



SURVIVING SUCCESS

SERIES: THRONE AND CITY

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2 Samuel 8:1-18

15th Message

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Can we have it all in life? This question was posed by a young man recently in a Bible study that I attend. He was being presented with open windows of opportunity in business, and he felt like he was standing beneath an ever-rising ladder that was gilded with promises for those who climbed higher and vested deeper.

For some in this valley, a rush of adrenaline surges through their veins as they see seemingly limitless opportunities for start-up companies, stock options and travel opportunities. With these advances, of course, come dreams of bigger homes, exclusive neighborhoods, private schools and community influence. Sometimes these awards are the pure gift of God; they are a blessing. The question is, what happens to our soul when we are gifted with success? Is there a price to be paid?

If ever there was someone who got in on the ground floor of a gilt-edged start-up venture, that man was David, the shepherd boy who became king of Israel. David was drawn into the most productive venture in history. He entered as the first employee. He had no capital; just a little oil was all he needed. The venture's principle backer was God, the "Lord of Hosts." This little company of one, which began in a cave, grew with amazing speed. When it went public, David became the CEO of the leading nation of earth. Now he was the royal monarch, standing right at the pinnacle of Israel's history. The queen of the nations, with a dynasty promised to outlive history! Talk about having it all. David had a brilliant career, a big house, with the prospect of a multitude of children, and influence abroad.

But what happened to David's soul when at last he had it all? Our text today, from the book of 2 Samuel, tells the story of his massive conquests abroad (8:1-14), followed by internal organization at home (8:15-18). Yet these successes are interwoven with red flags that appear as dangerous omens for David's spiritual life.

First, we will look at the king's latest successes abroad.

I. New Heights of Success Abroad (8:1-14)

Now after this it came about that David defeated the Philistines and subdued them; and David took control (lit., the bridle) of the chief (lit., mother) city from the hand of the Philistines. And he defeated Moab, and measured them with the line, making them lie down on the ground; and he measured two lines to put to death and one full line to keep alive.

And the Moabites became servants to David, bringing tribute.

Then David defeated Hadadezer, the son of Rehob king of Zobah, as he went to restore his rule at the River. And David captured from him 1,700 horsemen and 20,000 foot soldiers; and David hamstringed the chariot horses, but reserved enough of them for 100 chariots. And when the Arameans of Damascus came to help Hadadezer, king of Zobah, David killed 22,000 Arameans. Then David put garrisons among the Arameans of Damascus, and the Arameans became servants to David, bringing tribute. And the Lord helped David wherever he went. And David took the shields of gold which were carried by the servants of Hadadezer, and brought them to Jerusalem. And from Bethah and from Berothai, cities of Hadadezer, King David took a very large amount of bronze.

Now when Toi king of Hamath heard that David had defeated all the army of Hadadezer, Toi sent Joram his son to King David to greet him and bless him, because he had fought against Hadadezer and defeated him; for Hadadezer had been at war with Toi. And {Joram} brought with him articles of silver, of gold and of bronze. King David also dedicated these to the Lord with the silver and gold that he had dedicated from all the nations which he had subdued: from Aram and Moab and the sons of Ammon and the Philistines and Amalek, and from the spoil of Hadadezer, son of Rehob, king of Zobah.

So David made a name for himself when he returned from killing 18,000 Arameans in the Valley of Salt. And he put garrisons in Edom. In all Edom he put garrisons, and all the Edomites became servants to David. And the Lord helped David wherever he went. (NASB)

The battles summarized here, which took place over a period of twelve years, gather up David's military and administrative successes as king of Israel. These conquests took his rule to new heights never before achieved by himself or by any other leader in Israel. In much of this we can see God fulfilling his promises of chapter 7 to make David a name and to plant his people Israel in peace. God would be victorious over Israel's enemies.

What is so striking in the description of the battles is the stark brevity with which they are catalogued. Often just one verb ("David smote") is used to describe an en-

tire campaign. This is rather amazing when we realize that David was dealing with international conflicts involving thousands of troops. The numbers are staggering: 1,700 horsemen, 20,000 foot soldiers, 22,000 Arameans, 18,000 Arameans. They convey a feel for the surge of irresistible power driving David's tidal wave of success which moves through foreign soil at breakneck speed. When a few details are given to linger over, even then the focus is not on the battle, but on its aftermath. This emphasizes the new heights David has achieved. He is now the dominant force on the international scene.

The narrator begins this whirlwind tour of international conflict in the west, where David defeats Israel's perennial enemy, the Philistines. Again they are severely beaten. But now, for the first time, David takes new ground by bringing the battle into enemy turf, capturing their crown jewel and chief city. Literally, the term is the "bridle" of the mother city. This is a metaphor for severe oppression and absolute control. "The report that David took the reins 'out of the hands of the Philistines' means the roles are reversed from now on; the enemy finds himself in his hand."¹ A secure new rung is put in place in David's ladder of success.

