

The Duty & Privilege of the Christian to Himself in Times of Great Distress

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Now, have you ever wondered why the Bible, the only written revelation of the mind of God given to men, why so much of the Bible contains straightforward history and factual biography? Have you ever wondered why so much of this written revelation gives us the facts of the emergence of tribes and nations, their rise and their fall; so much history of individuals who are born, who live, who love, who marry, who fight, who war, who serve, who die, and who are buried? Have you wondered why so much of the Bible follows the track of men and women, such as Noah and Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon, Mary, Elizabeth, Ruth, Esther? Have you ever ask yourself why, of all the things we wish we could know, and which God could have told us had He given us a book that had far more of what we might call the didactic, God has given us so much history and biography? Have you ever asked the question? You say, "Well, frankly I haven't." Well, I think you ought to because so much of the Bible is indeed history. And so much of the Bible is biography. Now, the answer to that question has many facets. But suffice it to say, that among the many strands of an adequate Biblical answer to the question, "Why does the Bible contain so much history and biography?", two stand out among those many facets of the answer.

The first is this: the Bible is full of historical narrative and biographical sketches because the God of the Bible, who is the God of creation and redemption, works out His purposes of redemption and judgment in real space-time history. The Bible records a real creation by the word and power of God in Genesis 1 and 2. The Bible records a real fall when a real man named Adam and a real woman named Eve in disobedience to God ate of a real piece of fruit. It doesn't say it was an apple but a real piece of fruit. If it were an apple and had a tight skin, when Eve put her teeth into it, you could have heard the snap that you hear when you bite a nice firm Macintosh apple. And the juice would have spilled down the sides of her lips. It was a real apple. And when it says she turned and gave it to Adam, it was a real apple that had specific weight as he held it in his hand. If you put it on a scale, you would have seen how many ounces it was. And in that setting when it says God comes and says, "I'm going to enter this situation where man has defected from his allegiance to Me, aligned himself with the serpent, the devil, and I'm going to inject enmity between the woman and the serpent, between her seed and his seed," there God announces that He is the God of redemption and judgment. And in fulfillment of the seminal promise in Genesis 3:15 all the through to Revelation 22, God works out His redemption and His judgment in real space-time history, so that we would expect that this God who is working out redemption can use such terms as these that we find in Galatians 4: "But

when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law." These are events in space-time history.

And there is a second reason why we have so much history and biography, and it is this: as God is working out His purposes of redemption and judgment in human history, He's constantly illustrating the principles of His own kingdom. As that history unfolds, and we read of the events of nations, tribes, and individuals, God is illustrating again and again the principles that inhere in His gracious work and also in His work of judgment. So when we come to the New Testament, it should not surprise us to find the Lord Jesus in Matthew 24:37 and following saying this (speaking of those events surrounding His second coming in glory and in power. That's the focus in that particular part of Matthew 24. Other things are in focus in other parts):

"But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be."

What is Jesus doing? He's saying when you read the history of the people before the flood and of the flood coming suddenly in mercy to take Noah and his family on the swelling waves of the ark into safety while judging others, that illustrates a principle of God's activity in redemption and in judgment. Likewise in 1 Corinthians 10:11, after speaking of events of the children of Israel wandering through the wilderness, Paul says, "Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come." In other words, that history has relevance for the people of God in the new covenant. It contains principles of the things God is displeased with and the things He will judge, even among His people. And in that setting, fornication, idolatry, and murmuring are specifically highlighted. Or take James 5:10. James says, "Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience." You mean, when I read the history of Jeremiah and his being thrown down in a slim pit, that's not just a history of Jeremiah. It is setting forth an example to all the people of God the principles that will be operative when they seek to be faithful to God in a hostile and unbelieving world. And we could multiply passages. Why does God give us so much history and biography? Because redemption and judgment are worked out in real history. You see, Bible stories are not religious myths in which we have marvelous, wonderful spiritual meanings. Bible history is real history made of the stuff of real flesh and blood people and real trees of life and real gardens of Eden and real battles with real clashing steel and real blood. And so we should not be surprised that much of the Bible is given over to history and biography. But also, God wants His people enriched by that history and biography. We are not New Testament Christians. We are whole Bible Christians. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." Don't ever say you're a New Testament Christian. You're a whole Bible Christian if you are indeed living up to the standard of what God requires of you.

Now, why did I take 10 minutes for that rather lengthy introduction? Well, we're going to plunge into a bit of Old Testament history. And if I were preaching a series on the life of David, the first thing I would do is show you David's place in the storyline of redemption. It would be irresponsible to preach on the life of David without showing

you how he fits in the large storyline of redemption; how he fits into Genesis 3:15. And we would see the unusually strategic place that he has as God is working in history both in redemption and in judgment. But that's not my purpose this morning. But we're going to look at David under that second category of my answer of the question: why so much history and biography? For in the extensive account of the life of David, there are tremendous principles of the Christian life beautifully illustrated. Remember, to David was given the largest bulk of the inner life of the believer, as he is the sweet Psalmist of Israel. There is a richer doctrine of the Christian life found in the Psalms of David than is found anywhere else in the Word of God. And so it should not surprise us that when we read the history of David's life, God is illustrating tremendously vital principles of the Christian life through David, who is our Lord's Son, but of whom the Lord Jesus Himself was found in the line of David. And this morning we're going to look particularly at verse 6 of 1 Samuel 30. That will be the focus of our exposition where we read at the end of the verse: "...but David [strengthened] himself in the LORD his God." And we're going to examine this text under the title, "The Duty and Privilege of the Child of God in Seasons of Great Distress."

