

And the Lord Worked a Great Victory  
2 Samuel 21:15-22, 23:8-39  
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## Introduction

A man named David Murrow wrote a book called *Why Men Hate Going to Church* back in 2005. In it, he talked about the fact that church is too easily seen as an activity meant for women and children. As he sat in church one Sunday, it dawned on him that everything about the church, from the decorations to the activities, was designed to appeal to women – it seemed like it was all sitting around reading, talking about your feelings, and developing relationships - the things, he says, that either bore men or make them feel unmanly or unwanted. He argued that in church there aren't a lot of ways for guys to feed their desires to compete, achieve, and complete a mission. While the pastorate is dominated by men, almost every other area of church life is dominated by women. He says: "When men need spiritual sustenance, they go to the wilderness, the workplace, the garage, or the corner bar. They watch their heroes in the stadium or on the racetrack... Church is one of the last places men look for God."<sup>1</sup> So they quit coming and the numbers show the huge disparity between men and women attending and joining churches.

Christianity is so often criticized for being patriarchal and male-centric; the Bible is disparaged for being mostly the story of men. If David Murrow is correct, though, then we have a true irony: that women embrace the church in much greater numbers than men, and somehow, we have lost some of the manliness of Christianity. So, David Murrow started a ministry and website called "Church for Men" with lots of great resources. Other pastors have addressed these concerns more radically. Mark Driscoll, who was the pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle and the poster child for the "manly man" church resurgence, said this in his sermon "Death by Love": real men avoid the church because it projects a "Richard Simmons, hippie, Christ" that "is no one to live for [and] is no one to die for." Driscoll explains, "Jesus was not a long-haired ... effeminate-looking dude"; rather, he had "callused hands and big biceps." This is the sort of Christ that men are drawn to — what Driscoll calls "Ultimate Fighting Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

We come to a text like today's account of David's Mighty Men in 2 Samuel chapters 21 and 23, and we see men who were taking on giants, lions, and whole battalions of Philistines by themselves. They were such fierce warriors that they ignored pain and weariness and stood their ground against the enemy to the death. We're not going to have "Church for Men" today but by default we kind of have a "Sermon for Men." Ladies, please don't tune me out, there will be plenty for you to think through and apply as well. But in a culture that is very confused about what being a man means, we need to think soberly about what godly manhood looks like. Let's see if we can stake out some middle ground between the extremes of feminine church and Ultimate Fighting Jesus.

In the second half of chapter 21, we meet

### I. Four Giant Killers (21:15-22)

<sup>15</sup> *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.* <sup>16</sup> *And Ishbi-benob, one of the descendants of the giants, whose spear weighed three hundred shekels of bronze, and who was armed*

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<sup>1</sup> David Murrow, *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2005), pp. 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> <https://churchwatchcentral.com/2022/04/04/the-manly-man-resurgence-why-it-is-a-threat-to-your-church/>

with a new sword, thought to kill David. <sup>17</sup> 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." <sup>18</sup> 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. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> And when he taunted Israel, Jonathan the son of Shimei, David's brother, struck him down. <sup>22</sup> These four were descended from the giants in Gath, and they fell by the hand of David and by the hand of his servants.

Philistines again! David had been defeating Philistines in battle since he was a boy when he had killed Goliath, but at times he had also sought refuge among them when Saul was trying to kill him. The Philistines were the ones who were the cause of Saul's and Jonathan's death. They keep popping up to be a thorn in Israel's side. David went down to battle with his army, but the years have caught up with David, and verse 15 tells us that "*David grew weary.*" After he narrowly avoided being killed by a heavily armed giant who targeted him, David was forbidden by his men to be involved in anymore fighting. The man was in his sixties by now - give it a rest, you've got nothing left to prove and only harm will come to Israel if its king is killed. David was no longer the young man killing his tens of thousands, his fighting days were over. We all get there, to that place where we just can't summon the energy that was there when we were younger. You don't think about it when you're young, but if you live long enough, it's frustrating not to be able to do the things you used to be able to do with no problem. I used to be able to run around with the teens, play basketball at 6 am, go on mission trips and retreats without bringing a bunch of pain relievers. No mas! David was blessed by God to have others around him who could carry the load! That's a reminder to anyone who is a leader in anything - find people around you and be ready to hand off the baton to the next generation. Know when to stop going out to battle.

We have four mighty men here who distinguished themselves in these battles by killing giants or descendants of giants: Abishai, Sibbecai, Elhanan, and Jonathan. Verse 19 sounds like it's rewriting history a bit, since everyone knows that it was David who had killed Goliath the Gittite, not Elhanan. There are several explanations to this apparent contradiction that I read, the most convincing and often cited is that 1 Chronicles 20:5 says that Elhanan killed Goliath's brother, and that is what was meant here. Verse 20 reminds me of the movie, *The Princess Bride*, where Inigo Montoya is searching for the man with six fingers who killed his father. This guy had 12 fingers and 12 toes, a true freak of nature, but no match for David's nephew, Jonathan.