From the west the narrator turns south-east, to Moab. David defeats Moab and makes them a permanent vassal kingdom under Israelite rule. The second rung is secured.

Next David faces a formidable foe, Hadadezer. David not only crushes him, he proceeds to break the back of an entire coalition of Aramean states that come to support him. The name Hadadezer (which means, "the god Hadad gives help"), rings out eight times in the text. Each time we hear the name, it is met with deafening silence; there is no answer from this "god." The Aramean defeat opens the door for conquest and resettlement to the far north. There David places garrisons to make his rule a permanent fixture in Damascus, broadening the tax base. The third and fourth rungs in David's ladder are safely installed.

Hearing of Hadadezer's defeat, Toi, king of Hamath (located on the Orontes river, due north of Damascus), is so elated that his archenemy has been destroyed, he comes with massive amounts of tribute to David. Tributes of silver, bronze and gold, covering the gamut of wealth's expression, make their way into the royal capital. This willing gesture opens the door of David's influence all the way north to the Euphrates river. Yet another rung is in place.

Fokkelman summarizes David's conquests in these words: "Five campaigns, six peoples, seven names of the defeated—all this diversity obtains a center, when the gravitation's center, vv.7-12, displays the conqueror in his capital Jerusalem."²

David is unstoppable. His empire is insatiable in its acquisition. The final rung on the ladder is identified in the words: "*David made a name (for himself).*" David is a

star on the international scene. He has it all.

I was fascinated recently to learn that this is how Silicon Valley entrepreneurs appear to people from other lands. I have a friend, Mattei, who comes from Romania. He wrote a the following poem describing how he views these modern-day conquerors:

They talk of gold, like I of water,
they talk of places I've never dared to dream
they dine with demi-gods like equals
they ride the winds and laugh like kings

Their words are swords
their swords divide
they make the west be west
while the east is quiet and oppressed
their arms set boundaries for the rest!

They pet the sky,
they dry the sea
Put Himalayas on its knee,
to beg for life, life is not free.

At war, they're skillful warriors,
The army is for them a phrase
The soldier is a notion of a phase
And victory is granted by a gaze!

And yet they talk of more,
their hearts are in distress
their barns so full, yet need to be rebuilt, I guess
they've lost count of herds and lands—oh yes

This is how the captains of Silicon Valley are viewed in the Third World.

II. The Reason for David's Success (8:6, 14)

What lay behind David's unparalleled success? The text is clear and emphatic. It is given twice, in verses 6 and 14:

And the Lord helped (lit., *saved*) **David wherever he went** (*walked*).

"The verb translated as 'help' is the term *yasha'* which means 'to deliver, to save.' The root idea is to give 'width and breadth to something, to liberate.'" Thus, salvation is to be taken from a narrow, constricting place, to a broader, more expansive place. God's gift to David was to be with him wherever he went. Now David is truly the beneficiary of a God who will not be confined in a house, but who is with David, to broaden his influence where David "walks."

If we have any success in life, credit is due to God alone. If you have gained any semblance of richness, breadth, influence or wealth, the credit is due to the God who has walked with you.

But the question that this text leaves us with is this: How does this tidal wave of success affect David's soul?

I have titled the next section: Holy Devotions and Abrasive Emotions.

III. David's Response to Success

(a) Holy Devotions (8:4, 11)

and David hamstrung the chariot horses...King David also dedicated these to the Lord with the silver and gold that he had dedicated from all the nations which he had subdued:

In the face of success, David does what a good king is supposed to do: He refuses to place his trust in the spoils. He hamstringing most of the horses (see Deut 17:16), and dedicates all of the spoils to God, in Jerusalem. David publicly declares everything to be God's victory, and all the spoil is holy to God. His company has just gone public after acquiring three foreign subsidiaries, yet David walks down the aisle, gives glory to God, and puts his entire gain in the plate, keeping nothing for himself. This is the center of the text. The messianic king dedicates to God everything he received. The sweet scent of holy devotions permeated the air in Jerusalem that day.

But not every rose in this bouquet was so fragrant. There were some dangerous omens in the midst of the holy devotions.

(b) Abrasive Emotions (8:2)

This wave of success lands David on dangerous ground. Success oftentimes spawns a perilous euphoria that can lift our senses up to heaven, but it can just as easily sweep us away to hell. When the air around us is permeated with success, when we seem fused with God's perennial activity, and we are at the center of everything that is significant, it is tempting to endow ourselves with some aspect of deity. In the language of the Moabite tribute, the narrator gives subtle hints that this is the shift that is occurring here: "the Moabites became servants to David, bringing *tribute*." The term "tribute" (*minchah*) is normally a "gift" (usually a grain offering) brought to the Lord by his servants. Now David is receiving it while the Moabites become *his* servants. David's euphoria causes him to cross the sacred line between being a servant of God engaged in holy war and becoming a god unto himself. When that happens, a horrible detachment from human beings occurs that gives birth to the most terrifying wickedness.

