



FACING THE UNRELENTING FOE

SERIES: *THRONE AND CITY*

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2 Samuel 5:17-25
Eleventh Message
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As I listened to the message, the music and the testimonies on Easter Sunday morning, and later enjoyed a rich fellowship meal in the afternoon, I found myself longing to pause in the joy of Easter. I wanted to leisurely linger in that holy air and bask in the rays of resurrection.

But Monday came too soon, and with it the storms of life and the necessity to arm oneself in prayer for the battle. As the week unfolded, I stood alongside friends as grinding lawsuits, collapsed relationships, neighborhood feuds, physical pain, elderly confusion, estranged parents, and a spiritual son diagnosed with leukemia unfolded around me. How thankful we should be that we have the stories of Scripture as a compass to guide us through the storms of life! Newspapers merely report episodes of crises—they seem to have no beginning or end—but the Bible is a unified collection of God-given stories that have beginnings and conclusions which give shape and significance to our lives.

Resuming the story of the life of David from the book of 2 Samuel now, we find that the former renegade has been recognized as king by a united Israel. Furthermore, in a wonderful moment of triumph, David has just crowned Jerusalem as his capital. Doubtless the king longed to pause in the royal residence and revel in that rare moment of peace: a united Israel, universally acknowledging the one king in the royal capital, and Israel's king, basking in God's good pleasure. Things were all the sweeter for David, because these blessings had been realized following a painfully long and arduous road.

But before the poet has time to pen a poem of praise, David hears that the Philistine hordes are launching a massive offensive against his newly united kingdom. Advancing up the valley of Elah (where David had slain Goliath), they have installed a garrison as close as Bethlehem, five miles south of Jerusalem. Once again, David is about to come face to face with the intimidating, unrelenting, age-old enemy, the Philistines. Here is one adversary who would never allow Israel a moment's peace.

Do you have enemies like that? Have you noticed that no matter how much you grow in the Lord, some enemies never seem to go away? Like David, we may have thought, in the adolescence of our faith, that we had dealt with an enemy, but it surfaces again in mid-life. And it seems to return with more force, power and determination than ever to destroy us.

How do we face such an unrelenting foe? What impact do these battles have on our soul? These are the questions that we will seek to answer from our study today.

Our text sets out the story of back to back offensives by the Philistines against the newly united empire, and David's consecutive victories.

I. Battle One: A Flash Flood (5:17-21)

When the Philistines had heard that they had anointed David king over Israel, all the Philistines went up to seek out David; and when David heard of it, he went down to the stronghold. Now the Philistines came and spread themselves out in the valley of Rephaim. Then David inquired of the Lord saying, "Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will You give them into my hand?" And the Lord said to David, "Go up, for I will certainly give the Philistines into your hand." So David came to Baal-perazim, and defeated them there; and he said, "The Lord has broken through my enemies before me like the breakthrough of waters." Therefore he named that place Baal-perazim. And they abandoned their idols there, so David and his men carried them away. (NASB)

The Chronicler adds...

"And they abandoned their gods there, so David gave the order and they were burned with fire" (1 Chr 14:12).

This may give a clue as to why David was in such a hurry to capture Jerusalem: he needed a secure stronghold against a looming invasion.¹ We must never forget the terror evoked by a Philistine threat. Archaeological findings have shown that the Philistines were among the most advanced cultures in the ancient world.² They were leaders in international trade; and in parts of Palestine they held a monopoly on both local and overland commerce. Their cities were highly developed; their agricultural and military prowess were second to none. To face them in battle was to confront the most sophisticated and disciplined war machine of that day.

Their "search for David" is reminiscent of the incident in 1 Samuel 23, when Saul "sought" David. Now a national enemy gives him a taste of being the hunted one. "The Philistines forced their way in and fanned out in the valley of Rephaim"³ (cf. Josh 15:8). They place a garrison at Bethlehem (2 Sam 23:14) to prevent David

from getting help from the south. Their plan was to divide a country which David had just united.

The text is filled with historical echoes of intimidation. The place of the double confrontation is the valley of the Rephaim,⁴ which formed the northern boundary of Judah. It was named after the original inhabitants of Canaan, whom the Israelites imagined to be giants. Those intimidating giants that petrified everyone in Israel, except a few heroes of the faith, like Caleb and Joshua, now reappear in force to confront David.

