

The Strength of the Wise

2 Samuel 5:17-25

After a game, a club member says to his friend, "I'm not about to play golf with him anymore. He cheats."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, he found his lost ball two feet from the green."

"That's possible."

"Not when I had it in my pocket!"

Even friendly rivalries can get ugly. There was nothing friendly about the ancient rivalry between Israel and the Philistines. The Israelites had gone back and forth with their old nemeses since the days of Joshua, but for the last few decades, the Philistines had gained an upper hand. They must have watched events in Israel with glee as JEHOVAH's nation seemed to be imploding.

When God announced that his line would no longer wear the crown, Saul spent the rest of his days seeking to undo what God had decreed by attempting to kill the future king God had chosen to replace him. That future king was David. After Saul's death, David's home-tribe of Judah crowned him their king, while the remaining tribes recognized Ish-bosheth, the pitifully weak son of Saul. A bloody civil war ensued as the house of Saul sought to hold onto power.

While Israel was engaged in civil war, the Philistines became the strongest presence in the land. Many historians suggest that the various tribes of Israel, including David's kingdom of Judah, were paying tribute to the Philistines. Then, one day, the Philistines received discomfoting news. Israel had been reunited under one king, David. They knew this David. As a young man, he had slain their great champion, Goliath. The Philistines saw that a new day was dawning in Israel. It was in their interest to destroy David before he could firmly establish his throne.

David had finally ascended to the throne, but as many have experienced, sometimes, the greatest tests of our lives come right on the heels of our great personal moments. The Philistines were determined to not allow David and his administration to hit the ground running. They gathered to destroy David. Let us explore together David's wisdom in addressing this threat.

I. Wisdom Seeks the Guidance of God (17-19a)

¹⁷When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king over Israel, they went up in full force to search for him, but David heard about it and went down to the stronghold. ¹⁸Now the Philistines had come and spread out in the Valley of Rephaim; ¹⁹so David inquired of the LORD, "Shall I go and attack the Philistines? Will you hand them over to me?"

When David heard that the Philistines were out to get him, he went "down to the stronghold." Last week's text was an overview of several years of David's reign, which means that we do not know exactly where these conflicts with the Philistines fall. If they occur after David took Jerusalem from the Jebusites as a capital city, his stronghold would be the newly-captured citadel of Zion. If they occur before he took Jerusalem, his stronghold would be some spot in the wilderness from his days of hiding in caves. I believe the latter is the case. In biblical geography, "up and down" means "up and down," not "north and south." A trip to Jerusalem was never down from anywhere in Israel, and the citadel of Zion was elevated above the rest of Jerusalem.

A. David Had Many Incentives Not to Pray

Based on the recorded number of fighting men that joined David in the years leading up to the uniting of the nation, he had an army of over 300,000. He was a proven leader and a survivor. If there was anyone in Israel with the courage, resourcefulness, political savvy and force of will to lead the nation against her enemies, it was David. Besides, it was the right thing to do. God had given this land to His people and told them to drive out its inhabitants. It was a scandal that a wicked people like the Philistines should wield any power over the people of God. It was the most obvious fight in the world ... but David hesitated long enough to inquire of the LORD.

People of strong will, great intellect and remarkable giftedness, who fail to understand their utter dependency on God, turn out to be not all that strong, not all that bright and not all that gifted after all. The biblical definition of a fool has nothing to do with I.Q. or S.A.T. scores. It has to do with one's sense of God. If a life is lived as though God is either not there or not paying attention, such a life is lived foolishly. To a church bitterly torn over sophisticated issues such as wisdom, philosophy and rhetoric, Paul wrote to remind them that the credentials that humanity admires are not always the credentials God chooses to work out His purposes:

²⁶Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no one may boast before him. – 1 Corinthians 1:26–29

The people saw David as a giant-killer, a survivor, a warrior and a king, and he was all of those things. But, David saw himself as a man who had been sustained by the gracious hand and the sovereign purposes of God, and those virtues are why he was a useful vessel for God.

¹ Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge.

... ⁵ LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure ...

