2 Samuel 23:8-39 *Legendary: David’s Mighty Men*

***End of the Series***Today is our final sermon in a series we have called Legendary. This summer we have been looking at some heroes of the Old Testament—stand alone stories of God using ordinary people in remarkable ways. I have sometimes described this series as the B-List celebrities of the Old Testament. I have tried to stay away from the bigger names in the Old Testament—Abraham, Joseph, Noah and David—and touch on some stories that are maybe a little less known.

An exception was the first week, when we looked at Moses and the Red Sea. That was the Sunday right after Vacation Bible School, and our main story during VBS was Moses, so I thought we would kick the series off by making that connection. And another exception is this week, where we are going to look at David, who is arguably the biggest hero in the Old Testament.

I would argue, however, that the story we are going to look at today might be the least well-known of all the stories we have covered. Because even though it is about David, it isn’t a story that we hear too often. It isn’t one that makes our Sunday School curriculum or shows up in our Children’s Bibles. It’s the story of David’s Mighty Men.

And I should say, here at the beginning, that while this passage is not preached on very often, there is a somewhat famous sermon on this passage by a man named Haddon Robinson. Haddon was a teacher of preaching at Gordon-Conwell seminary who wrote one of the most important textbooks on preaching in the last 50 years. He passed away in 2017. My sermon today has been heavily influenced by Haddon Robinson’s sermon. <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2005/august/014.html>

***Campfire Stories***Our scripture passage is 2 Samuel 23, starting at verse 8. This is the end of David’s story. Most of 1 Samuel and all of 2 Samuel have centered on David. Now there is just one more chapter in 2 Samuel, and in the first 2 chapters of 1 Kings David is going to die. In fact, the beginning of our chapter begins with what are called “the last words of David,” a Psalm written by the sweet singer of Israel that does not make it into the book of Psalms (2 Samuel 23:1ff).

We’re at the point in 2 Samuel where the author is tying up loose ends. He’s fitting in some things that didn’t fit anywhere else in the story. And one of the things the author wants to do is tell us about David’s followers. David didn’t get to be king and have a long reign all by himself. Throughout his fabled reign in Israel he had advisors and fellow soldiers who distinguished themselves as heroes in their own right. They are known as David’s Mighty Warriors.

So 2 Samuel 23 is an opportunity to name these men and tell some of their stories. These are stories that didn’t quite fit into the narrative of David’s life, but deserve to be written down somewhere in the history. This chapter has the feel of old soldiers sitting around a campfire, reminiscing about things that happened back in the day.

We start with **verse 8:**

**8**These are the names of David’s mighty warriors:

Josheb-Basshebeth, a Tahkemonite, was chief of the Three; he raised his spear against eight hundred men, whom he killed in one encounter.

David’s mighty warriors. Sometimes in this chapter they will be referred to as the Thirty. You might want to think of them as David’s Knights of the Round Table. Not that there were only thirty of them, but over the course of David’s career these are the men who came alongside him to help him win the kingdom and were recognized as his elite soldiers.

Traditionally, fighting forces in that day were divided into three units—two to engage in the fighting while one was held in reserve to guard the supplies—so it makes sense that at any given time David would have had three chief officers—or champions—who were his closest military advisors.

A good example is Josheb-Basshebeth, who at one point was chief of the Three. The story told about Josheb-Basshebeth is that he once stood off against 800 men with a single spear. That’s some impressive fighting. This guy would scare Chuck Norris! **Or, again, verse 9:**

**9**Next to him was Eleazar son of Dodai the Ahohite. As one of the three mighty warriors, he was with David when they taunted the Philistines gathered at Pas Dammim for battle. Then the Israelites retreated,**10**but Eleazar stood his ground and struck down the Philistines till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword. The Lord brought about a great victory that day. The troops returned to Eleazar, but only to strip the dead.

Eleazar, the son of Dodai, once taunted the Philistines at Pas Dammim. Probably not a great idea, but he had the Israelite army to back him up. But once the Israelites caught sight of the number of Philistines, they wanted no part of the fight Eleazar was picking, so they bailed. But that didn’t stop Eleazar. He and David stood their ground and struck down so many Philistines that Eleazar’s hand cramped against his sword. When the rest of the Israelites returned to pick over the remains of the dead, they literally had to pry Eleazar’s hand from his sword.

And then there’s Shammah. **Verse 11:**

**11**Next to him was Shammah son of Agee the Hararite. When the Philistines banded together at a place where there was a field full of lentils, Israel’s troops fled from them. **12**But Shammah took his stand in the middle of the field. He defended it and struck the Philistines down, and the Lord brought about a great victory.