When David hears of the Philistine threat, he withdraws into the “stronghold.” The Chronicler (1 Chr 11:15) identifies this as the cave of Adullam, which overlooked the valley. From that vantage point, David prays:

“Shall I go up against the Philistines? Will you give them into my hand?”

Notice that David does not assume that every confrontation is tantamount to holy war; nor does he presume to know what to do if it is. We should never assume that every call to battle implies that we ought to be involved.

God’s answer is as brief and direct as David’s request:

“Go up, for I will *certainly* give the Philistines into your hand.”

The only change in God’s answer from David’s two questions is a doubling of the verb “to give” (lit. “*giving I will give*”). This encourages David with the emphatic hope that victory is certain. Hope becomes his basis for action, and divine intervention his ground for obedience. David summarily smites the Philistines; then as conqueror he names the place “Baal-perazim,” (“lord of the breeches”):

“The Lord has broken through my enemies before me like the breakthrough of waters.” Therefore he named that place Baal-perazim.

We are given much more detail concerning David’s reflections following the battle than the actual battle itself (a six to one ratio of words). According to the text, God’s holiness broke out “like the breakthrough of waters.” This may be a clue that God intervened with a flash flood—a common occurrence in that area. A flood would have been especially effective if the Philistines had fanned out in the valley in a sea of chariots. “The Jebusites were outmaneuvered via their water conduit ...and now it is the Philistines’ turn to be subjected to the surprise attack of a flash flood.”⁵

David’s mention of the waters with the verb *paratz* (Exod 19:22, 24) evokes memories surrounding the events of the Exodus. The Lord’s holiness broke through and led the Israelites through the waters, and then he used those same waters to slay the Egyptians. David now feels strangely tied to that event in a new way.

The Philistines, like the Egyptians, found their gods no match for the Creator God. They abandoned their idols there, and David’s men carried them away and burned them with fire.

II. An Interlude Within the Camp: Holy Water (1 Chr 11:15-19)

Now we will look at 1 Chronicles 11, which has a parallel story that took place within David’s camp. This account uses same verb *paratz* of three heroes who risk their lives “breaking through” enemy lines to the well of Bethlehem to assuage a whim of their king.

1 Chronicles 11:15-19:

Now three of the thirty chief men went down to the rock to David, into the cave of Adullam while the army of the Philistines was camping in the valley of Rephaim. And David was then in the stronghold, while the garrison of the Philistines was then in Bethlehem. And David had a craving and said, “Oh that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!” So the three *broke through* the camp of the Philistines, and drew water from the well of Bethlehem which was by the gate, and took it and brought it to David; nevertheless David would not drink it, but poured it out to the Lord; and he said, “Be it far from me before my God that I should do this. Shall I drink the blood of these men at the risk of their lives? For at the risk of their lives they brought it.” Therefore he would not drink it.

Here we see holy love birthed in the fiery heat of battle. A king’s whim, overheard by those who serve him, becomes holy orders to them, so they risk life and limb to fulfill his desire. As a pastor, I see this kind of thing happen frequently. A hurting brother or sister expresses a desire, which is overheard by another Christian, who takes it as holy orders and rushes out to fulfill the request.

But the Philistines are not about to give up. They set about preparing a second attack.

III. Battle Two: Angels in the Wind (5:22-25)

Now the Philistines came up once again and spread themselves out in the valley of Rephaim. And when David inquired of the Lord He said, “You shall not go directly up; circle around behind them and come at them in front of the balsam trees. And it shall be, when you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, then you shall act decisively for then the Lord will have gone out before you to strike the army of the Philistines.” Then David did so, just as the Lord had commanded him, and struck down the Philistines from Geba as far as Gezer.

Not to be deterred by a single defeat, the Philistines confront David a second time. Again they fan themselves out in the valley of Rephaim. Again David does

not assume that their provocation mandates a response. Nor does he presume to know what response he should make if one is required. And again he prays.