... ⁸ I have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

– Psalm 16:1, 5, 8

B. David's Inquiry of God Was Two-fold

One of the most obscure mysteries in the Old Testament is the “Urim and Thummim,” which meant “lights and perfections” and was used as by the high priest to determine God's will in important matters. What these were precisely is never described. Perhaps, they were stones that were cast like dice. Perhaps, they were jewels that gleamed a certain way or changed colors. In any event, they were not used often, but when they were, their verdict was regarded as God's voice to the nation. This is almost certainly how David posed his questions to the Lord.

First, David asked, “Shall I go and attack the Philistines?” Perhaps, he was supposed to barricade himself and wait for the battle to come to him. And, if David was spending any time reflecting on the history of God with His people, it may have dawned on Him that God might have something else in mind. In days past, God drowned one enemy of His people in the sea. He sent plagues on others. He created panic in the camps of still others so that they killed each other. David wondered, “Who knows what God might have in mind this time? And the lesson in it all may just be as follows:

“When we really think about it, there are almost always enough uncertainties in the battles of our lives to justify turning to God, seeking His guidance and acknowledging our utter dependence on His grace.”

“Shall I take the fight to them?” was only the first question and it was totally independent of the second question: “Will you hand them over to me?” Grammatically, it’s easy to spot two questions, but I never appreciated them as two independent issues until I was studying them for this message. In other words, we might expect a single “Yes” or “No” to cover both questions. The risk David was taking was that the first question might be answered, “Yes, attack them,” and the second question might be answered, “No, you won’t win. You’re gonna get creamed.”

It shouldn’t surprise us that we miss the duality of David’s inquiry. We have a difficult time seeking God’s direction without expecting that it must somehow be linked to our own tangible comfort. We should train ourselves to seek God’s will - period, with none of our own strings attached. That is not the beloved message to itching ears propagated in so many churches today. It is not the message peddled by the health and prosperity crowd. But, it seems to be the message of Jesus Who told His disciples to think hard about the cost of their discipleship. And, it seems to be the message echoed by Paul who wrote, often from prison cells, things like:

... I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹²I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³I can do everything through him who gives me strength. – Philippians 4:11-13

II. Wisdom Submits to the Voice of God (19b-21)

As it turned out, the LORD’s answer to both of David’s questions was, “Yes.”

The LORD answered him, “Go, for I will surely hand the Philistines over to you.”

²⁰So David went to Baal Perazim, and there he defeated them. He said, “As waters break out, the LORD has broken out against my enemies before me.” So that place was called Baal Perazim. ²¹The Philistines abandoned their idols there, and David and his men carried them off.

A. When God Speaks, All that Remains Is to Obey

If you want to engage in a lively Bible School discussion, explore how we are to recognize God’s voice. We don’t have a priest toting Urim and Thummim on his vest. Do all things simply become clear through the Bible? Do we trust our feelings and impressions? How much weight do spiritual advisors carry? Should we dismiss anyone who claims to hear an audible voice?

The various discussions that go on and on and on about how to discern God’s will may only culminate in a big “So what?” if we are not the kind of people that will act upon whatever light God sheds. The bottom line proof of David’s courage born of faith was the fact that he did as God commanded. One of the earliest things that God will ever speak to anyone about is the sin in his or her life. Sometimes, it takes courage to abandon old patterns and to embrace new ones. When we turn a deaf ear to God in such matters are we really entitled to think that He will speak clearly to us on other matters? James wrote to believers who were being selectively obedient:

... ²³Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror ²⁴and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. – James 1:22-24

After church, as one man shook hands with the pastor, he was heard to say, "Powerful sermons, Pastor. Thoughtful, well researched. I can always see myself in them - and I want you to knock it off." When we are confronted with God's Word, and we do not make the adjustments in our lives that His Word requires, our sense of need for Him fades, even as the need itself becomes greater.

B. The Gods of the Philistines Let Them Down

The Philistines brought images of their gods along, thinking that they would help them to be victorious. Their retreat was so hasty that they ran off without gathering up their gods. The text says that "David and his men carried them off," but not to keep them as battle trophies or to melt them down for the metal. A parallel account of the story assures us that they obeyed the Law of God: "David gave orders to burn them in the fire" (1 Chronicles 14:12).

