

Two Great Tests

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[0 : 0 0] And we're going to think this morning about the two great tests that we find here in our chapter, two tests that you and I will face repeatedly in our own lives, tests that will reveal a lot about ourselves, about our hearts, about our relationship with God. These tests that may come sneak up on us by surprise. Just like this raiding party that came to Ziklag, we may find ourselves all of a sudden in the heat of testing where our very foundations are shaken. One of these tests, we will see, comes connected with our pains, but one comes connected to our pleasures. David and his men in the course of this chapter, they face these two tests. And while David's men fail, not just once but twice, we see David, God's chosen king, who passes the test.

So today we need to think about what are these tests? How does David pass the tests? And how can we? So what are these tests? There are two. The first is the test of suffering. And it's here in the first six verses. Just to catch us up to speed with David's story so far, a number of months ago, he was anointed to be the next king of Israel. He has won a great victory over the giant Goliath and over the Philistines. But then he finds himself being hotly pursued by his own king, King Saul, because of jealousy. In chapter 27, things are so tough for David that he actually runs to the king of the Philistines, discovering that it's safer to live with an enemy rather than to be near to King Saul.

In chapter 29, just before the one that we read, the Philistines were going to line up in battle against Israel. And some of the king of Philistines' men said, we're not taking David with us.

And so he is spared from having to fight his own people. And he's sent back to Ziklag, interestingly, a city that was given to him by the king of the Philistines. Okay, so that's where we are.

And then we get to chapter 30. And in verses 1 and 2, did you notice that our narrator, the storyteller, he prepares us for what's coming? There are things that we learn that David doesn't know. So we learn, whodunit. We know that the Amalekites have come and they've raided and burned Ziklag. We also know what has happened. We know that all the women and children have been taken, but none have been killed. So we know that there is hope. But David and his troops, they don't have access to that information. So what happens is they make this 60-mile hike towards Ziklag, and they are confronted in verses 3 and 4 with destruction and distress.

[3 : 1 7] They found the city destroyed by fire, their wives and sons and daughters taken captive. So David and his men wept aloud, warriors weeping on the streets with the smell of the burned-out buildings confronted by empty homes and empty beds. Everything is destruction and distress. Here is an extreme test of suffering.

But it's true to say whenever we experience a measure of pain and grief, setback or disappointment, some form of difficulty, we may find ourselves here. How will I face this? Where am I going to find hope? How will faith help me in this moment? We see two responses to the test of suffering here in verse 6. If you look there with me, David's men. We discover David was greatly distressed because here's how his men respond. The men were talking of stoning him because their spirits are bitter.

They're ready to stone the Lord's anointed. They have bravely followed David for months. They've been with him at his side, but now they turn on their leader because their spirits have become bitter.

It reminds us that when the test of suffering comes, we have to think, will I turn to God and to God's King, will I turn from God or even turn on God in bitterness? Remember the parable that Jesus told in Matthew 13 of the man who went out to sow some seed? And when the seed fell on the rocky soil, the seed of God's Word had no root. So when trouble or persecution comes, those people fall away.

Suffering can reveal bitterness in our hearts. In Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, we meet many hobbits.

[5 : 36] One of those hobbits is Mary. At one point in the story, Mary finds himself near to death. He is being exposed to the black breath of the ringwraiths, and he lies unconscious in the houses of healing. And his friend Pippin anxiously waits by his bedside. But then King Aragorn comes to the houses of healing, and he encourages Pippin. He says this of Mary, his grief he will not forget, but it will not darken his heart. It will teach him wisdom. What we see from David's men is that their grief darkened their hearts. And maybe we recognize something of that in our own experience. Panic and terror, darkness. Perhaps we turn inwards. Perhaps we lose hope. Perhaps we look around for someone to blame. We know that Jesus said, in this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have overcome the world. But sometimes when suffering comes, we can't hear that, we can't believe it, and we lose hope. David is different. How does David show wisdom in the test of suffering? Look with me at verse 6, the last sentence, but, here's the difference, but David found strength in the Lord his God. So remember, David the king, he's not immune.

