

Called to Victory

2 Samuel 1:19, 1:23-27

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[Real Audio \(2 MB\)](#)

Thomas Carlyle claimed that for every hundred people who can handle adversity, there is only one who can handle prosperity. Saul wasn't one of those of people. How about you? Can you handle prosperity?

Our text today takes us to a tired and bloody battlefield where Israel has just lost a battle at Mount Gilboa. King Saul watched as three of his sons, including Prince Jonathan, were killed at the hands of the Philistines. Seeing his defeat, and overcome with despair, Saul fell upon his own sword and died. When David received word of Israel's great loss, he lamented, "How the mighty are fallen, and the weapons of war perished."

Earlier in the story, you'll recall, Saul had it made. He was the people's choice for a king. He was head and shoulders above the rest. He was powerful and prosperous. But his life ended in despair and suicide. By contrast, when we are introduced to David, he's nothing more than a shepherd boy. He's the eighth son of an unknown father. Nothing much. But he is about to become the greatest king Israel ever had.

Why does the story take this strange turn? Because Saul defended his prosperity with weapons. These were the weapons of war, and they were the weapons by which he perished. Whereas David had only the dream God had given him -- a dream that could not be defeated.

The dream began when the old prophet Samuel whispered God's promise in the shepherd boy's ear: "Thou art the one to lead the new kingdom." As incredible and inconceivable as that sounded early on, it looked like David would pull it off. First, there was the amazing victory over Goliath. Then he was given a commission in the military and had a string of successful campaigns against Israel's enemies. Eventually, when he returned from battle with Saul, the women began to dance and sing, "Saul has killed his thousands, but David his ten thousands." Saul hated that song. David was the national hero -- the kids all wore Captain David tee shirts. He married the king's daughter, and became best friends with the king's son. David was the hottest thing in town. In 1 Samuel 18:5 we are told, "All of Israel loved David." All, that is, except Saul who had every intention and every weapon necessary to stay in power. Or so he thought.

Because of Saul's power and his terrifying weapons, David and the dream of a new kingdom had to flee from town and hide in caves. Centuries later, after this story had been told and retold, people would remember it when the infant Jesus who had been born a king had to flee before the weapons of Herod and hide in Egypt.

Weapons. We all have them and use them whenever what little prosperity we have collected gets threatened. For Saul these were the weapons of war. What about you? What do you rely on when you feel threatened? Your intellect or talent? Your family, financial reserves, or your anger? How about your ability to work hard? No longer do we strap swords by our sides. Now we prefer Palm Pilots. This is certainly my favorite weapon. They fit in your pocket right by your side, and make you feel so secure and powerful. We may as well call them sabers, because we pull them out of their sheaths and wave them at each other every time we make another appointment. The full Palm Pilot documents just how indispensable you have become. Or maybe your weapon of choice is the Rolodex, or the trust fund, or the resume that is kept current on your computer. We have such an arsenal of weapons, that sometimes we don't even know which one to grab.

One of the problems with these weapons is that if you rely on them, you'll chase David, or maybe even Jesus away. You'll chase away the great dream of a whole new kingdom in your part of the world. In God's kingdom, there is no need for weapons. In his kingdom swords are beaten into plowshares, righteousness and peace kiss, sinners are forgiven, enemies are loved, and shepherds are turned into kings. It is a

kingdom built not by our hard work, but by the presence of God among us. Saul could not defeat the dream of this coming kingdom with his weapons. Neither could Herod with his, and neither could Pilate when he used the awful weapon of a cross. They may succeed in making God's dream hide a while, but it will always rise and prevail.

Clearly the kingdom of God is hiding today in places like Palestine and Northern Ireland, Macedonia and Sudan, or our own inner city slums. It's not gone. It's there, but the weapons have sent it into hiding. It may even be hiding in your home or workplace, which is not known for its love or justice. But the Kingdom of God always rises again, and when it does, it prevails because it is God's Kingdom.

Another problem with weapons is that not only are they finally ineffective, but they also drive you crazy. It is painful to read about Saul's crazed descent from prosperity. He is so threatened that David would take it all away from him that he goes nuts trying to find him. In fact, he becomes so crazy that he destroys himself. He kills all the priests of Nob who gave David shelter, stops praying to God, and turns to the witch of Endor, and alienates his own family. Among his last recorded words, Saul tells David, "I have played the fool." That continues to be the legacy of those who live by the sword.

Tomorrow you will face people who will be coming at you with weapons a lot more dangerous than Palm Pilots. Someone may betray you at work. Someone may come at you with angry, venomous words. Some crazed gladiator may hurt you because it's the only way he or she knows how to stay alive in the arena. When you see that coming your way, the temptation to pick up Saul's weapons will be overwhelming. But you cannot fight your way into God's dreams for your life. Actually, it's impossible to hold a dream as big as the one God has for your life if your hands are already full of weapons.

David trusted the dream. More importantly, he trusted the dream-giver. He trusted God so much, that he refused to pick up a weapon against Saul. The dreams God gives you cannot be protected by the weapons of life. They are God's dreams, and God doesn't need a lot of help making them come true. He doesn't need your cunning or your politics, and he certainly doesn't need your anger. What he asks for is something much more demanding. He asks you to believe in the dream. If like David you received the dream a long time ago, it may be hard to keep believing in it. If that is your struggle, then you need to pick up, not a weapon, but more faith.

At the same time Saul was being defeated at the battle of Gilboa, David was in a town called Ziklag, facing one of the darkest days of his life. He had taken all his six hundred men into a battle. You'll recall that these men were the distressed, the indebted, and the discontented of Israel. While they were gone, the Amalakites raided Ziklag, looting and burning the town down. Then they took all of the women and children captive including David's own family. When David and his men returned to see what had happened to their homes and families, the men turned on David and wanted to stone him to death. After telling us this, the next verse of scripture is what illustrates the difference in David and Saul: "But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God."

He calls his pastor, the priest Abiathar, and together they pray to the Lord until the great dream is renewed in David's heart. This is the function of the church in your life. We are not here to peddle advice or give you religious weapons for life's battles. We are not here to tell you, "Look out for them. They are going to take something away from you." In the great tradition of the priest Abiathar, we are here to strengthen you in the unimagined dreams of God, dreams that cannot be defeated, dreams that are yours by the grace of God.

Strengthened in God's commitment to him, David pursues the Amalakites to recover the women and children. All six hundred of the men leave on the campaign, but when they get to the Brook of Besor, two hundred say they are too exhausted from the last campaign to go any further. So with only four hundred David continues, finds the Amalakites, and brings all the women and children back along with the stolen loot. When they return as far as the Brook of Besor where the other two hundred men are waiting, their wives and children rush to them in a glad reunion. But some of the four hundred, those the Bible calls "worthless men," said to David, "These who stayed behind shouldn't get any of the recovered loot."

Isn't that interesting? Having begun as the distressed, indebted, and discontented, these men have now

become somebodies by the grace of God. Now they are victorious, they are asking that everyone get only what they've earned. We hear this in the church all the time. We were nobodies when the grace of God found us, and after he starts to put the pieces of our lives back together we are so tempted to say people should only get what they deserve. But who of us can afford to say that. Thank God, you didn't get what you deserved.

In a moment of great leadership David says, "No. We are where we are by the dream of God. And central to God's dream is that we be as gracious to others as God was to us." Then he ordered that the spoils of battle be shared among all. That is how you handle prosperity. Not like Saul, by greedily clinging to what you have been given. But like David, by remembering that what you have been given was grace. As the story of Saul and David illustrates, grace has to be shared or it goes away.

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