... ²⁵The images of their gods you are to burn in the fire. Do not covet the silver and gold on them, and do not take it for yourselves, or you will be ensnared by it, for it is detestable to the LORD your God. – Deuteronomy 5:25

It is not amazing that in one chapter of Israel's history, the nation could be so zealous about destroying the idols of their neighbors when, in the next generation, Israel would itself become steeped in idolatry with David's son Solomon leading the way? It is one thing to rail against the idols in the lives of others. It is quite another to identify those things in our own lives that contend with God for our affections, our trust, our loyalty, our time and our energy.

David did what he could to help his nation remember this victory. He named the place Baal Perazim, which was a way of praising God for breaking out against His enemies, another way of saying that He was greater than the gods of Israel's enemies. We pray as David prayed because we are dependent on God for the things that lay before us. We praise as David praised as a means of remembering that we are dependent on God even when no immediate crisis looms before us.

III. Wisdom Surrenders to the Ways of God (22-25)

²²Once more the Philistines came up and spread out in the Valley of Rephaim; ²³so David inquired of the LORD, and he answered, "Do not go straight up, but circle around behind them and attack them in front of the balsam trees. ²⁴As soon as you hear the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees, move quickly, because that will mean the LORD has gone out in front of you to strike the Philistine army." ²⁵So David did as the LORD commanded him, and he struck down the Philistines all the way from Gibeon to Gezer.

A. Success in One Conflict Does Not Guarantee Future Successes

Old nemeses never seem to go away just as old personal weaknesses always return to tempt us. Over time, David's kingdom would have only become stronger. When the Philistines reappeared, the king could have taken the posture, "Been there, done that." Without consulting the Lord, he could have reasoned, "This worked the last time," and attacked them head on. Perhaps, he would have beaten them again, perhaps, not. But, David was wise enough to know that just because a given method worked "then and there" was no guarantee that it would work "here and now."

It seems that seeking God's guidance is just never a bad way to go. Rather than to rely on past successes and old wineskins, David sought God, and God had something altogether new in mind. "I want you to circle around behind that grove of trees this time. When you hear 'the sound of marching in the tops of the balsam trees,' git 'em." That sound has been understood as everything from the actual sound of the enemy army to a natural breeze that blows across the land at a particular time of day to a specially manufactured miracle for the occasion. Whatever the proper interpretation, God assured David, "I am in this, and you will strike them down."

B. God's Work Must Always Be Done God's Way

The Book of Heroic Failures tells of the 1978 strike of British firefighters, when the army filled the gap for the missing firemen. One day, the replacement firefighters got a call to rescue a cat caught in a tree. The soldiers put up a ladder and retrieved the cat. The grateful lady invited them in for tea. After a pleasant visit, they said goodbye, got in the truck, and backed out - over the cat. Can such a success as that rescue mission really be called a success? Trying to do things for God using our own methods often produce successes that are something less than true successes.

One hard question we must ask ourselves when we set goals, and for that matter, churches should also ask themselves is this: "Are we determined above all to succeed, or are we determined first of all to walk in God's ways?" They are not the same proposition. If some notion that defines "success" is the prize before our eyes, we will pursue that notion and give very little attention to God's ways. But, if the prize is to do God's will in all things, then, whatever measurable successes that He blesses us with will prove authentically rewarding, for we will truly know that He willed it.

In this instance, precise obedience to God secured a greater victory than David had secured in the previous skirmish with the Philistines. This time, he struck down the Philistines from "Gibeon to Gezer," which essentially means that he drove them out of Israelite territory. Precise obedience resulted in a victory that would set the table for the next chapter when David will bring the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, a project that is only feasible because the Philistines have been cleared out of the area. However, in that same story, we shall also see that carelessness about another issue of precise obedience will result in a time of great heartache for Israel.

Oswald Chambers once said, "The majority of us do not enthrone God, we enthrone common sense. We make our decisions and then ask the real God to bless our god's decision." The greater way to wisdom is to seek Him in all things and to adjust our lives to Him when He speaks.

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