That passage was a quick introduction to the impressive men who fought for David. Turn two chapters over to meet the "Big Three":

## **II. Three Mighty Men (23:8-17)**

<sup>8</sup> These are the names of the mighty men whom David had: Josheb-basshebeth a Tahchemonite; he was chief of the three. He wielded his spear against eight hundred whom he killed at one time. <sup>9</sup> And next to him among the three mighty men was Eleazar the son of Dodo, son of Ahohi. He was with David when they defied the Philistines who were gathered there for battle, and the men of Israel withdrew. <sup>10</sup> He rose and struck down the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand clung to the sword. And the Lord brought about a great victory that day, and the men returned after him only to strip the slain. <sup>11</sup> And next to him was Shammah, the son of Agee the Hararite. The Philistines gathered together at Lehi, where there was a plot of ground full of lentils, and the men fled from the Philistines. <sup>12</sup> But he

took his stand in the midst of the plot and defended it and struck down the Philistines, and the Lord worked a great victory. <sup>13</sup> And three of the thirty chief men went down and came about harvest time to David at the cave of Adullam, when a band of Philistines was encamped in the Valley of Rephaim. <sup>14</sup> David was then in the stronghold, and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem. <sup>15</sup> And David said longingly, "Oh, that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!" <sup>16</sup> Then the three mighty men broke through the camp of the Philistines and drew water out of the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate and carried and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it. He poured it out to the Lord <sup>17</sup> and said, "Far be it from me, O Lord, that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?" Therefore he would not drink it. These things the three mighty men did.

Just as Jesus had his inner-circle of three disciples - Peter, James and John – so David had his inner-circle elite three. David's top three mighty men were Josheb, Eleazar, and Shammah. You had to record quite the impressive feat to be included in the top three and these guys certainly did:

- Josheb had exceptional persistence and stamina, killing eight hundred men in one battle with apparently just a spear.
- Eleazar had unusual courage, the guy who stayed when everybody else drew back from the Philistines, winning the battle single-handedly. It's not explicit in the ESV, but a lot of the commentators I read said that v. 10 that says "*his hand clung to the sword*" mean that his hand melted into the sword, so he just kept swinging it.
- Shammah had unique steadfastness, fending off the Philistines in the middle of a field, not surrendering an inch of it.

Don't miss that there is a phrase that shows up twice in the descriptions of the military wins: "*the Lord worked a great victory.*" Yes, these guys were great warriors and showed amazing courage in the face of overwhelming odds, but they accomplished what they did, as was historically true of God's chosen people, with the Lord's help.

Then there is this strange story of these three men overhearing something that David said in passing, that he wished he could drink water from the well of Bethlehem. I think that David was just tired and thirsty in the midst of being pinned down by the enemy, and wistfully longed for the water from his childhood. In the most literal of "your wish is my command" responses, these three guys fought their way through the Philistines, hiked seven miles, gathered the water, hiked seven miles back, probably had to fight again, and brought it back to their leader and king.

Have you ever given someone a really nice gift and you can't wait for them to light up when they see it, and the moment comes, and... nothing. They're not excited about it, you misjudged their response to it. That's what seems to have happened here. David literally poured out the water that they brought him; he didn't take a sip of it. These men who had just shown that they would do anything for him must have been so deflated, so hurt that he didn't appreciate their gift. But we need to look a little deeper, David wasn't actually rejecting their gift. He was regifting it, passing it on to someone else. He poured out the water "*to the Lord.*" He was actually showing humility and profound thankfulness for what they had done. John Woodhouse comments that "What mattered to him was not the water itself, but the extraordinary sacrificial love they had shown to him. For David the water, obtained at such a cost, represented the blood of his men. David would not use such devotion for his own physical nourishment. It was something that had to be given to God."<sup>3</sup> Paul said something similar in Philippians 4:18 that you might remember when we studied it back in April – "*I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from*

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<sup>3</sup> John Woodhouse, *2 Samuel: Your Kingdom Come* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 533.

*Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.”* The Philippians had sent him a gift to sustain him while he was in prison, and not only did he greatly appreciate it, but he counted it as their gift to the Lord.