Shammah found himself in a field full of lentils when the Philistines attacked. Basically, he’s in a soybean field. But that field represented Israel’s food supply, and when the rest of the Israelite troops disappeared—as seems to be their custom—Shammah stood alone in that bean field and said: “Not today!” And the Philistines paid for that battle with blood. And through Shammah, God gained a great victory.

One more warrior deserves singular mention. **Skip ahead to verse 20:**

**20**Benaiah son of Jehoiada, a valiant fighter from Kabzeel, performed great exploits. He struck down Moab’s two mightiest warriors. He also went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion. **21**And he struck down a huge Egyptian. Although the Egyptian had a spear in his hand, Benaiah went against him with a club. He snatched the spear from the Egyptian’s hand and killed him with his own spear. **22**Such were the exploits of Benaiah son of Jehoiada; he too was as famous as the three mighty warriors. **23**He was held in greater honor than any of the Thirty, but he was not included among the Three. And David put him in charge of his bodyguard.

Benaiah son of Johiada. He never makes it to the Three. But he’s more famous than any of the others. His trading card was the hot ticket among Israeli youth. Not one of the king’s generals, he was put in charge of the king’s bodyguard. Head of the Secret Service. He went down into a pit on a snowy day and killed a lion. Wouldn’t you like to know the full story behind that one? He took on Egypt’s version of Goliath with just a club. A valiant fighter. Great exploits.

These are some of the men that were garnering headlines in David’s day. This tells you something about the kind of men that were drawn to David.

It tells you something about David too. One of the tests a leader is to ask if anybody is following him. Another test of a leader is to look at the quality of the people who are following him. David is not surrounded by losers and scrubs. David is surrounded by seasoned soldiers who were deeply loyal to him.

***The Well at Bethlehem***In fact, the author of 2 Samuel wants us to know the extent of their loyalty, so he tells us a quick story that takes place early in David’s life. **Verse 13:**

**13**During harvest time, three of the thirty chief warriors came down to David at the cave of Adullam, while a band of Philistines was encamped in the Valley of Rephaim. **14**At that time David was in the stronghold, and the Philistine garrison was at Bethlehem.

This is after David has been anointed king, but before he actually takes the throne. He’s on the run from King Saul, but he also has to be aware of Israel’s traditional enemies, the Philistines. And as it happens, in the waxing and waning of war, the Philistines have occupied Bethlehem, which just happens to be David’s hometown. **Verse 15:**

**15**David longed for water and said, “Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem!”

David’s sitting around the campfire, and the soldiers are talking like they do. And the fact that he’s so close to his hometown maybe puts David in a reflective state of mind. So he starts reminiscing about the well that sits right by the gate of Bethlehem He tells stories about the hot days he spent watching his father’s sheep, and how at the end of a long hot day under the Palestinian sun, nothing was more refreshing than a drink of cold water from that well.

Do you have any childhood memories like that? For me, I think of the days I used to spend riding beans. Some of you remember that, right? Back in the days before Round-Up resistant crops farmers had to go out and eliminate weeds in their fields by hand. And one of the strategies was to stick a steel bar on the front the tractor and stick four chairs on it, and then load up a plastic tank with weed killer and put four people on it with spray guns and ride through the field and squirt every weed. We weren’t farmers, but my mom had a cousin who farmed, and every summer she and my sister and I would hire out to go ride Jim Warntje’s beans. It was hot, boring, monotonous work. And if you’d start to fall asleep—which was easy to do—suddenly Jim would stop the tractor and back up and yell at you because you were missing weeds.

But I remember break. After every couple of rounds we’d take a break and my mom would have a thermos filled with something we called Bohemian Tea. It was an Arnold Palmer, but we didn’t call it that. She made it with frozen lemonade and Lipton instant tea mix and she filled the thermos with ice cubes and so when you took a drink it was cold and sweet and refreshing. And still today, when I drink lemonade and iced tea mixed together on a hot day, it takes me back to those bean fields.

So that’s what David is doing. He’s just reminiscing. Telling stories. I don’t think he means anything by it. I don’t think he’s asking for anything.

But three of these mighty warriors are sitting there with David. And right after David tells his story about his childhood well of water, I can imagine these three stepping aside and having a little conference.

One of ‘em says: “Did you hear what the chief just said?”

The other two say: “Yep!”

“You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Yep!”

“So, when are we leaving?”

“How about right now?” **Verse 16:**

**16**So the three mighty warriors broke through the Philistine lines, drew water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem and carried it back to David.