He has the same suffering. It's his city that is burning. It's his wives, his family that have been captured. The same physical, emotional griefs belong to him, but David found strength in the Lord his God. It's a lovely phrase. It's not the first time that we come across this phrase in 1 Samuel. In 1 Samuel chapter 23, we meet it for the first time. David has been on the run from Saul, and Jonathan, King Saul's son, risking everything, comes to David, and it says there in chapter 23 that Jonathan helped David find strength in the Lord. What did that look like? How did this take place? And if we can learn this, then we learn important truths for ourselves, but we also learn something important about Christian friendship when others are struggling and suffering. Because what we discover in chapter 23 is that Jonathan directed David to God's word of promise, which for David meant, remember, remember, David, you certainly will be king. Jonathan invited David to trust in God's mercy and God's faithfulness. Your enemies, they will not succeed. God will look after you.

And so strength for David is found in trusting in God's word of promise. Charles Spurgeon, the famous 19th century preacher down in London, said that believers are to claim God's promises, and not only that, we are to learn to find just the right promise to suit a particular occasion. It speaks to us of the value of knowing and meditating on the word of God.

Now, it's like going to the chemist or going to the doctor when there is something wrong with us. We need just the right medicine. We need just the right prescription.

As Christians, when we have a wounded heart, when we know suffering in our lives, what is it that we need? We need the medicine of the gospel.

[9 : 32] We need to have in front of us the glory of Christ Jesus, our great King, to recognize the beauty and the power of His saving love, to understand the reality of His steadfast love, to understand that He is present with us always, and that His power is for us.

We need the promise of the gospel. We need the promises of God's word for that first test, the test of suffering. Now, we need to think about the second test. It's very different. It's the test of success.

But before we get to the test itself, we need to notice some details in the story. So, as the story begins, it continues, having found strength in the Lord his God.

What's the next thing that David does? Verse 7 and 8, David goes to God in prayer. David said to Abiathar, bring the ephod. And David inquired of the Lord, shall I pursue? Will I overtake?

And the Lord promises success. What does David do in this crisis? He takes the crisis, he takes his cries to his God and Father. And he receives this answer. And it will be God's word that directs his steps and his actions. It's God's word that directs his response to the suffering.

[11 : 13] And it's wonderful to think of the way God directed. You know, David didn't know who was responsible. He didn't know, should I go north, south, east, or west? But God directed his steps.

That takes us to the pursuit. Having seen David's prayer, then from verse 9 to 16, we have the pursuit. And I think it's important for us as we consider the pursuit, just to think about the two different exhausted groups that we meet here. So, in verse 10, we find that 200 of David's men were too exhausted to cross the valley. Some ways that's no surprise when you think about their physical, all that they've had to do physically with the big hike, all that they've experienced emotionally, seeing their city destroyed, their families gone. So, 200 are too exhausted and they're left behind. But they'll return to our story. But then in verse 11, there's another exhausted man, there's an Egyptian who had been the slave of an Amalekite who was abandoned because he was ill. And think again about the providence of God directing David and the 400 to meet this one guy in the middle of nowhere. God's in charge. And this man gives directions because he was part of the raiding party. But you know, before we move from this, just to recognize the contrast that our storyteller draws, did you notice how cruel his Amalekite master was?

This man got sick. So, he's abandoned. He's thrown over. He's good for nothing. But how does David treat him? He shows care, doesn't he? He gives him food. He gives him water.

He wants his strength to be restored. Remember, Samuel is pointing us towards the king that God's people need. We need this kind of king. We need Jesus, a good and gracious king.

So, we've seen the prayer, and then there's the pursuit, and then there's the plunder. In verse 16, there's the party of the Amalekites because of the great amount of plunder. But then verses 17 to 20, the attention shifts. Now, if this was a movie, if this was being recorded as a movie, you can imagine the director changing his camera from being wide-angle to see the Amalekite troops spread across the fields or the wide angle of David and his 400 men. Now, we've got a close-up. Now, attention is drawn on one man. And who's at the center of the story? It's David. Listen to how our author does it.