We see this in the heartless subjugation of the Moabites.

And he defeated Moab, and measured them with the line, making them lie down on the ground; and he measured two lines to put to death and one full line to keep alive. And the Moabites became servants to David, bringing tribute.

David lines the Moabites on the ground and measures them off with a rope to determine who lives and dies. David, the undisputed victor, now makes sure he remains victor by demonstrating that he is lord of life

and death—and this is determined arbitrarily, by the length of a rope. In the end, twice as many Moabites are dead as alive. Those who managed to survive are left in awe that this "lord" permitted it. In this way David commands their allegiance for their remaining days. Such servants often end up as mercenaries of the worst kind, carrying out the dirty work of kings and commanders.

Here then we find the strange juxtaposition of holy devotion inside the temple and random violence on the battlefield—holy piety, coupled with unrestrained, humiliating, abusive emotions, practically verging on the demonic. As happens with many of the ambiguities in life, we are left a little dazed as to how to put these things together.

When the narrator says: "David made a name" (a direct link with the promise in chapter 7, but with the subject changed), we are left to wonder. Yes, David made a name. But was that the result of the pure gift of God, or was some of it of David's own making? In the euphoria of success, it is easy to become detached from God and seek to make our own name.

In summary, we see three themes to David's international conquests: First, David is taken to new heights of success never before achieved in Israel; second, the narrator emphatically declares that the basis of David's success was God's grace; but third, the impact of such success was a mixed bag in David's soul. Holy devotions coupled with abrasive emotions.

Stepping back from the world of international affairs now, the narrator grants a view inside of the kingdom, and how David's success was received at home.

IV. The Aftermath of Success at Home (8:15-18)

So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and righteousness for all his people. And Joab the son of Zeruiah was over the army, and Jehoshaphat the son of Ahilud was recorder. And Zadok the son of Ahitub and Ahimelech the son of Abiathar were priests, and Seraiah was secretary. And Benaiah the son of Jehoiada was over the Cherethites and the Pelethites; and David's sons were priests.

"The successful conclusion to military violence abroad culminates in harmony at home created by so righteous a king."³ ("David administered justice and righteousness for all his people")... 'Justice' and 'righteousness' "stand next to one other twenty-seven times in the Bible." Here it "ensures that David is permanently occupied with this quality."⁴ Here is a reign that is well oiled. Everything is orchestrated to a tee, listing the highest ranking army officers, government officials, civil servants, to priests. "Now that everything is in order, at home and abroad, it seems as if heaven on earth has broken loose. Where to now? What more is there to experience?"⁵

David has it all. Or does he? There is a price to pay for all that administration and machinery: the king be-

comes detached from the people. In the very last line in the story, the narrator places "a stick of dynamite"⁶ under David's perfect world:

And the sons of David were *priests*.

"This is such a difficult thought that the translators of the LXX and other Aramaic versions stretched the meaning of the word priest to be 'administrators of the royal estates.' But this is the same word in verse 17, and carefully placed outside the circle of priests. But it may be that, in light of their father's success, the sons themselves usurped the office of the priesthood, and their father did nothing to correct them (just as Absalom and Adonijah usurp the office of king later). In that case the episode provides a sequel to the corruption of Eli's sons and Samuel's sons earlier in Samuel."⁷

David's immeasurable success has left him detached from his own sons. They love daddy, they respect him, but most of all they want to be like him, so they imitate him. Unfortunately, the father has not been home to teach his sons that the way to glory is the way of the wilderness, brokenness and prayer. Instead, surrounded by success and power, the sons grab some of it for themselves and usurp the holy priesthood. Through these sons the whole kingdom disintegrates, and David spends the rest of his life trying to recover what he had lost.

How successful do you want to be? Do you want to be world renowned? A millionaire? Perhaps God will grant you your dream. But be warned. Success may detach you from God and the ones you love the most, and you could lose everything.

For the past several years I have enjoyed coaching the girls softball team at our high school. Each year I found to my joy that I was experiencing greater and greater influence among the girls. This year was especially rewarding because we had four Christians on the coaching staff. But this spring, after five years, I found that I was becoming detached from my two daughters who are still living at home. I was drifting from their world. I discovered that I cannot do all the things I want to do in life. At the team party yesterday, I tendered my resignation as coach. I do not want to have influence but lose my children in the process. God told me to go home. There is much that is of value in staying home. For one thing, you will never be mistaken for God in your own home!

A number of weeks after the brother who asked the question: "Can we have it all?" and he had taken a step or two down that road, he said, emphatically: "You can't have it all." Perhaps that is why, when we come to the New Testament, there is only one King left in the story, and he is crucified.

1. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel, Vol. III, Throne and City* (Assen: Van Gorcum 1986), 257. I have been greatly helped by Fokkelman for many of my observations.

2. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 259.

3. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 261.

4. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 262.

5. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 262.

2. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 262.

7. Fokkelman, *Throne and City*, 262.

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