Our last text covers the rest of chapter 23 where we meet

### **III. The Other Thirty-Seven Mighty Men (23:18-39)**

*<sup>18</sup> Now Abishai, the brother of Joab, the son of Zeruiah, was chief of the thirty. And he wielded his spear against three hundred men and killed them and won a name beside the three. <sup>19</sup> He was the most renowned of the thirty and became their commander, but he did not attain to the three. <sup>20</sup> And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was a valiant man of Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds. He struck down two ariels of Moab. He also went down and struck down a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen. <sup>21</sup> And he struck down an Egyptian, a handsome man. The Egyptian had a spear in his hand, but Benaiah went down to him with a staff and snatched the spear out of the Egyptian's hand and killed him with his own spear. <sup>22</sup> These things did Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, and won a name beside the three mighty men. <sup>23</sup> He was renowned among the thirty, but he did not attain to the three. And David set him over his bodyguard. <sup>24</sup> Asahel the brother of Joab was one of the thirty; Elhanan the son of Dodo of Bethlehem, <sup>25</sup> Shammah of Harod, Elikah of Harod, <sup>26</sup> Helez the Paltite, Ira the son of Ikkesh of Tekoa, <sup>27</sup> Abiezer of Anathoth, Mebunnai the Hushathite, <sup>28</sup> Zalmon the Ahohite, Maharai of Netophah, <sup>29</sup> Heleb the son of Baanah of Netophah, Ittai the son of Ribai of Gibeath of the people of Benjamin, <sup>30</sup> Benaiah of Pirathon, Hiddai of the brooks of Gaash, <sup>31</sup> Abi-albon the Arbathite, Azmaveth of Bahurim, <sup>32</sup> Eliahba the Shaalbonite, the sons of Jashen, Jonathan, <sup>33</sup> Shammah the Hararite, Ahiam the son of Sharar the Hararite, <sup>34</sup> Eliphelet the son of Ahasbai of Maacah, Eliam the son of Ahithophel the Gilonite, <sup>35</sup> Hezro of Carmel, Paarai the Arbite, <sup>36</sup> Igal the son of Nathan of Zobah, Bani the Gadite, <sup>37</sup> Zelek the Ammonite, Naharai of Beeroth, the armor-bearer of Joab the son of Zeruiah, <sup>38</sup> Ira the Ithrite, Gareb the Ithrite, <sup>39</sup> Uriah the Hittite: thirty-seven in all.*

We have seen Abishai at a number of points in David's story, he was one of the four giant slayers from earlier. He was always offering to kill someone for David and had been a commander over a third of David's army. He only killed three hundred men in a one battle, apparently that wasn't enough to propel him into the elite group of three. What's interesting is that he is listed here among the top thirty-seven, but his brother Joab, who had been David's main general for the longest time and eliminated all of his important rivals, is left off the list. Probably because of his disregard for David's explicit instructions not to kill his rebel son, Absalom.

Benaiah's big deeds were killing a lion and a fierce Egyptian man, as well as striking down two ariels of Moab, whatever that is, probably a regiment of soldiers? Mark Batterson, a pastor in DC, has written a book called *In A Lion in a Pit on a Snowy Day* referring to the incident in verse 20. I never read it, but I read a synopsis of it – it's about taking risks and pursuing your dreams; don't be passive, instead “unleash the lion chaser within.” So there you go – if you need some motivation to go after your dreams and goals, Benaiah killed a lion in the snow, so you can do anything. Sorry, that doesn't do it for me, but if that sounds intriguing, you might want to read the book.

Who is the last person listed? Uriah the Hittite. A reminder of David's greatest sin in stealing his wife and sending him to his death. Perhaps also a reminder that David didn't always treat his mighty men as well as he could have, wasn't always the ideal leader, but God used him anyways.

### **Conclusion**

There's real confusion about what it means to be a man these days. I remember being at lunch with the guys in my youth group fifteen some years ago. We were talking about growing into manhood,

and one of them interrupted me and asked, “When did you feel like a man?” I didn’t know how to answer him. I was a married father of two kids at that point, and to be honest, I think I felt like a man when I became a father. But I don’t think that’s a good benchmark because plenty of men will never be fathers, many will not even get married. So I don’t think that you can use a life event that not everyone will experience to define manhood. So, is it an age, maybe 18 or 21? Or is it the old Jewish bar-mitzvah declaration of a 13-year boy now being a man? Maybe we need a ritual like the bar-mitzvah to confer the status of being a man to help boys embrace manhood. That might help with guys who are wondering if they’ve done enough to prove that they’re men.

And so the confusion plays out in extremes – on the one extreme, there’s the embrace of hyper-masculinity, some call it “toxic masculinity.” Take all the caricatures of manhood – the violent, thoughtless brute who only hurts other people. On the other extreme, there’s the encouragement for boys to choose to be girls if they feel like it. This is not an all-out rant, but I don’t know if you saw recently that there were men in the “Christian music industry” who showed up at the Dove Awards (the Christian music version of the Grammys) in drag, in dresses. Derek Webb, whose music I used to love when he was writing godly music, was one of them. In one sense, it’s almost too ridiculous to believe, but I guess in another sense, it was just the next step in where our culture is pushing: to include cross-dressing men in the name of tolerance despite the Scripture’s prohibition of men dressing like women, asking us to jettison the historic Christian sexual ethic.