[14 : 15] Verse 17, David fought them from dusk until the evening of the next day. Verse 18, David recovered everything the Amalekites had taken. End of verse 19, David brought everything back so that by the end, his men are saying, this is David's plunder. The spoils of war, it's because of David.

David, they're not wanting to throw stones anymore. They want to throw a party because they've known success. And this brings us to test two, the test of success, because we need to think, what will it do to David? What will it do to his men? What will it do to their heads and to their hearts?

Before we get to their response, maybe just to remind ourselves of a proverb, Proverbs chapter 30. The wisdom of the author says, give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.

Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, who is the Lord? Or I may become poor and steal and so dishonor the name of my God. In that proverb, the author is saying, suffering can be bad for my faith. It can make me dishonor God, but so too can success because it can make me forget God.

Remember the warning that God gave to the nation of Israel after rescuing them from Egypt where they'd been slaves, taking them to meet with him at Mount Sinai, and then promising to settle them in the promised land. He said to them, listen, when you are living in peace and plenty, when you're enjoying the good life that I promised you in the promised land, beware of pride. I'm saying, I did this.

[16:16] We are the people, we deserve this. The danger that comes with success. Look at David's men, and we see the danger so clearly. Verse 21, and we got David coming back with the 400, back to those 200. They'd been so exhausted, so they had to stay on the other side.

David asked them how they were. David's a caring king. But all the evil men and troublemakers among David's followers said, because they did not go out with us, we will not share with them the plunder.

We recovered. However, each man may take his wife and children and go. What do we see in their hearts? We see greed. We won't share. We see pride. Now they're no longer saying, this is David's plunder.

They're saying, this is the plunder we recovered. And they're dismissive of their brothers. They'd fought side by side by side. But now it's like, take your family and go. We don't need you. Success had tested them, and they failed the test. Compare their response again with that of David, the anointed king.

Verse 23, he honors the Lord. No, my brothers, you must not do that with what the Lord has given us. He has protected us. He has delivered into our hands. He's not full of pride. He gives glory to God.

[17:51] He shows grace as well. He says in verse 24, the share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. Everyone gets an equal portion. This king wants to be generous with what he has. Remember Jesus' parable of the workers in the vineyards, the guys that worked in the heat of the day, all day. And then with just a few minutes to go before knocking off time, some other guys are employed to come and to work. And the owner of the vineyard at the end of the day deliberately pays the guys that just worked a little first and pays them the same.

And when the grumbling comes, don't I have the right to be generous, to show grace with what is mine? And we see how David practices generosity in the rest of the verse, because he sent some of the plunder to the elders of Judah. Here is a gift for you from the plunder of the Lord's enemies. He doesn't hoard it for himself. He spreads the joy of victory far and wide. For the king after God's own heart, what we see is generous grace and not greed. For the anointed king, it's mercy on display and not malice. What's the difference? How does this happen? It's because David found strength in the Lord.

David had his eyes firmly fixed on the Lord. He won't take the spotlight. Success won't change him, and he will deliberately point his men away from himself and towards the Lord as God.

Since we are in Olympic season, it seems very fitting to talk about Eric Liddell. You've probably noticed even in the coverage from the BBC, there's lots of connections with 1924 when the winners get their medals. They also get a poster with a retro 1924 theme to it. But the 1924 Olympics are sometimes known as the Eric Liddell Games. His story has become so famous, and there's loads of podcasts and people who are writing books and articles about Eric Liddell, who famously wouldn't run the 100 meters on a Sunday because he wanted to honor God rather than to have sporting success. But who then ran the 400 meters, never really ran it. He won the gold and broke the world record. Did success go to his head?

As the world watched with a sense of wonder at Eric Liddell, success didn't go to his head. He was a Christian man, and he would leave that success behind and do so gladly to spend the rest of his life sharing the good news of Jesus in a Christian war camp, sharing the good news of Jesus with boys and girls. And it's amazing to read testimonies of how his Bible teaching, how his singing of psalms and hymns of how his godly lifestyle had a huge influence on so many children in that camp. He was described by one child as Jesus with running shoes on. He found strength in Jesus as Lord. So Eric Liddell was able to face the test of success and the test of suffering in a war camp, doing both looking to Jesus, finding strength in his Lord. It takes us to the last thing, the last question to ask ourselves, how can we pass the test?