This time God gives a lengthy speech in reply, explaining that David is not to engage the enemy in direct confrontation (“do not go up”), but he is to circle behind them and wait for God’s signal before attacking. When David hears the sound of God’s holy steps on the tops of the balsam trees, he is to act quickly and decisively, for then God has gone before him. “When you hear the voice of marching at the top of balsam trees”⁶ is perhaps a reference to an army of angelic hosts whom David can hear in the wind but cannot see.

“Act immediately” (*charatz*): the noun form of this verb is a “threshing sled” pulled by oxen, with sharp stones or pieces of iron to rip up stalks of grain. The verb means “to cut,” “to sharpen,” then “to decide”—thus here: “act decisively.” The Dead Sea Scrolls use the term seven times in eschatological contexts for the “appointed” time, the “determined end” (Joel 3:14).⁷ The Philistines, who have fanned out across the valley, may have the horizontal advantage, but David has the vertical advantage, the link between heaven and earth, God and creation, angels and mankind. To take advantage of this, David must act immediately and decisively.

The great archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni summarizes the battle by saying: “David ambushed the Philistines by blocking their retreat at the western end of the Valley of Rephaim. The Philistines were forced to retreat via the watershed road, past Geba, to the Beth-horn road. David pursued them as far as Gezer.”⁸

The narrator reflects on the meaning of this event and again ties it to the Exodus. David’s obedience is exact and complete, reminiscent of Moses, who obeyed every instruction. This battle also is a capstone of God’s faithfulness in Israel’s history. When David acquires the land up to the coastal plane, a divine act of completion is recorded which began with the crossing of the Jordan to give the whole land to the people of God (Hertzberg). This was a very significant moment in Israel’s sacred history.

The question raised by these ancient accounts is this: What is the impact of this kind of warfare on the soul?

IV. Reflections on the Human Soul in Warfare

(a) Proper Expectations

The stories of Scripture give the believer proper expectations in life. Here is one thing you can count on: some enemies never go away. David is confronted by an enemy he had crushed in his adolescence (Goliath), then deceived and lived with in his young adulthood (Agag), and is now facing again in a national confrontation in his manhood, as king. The greater the success that David had, the greater and more organized the opposition became. Now an entire nation unifies against him and seeks him with the same single-minded determination as the deceased Saul. And note that the attack

comes right on the heels on the unification of Israel. Oftentimes when we direct our efforts at working for peace, ironically, we make more enemies than when we were working for war. The assassinated prime minister of Israel, Yitzak Rabin, made far more enemies as a diplomat for peace than he made in his days as a military general.

(b) The Key to Victory

But, no matter how big the battle, or how relentless the opposition, the keys to victory are the same.

1. Dependence on Prayer

First, we must depend on prayer. Every battle requires prayer. Just because there is a battle brewing, doesn’t necessarily mean it’s *our* battle. It can be very damaging to the soul if we engage in every conflict we come across, and fight on a multitude of fronts. The questions needing to be asked are these: Is the confrontation a holy war? Do I need to respond? Will God go with me? If so, what must I do? We must never assume or presume anything.

But then we ask, “How do we pray in the midst of the battle?” If you find praying difficult, notice that David’s prayer in the midst of the battle is intensely personal and brief. There is no holy protocol, no elaborate ritual, no formal address. His prayer is pure, naked substance. This is the language of lovers: “Shall I go up?” And the response: “Go up!”

I am enjoying the memoirs of Elie Wiesel, and I am struck by his succinct writing style. In this context, he says:

“All my subsequent works are written in the same deliberately spare style as *Night*. It is the style of the chronicles of the ghettos, where everything had to be said swiftly, in one breath. You never knew when the enemy might kick in the door, sweeping us away into nothingness. Every phrase was a testament. There was not time or reason for anything superfluous. Words must not be imprisoned or harnessed, not even in the silence of the page. And yet, it must be held tightly. If the violin is to sing, its strings must be stretched so tight as to risk breaking; slack, they are merely threads.”⁹

David’s brief prayer, the request, “Shall I go up against the Philistines?” is filled with passion, emotion and power. Secondly, I would add, to help you pray, pray the Psalms out loud. These psalms have been the prayer book of the saints for three thousand years. They were birthed out of the soul of David and were used by every subsequent king in Israel. They were the very breath and sustenance of Jesus. As you pray the Psalms you will learn a language for your soul.

