must try to be good enough to deserve it. That battle is not ours to fight or win. That battle belongs to the Lord.

Ephesians 2:8-9 tell us, "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast." Notice the words "you have been saved." Do you know what tense the verb is? It is a perfect tense, which means an action completed in the past. To be saved is a completed action. I recently read a book titled *Miracle on the Hudson*, about the US Air flight that landed in the Hudson River with no loss of life. What do those passengers need to do now to save themselves? That's a dumb question. The rescue has happened in the past. They've already been saved. They don't have anything to fear from that peril. That is what Paul meant when he said we have

been saved. It has already happened. The rescue has been accomplished. We don't need to, in fact we can't, do anything more to be saved

Sometimes we think being saved just means being saved from future judgment. It includes that, but means much more. We are saved from judgment because in Christ God accepts us and loves us unconditionally. That happened by grace, which is activated by faith, which is a gift from God. So is what God has given us in Christ enough? Has God won that battle?

Back in January we had a period where it rained incessantly. I was glad for the rain because we need it. However, I do not enjoy prolonged periods of gray, rain and cold. I long to see the sun. What would have happened if after days of gray and rain I got fed up and attempted to get the sun to shine again? Maybe I offered gifts or sacrifices to the sun. Or maybe I tried doing a stop rain dance, call it a sun dance. Or perhaps I decided the sun was upset with me because when the sun had been shining earlier I didn't go out in the sunshine and make the most of it. So I need to do penance. I go out in the cold rain in just a pair of board shorts and no shirt to show the sun I am suffering so it will know how really sorry I am. I promise if the sun will come out that this time I will do better and will make the most of it. Maybe then it will shine again. Will any of that make any difference at all? No, it won't, because those things have nothing to do with why the sun shines.

And all of our efforts and promises to do better have nothing to do with whether God accepts and loves us. We can do all our versions of a religious dance that we want to convince God to love and accept us and it won't accomplish anything. He loves and accepts us because of who Jesus is and what he did for us, and for no other reason. When we start fearing that God does not accept us or truly love us, we are saying what God has provided us is not enough. We are counting the troops again, right along with David. And as always happens, the results will be disastrous.

So never question whether what God has done in Jesus is enough. Never question whether that battle belongs to and has been resoundingly won by the Lord. Never worry about whether in Christ God totally loves you and accepts you. That battle is over, and God won.

NEVER ASSUME THE BATTLE COMES DOWN TO HUMAN CALCULATION

We are all going to fight a lot of battles. Some days it feels like one battle right after another. Anything that you might become tense about, that you might stress

over, grow and ions about is a battle. Life mostly looks like the side with the biggest army and the best weapons wins. The people with power and money get their way. The sports teams with the best players win the game. The most beautiful and most talented get the most attention and popularity.

The message we get from this weird story is spectacular. It tells us that regardless of how things look and often turn out, the battle is not about human strength, talent, ability, beauty or cleverness. It tells us that every battle we face belongs to the Lord. We never face a single battle that does not belong to him. In ever single thing that we might worry about, grow uptight over, fear, we must remember it belongs to the Lord. What he gives in this battle we face, whatever it is, will be enough. So we need never be discouraged.

This applies in so many situations. Think about raising children. I easily get concerned for our grandchildren. Ella, at 14 months, is all ready obsessed with cell phones and remote control devices. She swipes her finger across the smart phone and points the remote at the TV. How are her parents ever going to control all that electronic interference in her life? And how are they going to train her in the Lord in a culture that is increasingly looking and smelling like a sewer? I am glad we didn't have to deal with smart phones and tablet computers and not even the Internet when we raised our kids. But we did face a daunting task that I felt most of the time was beyond my ability and knowledge. And I know that there were many situations that I did not handle well at all. We had our "don't make me stop this car" episodes. The one thing I hung onto was the battle belongs to the Lord. I know that God worked in their lives in ways that Laurie and I had zero control over. What God supplied was enough. My job as a parent was to do the best I could as a dad, love those kids, be an example, then trust what God would supply is enough. Now I have the opportunity to remember that the battle for our grandchildren's lives also belongs to the Lord.

Laurie and I have a friend who grew up in a deeply dysfunctional family that was ultimately blown up by divorce. He has little relationship with his father. His mother and one sister are so dysfunctional they border on completely non-functional. His other sister has battled her demons for years so severely that she would have nothing to do with the family. Today she will only have contact with her brother, our friend. Our friend should have turned out to be unhappy, unhealthy and unable to have relationships like the rest of his family. But the battle belongs to the Lord. Many years ago Laurie was instrumental in helping his wife find life in Jesus, then both of us played a role in him also coming to know Jesus. Jesus changed the equation in his life. He and his wife have been happily married for

more than 30 years. When I think of him what comes to mind is his smile, his infectious laugh, his sense of humor and his enthusiasm for life. What by all reasonable expectation should have happened in his life has not happened, because the battle belongs to the Lord.