These three guys take off like ninjas. It’s something like 7 miles from the cave of Adullum to the gate of Bethlehem, and there are a bunch of Philistines between here and there. Plus, it’s not like this well is in some back corner, it’s right by the town gate where the Philistines are in garrison. If there’s anything the Philistines are going to be paying attention to, it’s the town gate and the town water supply. But these three guys slip through the lines, sneak up to the well—I imagine two of them fighting off the Philistines while the third guy draws the water –and then, like the Three Musketeers, they fight their way all the way back to David.

Why did they do it? Loyalty. Loyalty to David. Haddon Robinson calls it loyalty taken to the high pitch of devotion.

This story says something about the kind of commitment a human leader can inspire. In fact, it’s almost kind of scary. Sometimes people will become so committed to a human leader that they will risk anything to make that leader happy. You can kind of see that here.

There’s a word for this in Hebrew. It’s a word I referenced a couple of months back when we were in Psalm 23. It’s one of the richest and most complex words in the Old Testament. It’s the word ***Chessed.*** There are something like 19 different English words that can be used to translate it.

Basically, *Chessed* is **loyal-love.** It’s loyalty taken to the high pitch of devotion. It’s the kind of loyalty a man will have to his family, or to his clan. It’s usually loyalty to someone who does not deserve it. By putting their lives on the line to get David this drink of water, these men are expressing their loyal-love towards him.

*Chessed*is the word that is used in the Old Testament to speak of God's love for us. It is loyalty to the high pitch of devotion. One of the words used to describe God’s *chessed* in the New Testament is grace. That's God's loyal love.

***Poured Out as a Drink Offering***You can imagine the scene when these guys get back to David. Sweat stained and dirty, maybe speckled with some blood from their enemies and maybe some blood of their own, they hold out the waterskin like kids who have wrapped up a present for their parents on Christmas day.

And then David does something shocking. He pours the water on the ground! The end of **verse 16:**

But he refused to drink it; instead, he poured it out before the Lord.

What’s he doing?!? How can he be so calloused? How can he be so ungrateful? Doesn’t he get what these men have done for him?

Actually, he knows. **Verse 17**:

**17**“Far be it from me, Lord, to do this!” he said. “Is it not the blood of men who went at the risk of their lives?” And David would not drink it.

Such were the exploits of the three mighty warriors.

David knows too well what these men have just done for him, the high pitch of their devotion. And his response is: “I’m not worthy of that. You men got this water by risking your lives for it. I can’t drink water like that. I’m not worthy of it.”

So he pours it out as an offering to the Lord. He’s not ungrateful. He’s certainly not disrespecting their gift. Rather, he’s giving it to God. He’s saying, truly, the only one worthy of a gift like this is the LORD. David takes the devotion that was given to him, and he gives it to God. That’s the integrity of a Christian leader.

We rarely see this kind of integrity in leadership positions today. Far too often, we see leaders who believe that this kind of devotion, this kind of sacrifice on their behalf, is their entitlement. There are far too many leaders in our world today who I could imagine, if somebody brought them water from the well in Bethlehem, would be wondering where the ice cubes are.

Haddon Robinson references a story he saw on Sixty Minutes. His sermon is several decades old, and when he references the story he says he saw it “some time ago,” but I’m afraid the situation he describes hasn’t changed much:

It was a story about alcoholism and sexual escapades in Washington. The question they raised is why is it that the alcoholism and the sexual adventures of congressmen and senators and presidents don't get reported until some scandal breaks open on the front pages of the paper.

One of the reporters interviewed said if they reported sex and alcohol in Washington, they wouldn't have room to report anything else. But then he said, "You see, when a man comes to Washington these days, he comes to his office thinking of it as a prize he has won."

Too many leaders spend so much time and effort and money trying to get into office that when they do, they stop seeing themselves as servants of the people and start thinking of ways they can benefit from getting to the top. It happens with Christians too. Too often celebrity pastors come crashing down because they act like they deserve the high pitch of devotion sometimes directed their way.

Thankfully, David doesn’t do that here. In this story, we have a picture of followers who are loyal to their leader; but more importantly, we have a picture of a leader who is loyal to his followers. We see David’s *chessed*, his loyal love. David is loyal to his followers, and loyal to God.