[21 : 47] So we've seen in this chapter that on these occasions, David, the future king, represented a model of true faith. But to know the story of David, the king after God's own heart, is to know that he was not perfect. There would be a time when success in his story led to ease and leisure, which led in its own way to adultery and then arranged murder. For you and I, when suffering comes our way, when success comes our way, we need to understand that we are being tested. Will I turn to God? Can I be thankful even in this circumstances? Will my heart show pride or humble trust? Will it be bitterness or contentment that controls me? And truth be told, and our own experience I'm sure probably tells us that you and I can never perfectly pass these tests. We can never be obedient enough. We can never pursue God's glory enough. There will be points where we will and we do fail these tests. So then where does our hope apply? Well, we have this wonderful clue from our chapter? We need to look to the king. Not King David, but to the true and greater king, to Jesus, God's anointed king, who passes every test in which we fail, the king who shares his grace and his victory with us. It is remarkable to recognize that Jesus is the son of God, the king of glory, and yet he is also described as the suffering servant.

No one understands the depth of destruction like Jesus. Jesus, the creator who came into his creation, who saw a world and saw image bearers being ruined, defaced, destroyed by sin. Jesus who wept in the face of death and unbelief. Jesus whose own body would be torn apart in order for him to save a people for himself.

Knowing your distress like Jesus, the suffering servant rejected by those he came to save, abandoned in a time of great need by his friends, betrayed by one of his inner circle, suffering the agony of a Roman cross, and in the depth of his distress, crying, my God, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Jesus knew the distress of bearing our sin, of experiencing hell on earth as the only way to save us. And all the while, Jesus found strength in the Lord, his father in heaven. To read the gospels, it is to meet Jesus, the man of prayer, who prayed often to enjoy his relationship with his father, and in those crucial times of temptation and testing and trial. We discover in the gospel, Jesus, a son perfectly committed to his father's glory, leading him ultimately to go to the cross as God's way of salvation. He is the savior who entrusted himself into his father's hands. Into your hands, I commit my spirit, confident in his victory, confident in the promise of resurrection life. Jesus, who for the joy set before him, endured the cross and scorned its shame. Because Jesus came on a mission. Jesus is the king who came to lovingly pursue his bride, the church. From heaven he came and sought her. He took on our debts. He paid the price in full, and all his riches are given to us, and we are redeemed. We are rescued.

We are ransomed by his blood. Jesus is the king who defeats and plunders his enemies. Those enemies, the dark spiritual forces, Satan, sin, and death, defeated by the cross and the resurrection. The spoils of war for Jesus are his own people, taken from the kingdom of darkness, brought into the kingdom of light. Because Jesus died and rose again. The Olympics has some amazing comeback stories. This week's had some wonderful stories. The puncture and the BMX, the downhill biking on the Monday, Alex Yee and the triathlon on Thursday, if you've been watching. There is no comeback story we will ever witness, like the comeback of Christ Jesus. He came back from death to eternal life to take the throne of heaven, the conquering Savior King who will come back one day to make everything new, to live with his people forever. Jesus is the king who graciously shares his victory with his people. Without him, there is no way we can, we ever will, pass God's test.

The test of suffering, the test of success, we will fail. But by his grace, his perfect record is credited to us. We are forgiven of our failures. We enjoy life with our good and gracious king.

[28 : 26] And when those tests come again, because they will, we find strength in our Lord. We look to him as the one who supplies grace to us, who invites us to look to him, to rest in him, to trust in God's word of promise, to lean in by prayer that he would be our strength as the Lord's, our God. In the two great tests of life, we must trust Jesus. We must keep his victory central to our lives, to our story. We must look to him and to his strength always. Let's pray for help to do that.

Lord, peace of prayer. Let's pray for help, so thank you, everybody.

Let's pray for help. Please pray for help. Thank you for coming. Oh, thank you, everybody.