There is an interesting conversation to have about the stereotypes of what masculinity looks like. Spending time with my long-time friends the last couple days, my ears were tuned to comments because of the sermon I was preparing, so I heard things like, “We’re not ordering a charcuterie board, we’re not women” and “that drink’s girly,” and “that is a man’s event.” We have designated so many things as “manly” or “girlie,” and you risk being made fun of by your buddies if you don’t get them all right. So, do men have to love football or mixed martial arts, go hunting, and drink Scotch and be bored by ballet and turned off by what we traditionally think of as feminine things, like baking and poetry, to be manly? I don’t think that’s true, men can love the arts, theater, cooking, even crafts, in the same way that women can enjoy contact sports, lifting weights, and riding motorcycles (whatever you want to classify as “manly” things). None of that erases the distinction between the sexes and the fact that God made us male and female, but we should filter out our culture’s superficial ideas.

What women may not realize is that most men go through their lives either consciously or subconsciously keeping score of whether they are manly enough. We check off these superficial lists of things that look manly and avoid the things that aren’t. I want to free us from some of that. If you are a man who loves poetry, but you’re too embarrassed to admit it, go ahead and embrace it. You’re still a man, don’t question your gender. God just gave you a poet’s sensibility and the gifts that go along with that. If you’ve always wanted to be a Marine, that’s awesome, God designed you with a warrior’s soul and gifts to match. Embrace God’s calling to be a man in the way that He designed you.

At the root of manhood, specifically godly manhood, is finding a sense of calling, living out why you are here on the earth. Nobody has it all figured out, but every man is tasked with finding meaningful work, which is rooted in the Genesis creation mandate to have dominion over the earth. Not that every man needs to be a farmer, but that every man must find the way that he exercises cultivating the earth and being productive in work. (Women need to find that as well, but we’re talking about men today.) Listen, I can’t solve every issue related to manhood in a 35-minute sermon, but I see three specific things in this passage that can help us when we talk about godly

manhood. And we don't just appreciate them because David's mighty men did them, they're also rooted in the person and work of the Truest and Greatest Man, Jesus Christ:

- 1) A godly man meets the challenges that the Lord puts before him. The mighty men in these passages rose to meet the enemy, fighting to the death if necessary. Jesus faced the hardest trials that God placed in front of them, courageously allowing Himself to be killed for us. In our lives, this will look very different than fighting Philistines, but it means that we can expect obstacles, enemies, and challenges. And either we wilt away and hope that someone else fights for us, or we stand our ground and fight. We can walk away from our marriages or abandon our children when it gets hard, or we can dig in and do the hard work that they need us to do.
- 2) A man protects the weak and vulnerable. Like Abishai who came to David's defense when he was weary and under attack, we are God's protection for those around us. We stand up against bullies and injustice, we protect our wives and children and others in our sphere when necessary. How did Jesus do this? That was actually His whole mission: Romans 5:6 – *"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly."*
- 3) The last key to manhood here that we don't talk a lot about is self-sacrifice. When the three men risked their lives for David to fetch him water, that's an extreme picture of sacrificing your own desires, needs, and wants for those around you. Life is not just a series of "finding yourself" – seeking thrills and fun wherever they can be had. A godly man looks for how he can love and please his Lord, and then love and meet the needs of those around him. Guys, you want to show your wife how much of a man you are and make her fall more in love with you? Should you get into the best shape of your life and lift as many weights as you can look like Dwayne Johnson? Will that impress her? I doubt it. You know what she'll respond to? Your sacrificing yourself for her and your children. Ephesians 5:25, 28 – *"Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her... In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies."* Who should sacrifice their wants and desires in marriage for the other? Both spouses should. But husbands, guess what? You go first. You get to be the first to be last, initiate the self-sacrifice, whether it's reciprocated or not! That's what it means to lead.

Now, you might think: "OK, if I live a life of self-sacrifice, then God will honor that and let me into heaven." That's not true. You can sacrifice all you want and still die and be judged for your sins. It's not your sacrifice that God looks at, it's the sacrifice of the sinless One who died to pay the penalty for your sin. Jesus not only lived a life of constant self-sacrifice because He was the perfect and complete Man, but He died to give His life as a ransom for many. That's the sacrifice that God looks at and grants eternal life as a result. Jesus also made a trip to Bethlehem. He broke through the battle lines of Hell's hosts and drew water from the well of salvation. Then He poured out His life as a precious offering, giving it to God as an acceptable sacrifice. Once we accept His sacrifice on our behalf and are united to Christ by faith, then our self-sacrifices are significant to God.

Benediction - 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17 – *"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God our Father, who loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts and establish them in every good work and word."*