Stay Strong

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1 Samuel 30:1-8

Sermon Series: Life is Messy

Strength is something God gives people.

Superman was the first comic book superhero. Today, he’s something of an American icon. He was the brainchild of two Cleveland high school students in the 1930s, who sold their idea to Action Comics. Superman first made his debut in 1938.

Superman is born on planet Krypton. He is rocketed to earth as an infant to escape destruction and is found by a Kansas farm couple, who adopt him and give him the name Clark Kent. When he displays supernatural powers in his teens, his parents teach him to channel these powers into good ends. He’s reticent to display his supernatural powers, so he adopts a dual identity. He moves to Metropolis to assume the role of a newspaper reporter for the Daily Planet. When his super powers are needed, he ducks into closets and phone booths to don his trademark uniform. Boys and girls, you’ll have to ask your parents about phone booths! Superman regards it as his moral duty to fight crime and injustice. Do you recall his arch enemy? It’s the megalomaniac Lex Luthor.

Superman is legendary for his super strength. The early radio serials said of him, “Faster than a speeding bullet. More powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. Look! Up in the sky! It’s a bird. It’s a plane. It’s Superman!”

I want to think with you about another kind of strength—strength of character and heart. Strength is something God gives people.

We have reached the midway point in our sermon series on David. We’re investing considerable time in retelling David’s story. After all, David’s life story is the most extensively narrated human story in Scripture. David has sought refuge in the desert town of Ziglag to flee Saul’s jealous rage. David and his soldiers leave town on a military assignment. The Amalekites, the longtime nemesis of Israel, seize the moment to ransack Ziglag and carry away their women and children to serve as slaves.

David and company are horrified to find a virtual ghost town upon their return. These rough, tough military men are reduced to tears. Their grief soon turns to anger and finger-pointing. They lay the responsibility for leaving the town unprotected at David’s feet. They begin to discuss among themselves the prospect of stoning David.
David now finds himself embroiled in a leadership crisis. Our narrator tells us that “David strengthened himself in the Lord his God” (30:6). Hold that thought! We’ll come back to it a few moments from now.

David not only finds strength in God; he asks God for guidance about what to do next. He consults with the town priest about whether to hunt down these desert pirates. He’s told in no uncertain terms, “Go for it. You will be successful.” So, David and 600 men take off in hot pursuit. The Amalekites already have a three-day jump on them. It won’t be hard for them to disappear into the desert. David and his troops make it as far as the Besor Ravine. They’ve already logged a three-day march home to Ziglag over 50 miles of rugged terrain. They face exhaustion of another sort when they find their town decimated. And now they march another 15 miles to arrive at this ravine. No wonder some of them are dead tired. “We can’t go another step,” they tell David. “We’ve had it.”

David leaves the 200 behind with the baggage to continue the chase. They come upon a battered Egyptian. What good fortune for David and this half dead man. David’s Good Samaritan sensibilities kick in to provide for his distress. It turns out he has worked as a servant for an Amalekite ruler. What thugs, these Amalekites. When they no longer have use for someone, they leave him to die in the wilderness. The Egyptian offers to take them to the Amalekites, provided they afford him “diplomatic immunity.”

The Amalekites are having a party in the desert with the spoils from Ziglag. They’re not expecting anyone to find them in this remote location. These drunken bandits are easy prey for David’s soldiers. Our narrator is very specific to tell us that everyone who was earlier captured is accounted for. Everyone is now singing David’s praises. “This is David’s bounty,” they sing in unison.

David and his 400 fighting men rendezvous with the 200 left with the baggage. The 400 aren’t feeling particularly generous toward the 200. They want to keep the spoils for themselves. They’ve adopted the attitude, if you don’t fight, you don’t eat. To the victors go the spoils. David isn’t buying it. He delivers the following edict, “The share of the one who fights is the same as the one who stays with the gear” (30:24). (Note to self—David is starting to act like a leader).

The rationale for his edict is solidly theological, “You can’t act this way with what God gives, for he has saved us and handed over to us the raiding party that attacked us” (30:23).

I have two observations to make of this story. The first concerns David’s soldiers. David turns this ragtag assortment of malcontents and misfits
There is nothing more fickle than public opinion.
- Napoleon Bonaparte

into one lean, mean, fighting machine. He instills in them something to live for. He has become their fearless leader. Yet, how quickly things change! In the span of a few verses, they’re ready to stone David. Later, when they are successful in battle, how quickly they change their tune. David can do no wrong again.

People are fickle. There’s no other way to explain it. People can turn on you faster than a New York minute.

When the French general Napoleon Bonaparte was leading his army through Switzerland in the early 1800s, he was greeted with thunderous applause. Napoleon, however, was nonplused with the adulation. His subordinates commented, “Isn’t it great to hear the roar of the crowd and the support of the people?” Napoleon replied, “The crowd that follows me with adulation, would run with the same eagerness were I marching to the guillotine. There is nothing more fickle than public opinion.”

The English leader Oliver Cromwell said something similar. When people fawned over him for successfully taking the British throne away from King Charles to establish the Commonwealth, he remarked to a friend, “Do not trust the cheering, for those persons would shout as much if you and I were going to be hanged.”

People are fickle. One day, they’re your biggest fans. The next day, they are showing you the door. The adoring crowds who greet Jesus with “Hosanna” on their lips on Palm Sunday are the same people a few days later who cry “Crucify him.”

My second observation has to do with David as a leader. We learn a lot about people when they’re in crisis. David is confronted here with a leadership crisis. We’re told that “David is greatly distressed” (30:6). Every family, David’s included, has been taken into slavery and his soldiers hold him responsible. “Stone David,” they whisper to each other. The mood is downright mutinous. Throw David overboard.

Two chapters earlier, these exact same words are used of King Saul. The prophet Samuel, Saul’s spokesman for God, has now died. The Philistine army is poised to do serious damage. Saul says of his own predicament, “I am greatly distressed” (28:15).

Here are two leaders both in crises and both greatly distressed. Yet, consider how they approach their predicament. Saul visits a witch to summon the ghost of Samuel to tell him what to do. David strengthens himself in the Lord. The difference couldn’t be more dramatic. One seeks a medium; the other seeks God.

This is David at his best! We’re not told what he does to
find his strength in God. But one thing we know for certain: David prays. The Psalms attest to his active prayer life. Half of the Psalms are attributed to David. Consider what David prays:

“I love you, O Lord, my strength” (18:1).

“The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid” (27:1).

“The Lord gives strength to his people” (29:1).

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (46:1).

“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart” (73:26).

“Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually” (105:4).

Let me speak for a moment to those among us who are feeling depleted. Maybe today you are feeling at the end of your strength.

Well-meaning people will sometimes say when we are going through a rough patch, “Don’t worry! God won’t give you more than you can handle.” I appreciate the sentiment, but it doesn’t always ring true for me. If I am supposed to handle some affliction, why am I not doing so?

Let me set the record straight. You won’t find this platitude in the Bible. The only verse that comes close communicates a different thought, “God is faithful. He will not let us be tempted beyond what we can bear” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

If we were meant to handle everything, why on earth would we need God? David faces plenty of predicaments he can’t handle on his own. Allow me to rework the ending of this sentiment: God won’t give you more than He can handle. When life deals us more than we can handle, we rest in the confidence that God can handle it. Some things are not meant to be handled on our own—like the full weight of our sins and the prospect of death. God won’t give us more than He can bear.

God give me strength. I resonate with Phillip Brooks’ prayer, “Do not pray for easy lives; pray to be stronger people. Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers; pray for powers equal to your tasks.” God give us strength!