So the first key to victory is prayer.

The second is obedience.

2. Obedience to Revelation

The irony here is that there is a profound simplicity of action required in comparison to the complex emotions we feel. Oftentimes when we face our most implacable enemies we can be overrun with terror, paralyzed by fear and plagued with pain. But God says: "Listen. Wait for me. Then show up." Jesus warned the disciples to not prepare beforehand what they would say when they were hauled before the law courts. There is a window of opportunity which is opening up, heaven is breaking in on earth, so when it comes, act decisively!

But notice that no details are given after that, lest we make an idol out of the method and forget the source of victory. What we are left with is an intimate working together of God's holy activity, which we perceive in prayer, and our activity, which we live out in obedience. As Fokkelman notes, David's 'striding forward' and the 'marching out' of God are to be synonymous.¹⁰ The result is that heaven unites with earth, angels descend in the wind, and God comes to the aid of man. But without prayer we do not see it, and without obedience we do not seize it.

(c) The Impact on the Soul: Holy Awe (Psalm 108:1-6)

Even for the most seasoned warrior, when God acts from heaven there is an ever-increasing sense of humility and awe. We come away with a greater spiritual attentiveness of God at work. The only way David can capture this feeling is to write a poem and sing it. In Psalm 108:1-6, we see the clear reference to Philistia, in verse 9: "*Over Philistia I will shout aloud!*"

**My heart is steadfast, O God;
I will sing, I will sing praises, even with my soul.
Awake, harp and lyre;
I will awaken the dawn!
I will give thanks to You, O Lord among the peoples;
And I will sing praises to You among the nations.
For Your lovingkindness is great above the heavens;
And Your truth reaches to the skies.
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens,
And Your glory above all the earth (Ps 108:1-6).**

David never got over these two victories over the Philistines. He relived them again and again in song as the experiences broke his soul open to comprehend the incomparable dimensions of God's love. He was awed to be set in the center of it, fully integrated in the midst of it, and pulled into something so comprehensive and integrating. He was awed that in the first battle, God's holiness broke out through the creation, in a flash flood. When the battle was joined again, he actually heard the angelic troops descending from heaven on the tops of trees, and he experienced the rout with angelic swords at his side. If that was not enough, he was further awestruck when he looked back on history and recognized a supernatural linking with Moses and Exodus.

Finally, David was overcome with emotion when his warriors risked life and limb to break through enemy lines to offer a cup of water to him in an act of grateful homage. In the gospels, Jesus made reference to this when he said: "And whoever in the name of a disciple gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward" (Matt 10:42).

In these stories David is drawn into something much larger and more comprehensive than himself. He is integrated with God and his creation; with angels and their weapons; and with events and leaders of sacred history. Finally, the bonds between brothers are forged in the white heat of battle, making them stronger than death.

Notice the response of the Philistines. They "abandoned their idols there" (1 Chr 14:12). Fighting idols will never rid you of the idolatries in your life. Addictions will never cease when you merely come face to face with the idols. You must be drawn into the bigger scene of what God is doing, fighting his battles and becoming integrated with creation and history. Then those idols will drop like dust, and you will be left with the holiness of God, awestruck as you live in his holy air.

May God grant you such a week of holy victory in your battles.

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, Vol. III, *Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1986), 171. I have been greatly helped for many of my observations by Fokkelman.

2. For a complete and up to date archaeological history of the Philistines, see the excellent work Trude & Moshe Dothan, *The People of the Sea: The Search for the Philistines* (New York: Macmillan/Domino Press, 1992).

4. On *Rephaim*, see Gen 14:5; 15:20; Deut 2:20; Josh 15:8; 17:15.

5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 173-174.

6. "The balsam-trees, from which the attack is made, are mastic terebinths, 'more like bushes than trees', and are even now a characteristic feature of the hilly country." Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 274.

7. "*charatz*," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck & Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 5:216-220.

8. Yohanan Aharoni & Michael Avi-Yonah, *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, 3d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 77.

9. Elie Wiesel, *Memoirs: All Rivers Run to the Sea* (New York: Knopf, 1995) 321.

10. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 175.