***Devotion Wasted***But even David fails as a leader.

There’s one more note we need to make about David’s Mighty Men, and it reads like a punch to the gut. Starting in verse 24 we are given a list of those where included among the Thirty. There are less than 30 names, so I don’t think it is supposed to be an exhaustive list, but these are some of those that were renowned in David’s army. Some of them have names you can hardly pronounce. Some of them are named only this one time in scripture. The list includes names like Abiezer from Anathoth and Ira the Ithrite. And then, the final name on the list is **Uriah the Hittite.**

And that’s the name that hits you. Why did the author have to do it that way? Why did he put that name, of all the names, last? Why does he have to spoil this walk down memory lane at the end of David’s life by dredging up that memory?

Remember what the name Uriah the Hittite means:

It was at the height of David’s fame, after the kingdom was secured and he had a palace in Jerusalem. It was the spring, the typical time of year for kings to go out and fight their wars. But while his men were on the battlefield, David was taking his leisure at home. That’s when a woman named Bathsheba caught his eye. He coveted her, committed adultery with her and then, to his dismay, learned that she was pregnant.

So then David (always the man in control) saw to it that her husband be sent back from battle with the assumption that he would jump into bed with his pretty wife and when she delivered a child some 7 or 8 months later no one would have any reason to question the child’s paternity.

The problem was, Bathsheba’s husband was Uriah the Hittite—whom we are just here learning was counted among David’s Mighty Men. He was one of the 30. And he was intensely loyal. Loyal to David, loyal to his fellow soldiers. Loyal to the high pitch of devotion.

Uriah didn’t go along with David’s scheme. He said to the king, “I can’t do it. I can’t go home. I can’t go to bed with my wife. My soldiers are still out fighting in the field. They’re living in pup tents. They’re eating C-rations. I can’t be disloyal to them. I can’t enjoy the benefits of home while they’re fighting in the field.” And so Uriah spent the entire time he was back in Jerusalem on post as a sentry at the palace. He was loyal to the cause.

And David spilled out that water of Uriah’s devotion like sewer water.

He murdered him. Sent a note with Uriah back to Joab that said “Put Uriah at the hottest point of battle, and then have everyone else retreat and leave him by himself.” That’s what happened, and Uriah and several other valiant men were needlessly killed.

It was murder. Plain and simple. Premeditated, carefully orchestrated, murder. David murdered one of his best and most loyal men.

Then Nathan came to David with that story. The story of a poor man who kept a little ewe lamb as a pet. But when his rich landlord wanted to host a special guest, just to be a jerk, he decided to take the poor man’s lamb and slaughter it for supper.

When David heard that, he was furious. After all, David was a man of integrity and fairness. When it came to rich men stealing lambs from a poor man, David had high moral standards.

Not so sensitive when it came to stealing wives.

David said, "The man who did that deserves to die. He'll pay fourfold for what he has done."

And Nathan said, "You're the man."

When Nathan leaves, David prays. You can read that prayer in Psalm 51. According to Deuteronomy 22:22, he deserves to die because of adultery. Because of Numbers 35, he deserves capital punishment for his sin of murder. And there were no sacrifices to take care of sins like that. But in **Psalm 51**, David prays:

**1**Have mercy on me, O God,  
    according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
    blot out my transgressions.

The word translated “unfailing love” is our word *chessed*. “God, have mercy on me, according to your loyal love. Your loyalty taken to the high pitch of devotion.”

Why? Why should God forgive him? Because God was loyal to David? No. God was loyal to his own mercy. God was loyal to his own love. It wasn’t because David deserved to be forgiven that God forgave him, but because of God’s commitment to be merciful and gracious.

And, in order for David’s sins to truly be blotted out, David’s greatest son Jesus was going to have to come to Bethlehem, and then He fought the hosts hell in order to draw water from the wells of salvation. That’s *chessed.*

Jesus is the ultimate leader. He’s the one leader who is truly worthy of the high pitch of devotion. Only Jesus, of all who have ever lived, would have truly deserved the gift of water from that well. And only Jesus is the kind of leader who will never let his followers down. He never treats us like David treated Uriah. He never betrays us. He never turns against us. It’s loyalty forever, the high pitch of devotion.

In fact, the truth is that this word *chessed* can only truly be used of God. He is the only one who practices perfect loyalty.

* It is the loyalty to the high pitch of devotion to the Father that leads Jesus to come to be our Savior.
* It is loyalty to the high pitch of devotion whereby Jesus gives himself, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.
* It is loyalty to the high pitch of devotion that causes Jesus to take our prayers and our gifts and our sacrifices, and offer them to the Father, as a sweet smelling offering, as a sacrifice, well pleasing to God.
* It is loyalty to the high pitch of devotion that will never fail because there are no Uriahs with God.