Let's think about money. At my previous ministry I had a colleague that I could count on at least once a week to bring up money in a conversation. He was always greatly bothered about money and about how he was going to survive in the future. I thought this ironic because he was in a much better financial condition than I ever was. On more than one occasion after he had spent considerable time stressing over finances I asked him if he believed that God would take care of his needs. He typically said yes, but...Then he would run through the math on getting kids through college, preparing for retirement and a host of things and the fact there was no way in current conditions he would be able to meet those needs. I would say, you know, the math has never worked for Laurie and me. And yet somehow, what God has provided has always been enough. Don't you think that at some point we have to do our best, be faithful and as wise as we can be, but then trust that God will provide what he thinks we need? He almost always responded that we were being foolish. Philippians 4:19 says, "My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus." We need to work hard, be wise, but in the end the financial battle belongs to the Lord.

How about the political and moral situation in our country? I know many Christians who are freaking out about that. Does that battle belong to the Lord? The message of this chapter is that everything belongs to the Lord. There are exactly zero battles in our lives that do not belong to him. There are exactly zero circumstances in our lives in which he will not provide what we need. That is as true of the moral and political condition of our country as it was of the battles David faced.

What will this mean for us? We can be secure in God's love and acceptance. What God has provided is enough in Christ so that we need never question whether God loves us. This is crucial, for we have seen in recent weeks that it is essential for us to draw on his love to love other people.

We can be at peace. Jesus told us in Matthew 6 to not worry. This is why. Whatever battle we face, it belongs to the Lord. It belongs to the God who saved a hopeless situation on the banks of the Red Sea, who enabled a shepherd boy to defeat the undefeatable huge warrior, who used a pitiful force of 300 men to defeat an army of many thousands. Knowing the battle belongs to God means we don't

have to wrestle for control of everything and everyone to force things to go the way we want. Instead we can rest. We can do our best, but trust the outcome of the battle to God.

We need never despair. If the battle belongs to the Lord, then no matter the odds stacked against us there is always hope. Our spiritual condition before God was 100% completely hopeless. But that battle belonged to God, and through Jesus Christ he won it decisively on our behalf.

This does not mean we will see the victory we hope for in every situation. God works in ways that are inscrutable to us, many times because he is working toward outcomes that are years, sometimes even centuries down the road. What do you think you would have felt if you were a disciple of Jesus the day after seeing him tortured and executed on a Roman cross? I would have been scared to death that I was next. But I also would have been devastated, confused, and upset. I knew for a fact that God was present in Jesus. I had seen him exercise power even over nature and death itself. And then God let this happen? All was lost. We thought the kingdom had come, and now it's all gone. Frankly I am disillusioned with God. It's like he's played an evil trick on us. I don't think I can ever trust him, because this is the worst defeat I could ever have imagined. I would have been hours away from learning that what appeared to be a grievous, inconceivable defeat was, in fact, the greatest come from behind victory that creation will ever experience. But I would only know that after the fact.

A friend and I were recently talking about marriage proposals. He asked if I got down on one knee for the classic proposal. I did not. In fact I didn't really plan to ask Laurie to marry me. I knew I loved her, and I knew she loved me. But on my birthday we faced some realities. We just weren't in a place where there was anywhere for us to go and there wouldn't be for the foreseeable future. Laurie just wasn't in a place to make any commitments, so we agreed we needed to go our separate ways. I was really sad. I loved this girl. The next morning when I got up I had to come to grips with my broken heart. Was God supplying enough? Did this battle with sadness, loneliness and the loss of love belong to him? It didn't feel like it. But I knew that God does provide enough. The only issue was whether I would believe that and act on it. I finally accepted that even in that disappointment and hurt what God was supplying was sufficient. I spent some time praising God and telling him that I trusted him to provide what I needed to win the battle with sadness and loneliness. After that I was still sad, but not despairing, because I had hope. It wasn't hope that I would get Laurie back, for I was sure that was a done deal, but hope that God would work and that he would provide what I needed to

deal with the loneliness. It was hope that God would restore joy to me and that he would give me what I needed to live a full life. Weirdly, circumstances put Laurie and me together just a little later that day, and within a couple of hours we were engaged to be married. I assure you a thousand times, a million times, an infinity, that what God has supplied is enough.

Every battle we face belongs to the Lord. We may not understand why battles go the way they do, but we can always trust in him and know that in the end his victory is never in doubt. As we trust in this truth we can live with unlimited peace, we never need to be in despair. Let's stop worrying about things we don't control and let the sunshine of God's love, grace, power and victory shine in our lives.