And what I want for you to note with me first of all is the historical setting of this incident in the life of David. What is the historical setting of this incident in which David strengthened himself in Jehovah his God? Well, this portion that I read in your hearing describes the most distressful period in David's life prior to his ascension to the throne in Judah. David had many distressful periods. But if you read through the book of 1 Samuel up into 2 Samuel 2 when he becomes king in Hebron over Judah, you will come to the conviction that there was no point that was lower; more intense in cumulative trials and troubles than the passage read in your hearing. He had been anointed king years before by Samuel the prophet. And for a while, he was Saul's pet in Saul's court. And David alternated between the use of his harp and his sword. And he'd go out with his sword and slay his tens of thousands. Then he'd pick up his harp and calm the evil spirit that was troubling Saul. And for a while, he was Saul's pet. By use of his sword and his harp, he endeared himself to King Saul. But after a while, the Scripture says "Saul eyed David from that day and forward." His eye became jaundiced. He looked upon David no longer as pet but threat. And in his insane jealousy, he looked upon David as his greatest enemy. Then for chapter after chapter in 1 Samuel--and many Psalms were composed in this period--David is chased around Judea like a Kerr dog; like a fugitive from the law. He's found in caves and out in the open air, driven away from all the society to which his soul was so sensitive and accustomed until we find here in this section in chapter 27, David reaches a low point where in his despair, he forgets the promise of God; he falls into a period of unbelief and says in verses 1-4,

"And David said in his heart, I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul [He forgot the anointing by Samuel; he forgot the promise of God's ultimate purpose which had bolstered his soul through many a dark night and many a weary day. He says, 'I've had it. Saul's going to get me.' And notice what he does]: there is nothing better for me than that I should speedily escape into the land of the Philistines; and Saul shall despair of me, to seek me any more in any coast of Israel: so shall I escape out of his hand. And David arose, and he passed over with the six hundred men that were with him unto Achish, the son of Maach, king of Gath. And David dwelt with Achish at Gath, he and his men, every man with his household, even David with his two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the Carmelitess, Nabal's wife.

And it was told Saul that David was fled to Gath: and he sought no more again for him."

Think of it, David goes into the very association of the great enemies of God. Remember the giant, kids? He was Goliath the Philistine, the uncircumcised Philistine. David says the only safe place now is to make camp among the enemies of God. And he does. And if you read the subsequent history, you find that God gave him favor with Achish. Achish gives him a town of his own in which to dwell with his 600 men, a town in which his wives and the children of his fellow warriors will be safe. And in that town, David does some very questionable things. You remember that he engaged in commando raids and was wiping out Philistines, the enemies of God, to the south of him, and Achish didn't know it. And then the time came when one of the five great kings of the Philistines gets together with his buddies, and their going to have a massive military endeavor that involves all of the Philistines--this is recorded in chapter 29. And when they get together, David, who had become sort of the personal body guard of Achish, is with him. And these other characters see David and say, "No way, Jose. This guy is a Hebrew. And if we get into a battle with the Hebrews, he's going to turn coat. And he's going to turn on us. We don't want him." And so in a spirit of reluctance, Achish says, "David, I'm sorry, I still love you, and I still respect you, but you've got to go home." So there's a there's a three-day journey between the mustering of all the armies and the town of Ziklag where David had left his wives, and the other warriors had left wives and children. And now that's the background to our passage. That's a broad overview.

Having looked at the historical setting of this incident in the life of David, notice with me now the immediate situation described in verses 1-3 of chapter 30:

"And it came to pass, when David and his men were come to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had invaded the south, and Ziklag, and smitten Ziklag, and burned it with fire; and had taken the women captives, that were therein: they slew not any, either great or small, but carried them away, and went on their way. So David and his men came to the city, and, behold, it was burned with fire; and their wives, and their sons, and their daughters, were taken captives."

This was like Atlanta after Sherman and his troops went through in the Civil War. It was a scorch and level operation. Now, put yourself in the mindset of David and his men. You thought you were going off to war. You hugged your wives and your children. And you go off at the rearguard of Achish and his army, and you're told you're not wanted. You've got to go home to wife and children. And thinking of what it's like when you're away on a business trip--and some of you have been away on military expeditions--the moment you know home is in your crosshairs, all of the excitement you live in your own mind's eye as I have done dozens of times over the years. What will my wife's face look like when I see her after a time away? How will the children greet me as they jump up into my arms? These were real men, dear people. Don't read this stuff as though they were wooden soldiers and drugstore Indians. They had real feelings, real emotions, real passions. Men envisioning themselves embracing their wives and hugging their children. And as they begin to draw near to the city, they begin to see the curl of smoke. And their noses pick up an acrid, pungent smell. Then they move from a brisk walk to a breakneck run. And they come to the gate, and they look and see their city is nothing but a pile of charred rubble. "Where are my kids? Where is my wife?" Can you feel something of this, folks? The Holy Spirit has described this for us. "Behold, it was burned with fire; and

their wives, and their sons, and their daughters, were taken captives." What happens when women and children are taken captive in war? Rape, brutality, slavery! Can you be one of these warriors envisioning your wife being molested, gang-raped by soldiers; your children being put in shackles? That's the situation. There's the picture, the immediate situation described: smoldering embers, the desolation, and the mocking silence of a burnt and empty town.

Now, what was the combined reaction? We've look at the immediate situation described. What was the combined reaction as it is depicted in verses 4-6a? "Then David and the people that were with him lifted up their voice and wept, until they had no more power to weep." Now, here are 600 soldiers who can in the thick of battle hour after hour exert the power of arm and shoulder as they clash against the enemy. Think of these Hebrews with their unfettered emotional expression, weeping so hard until they're utterly exhausted and the fountain of tears is dried up. That's what the text says. It wasn't internal, silent grief. The text says, "David and the people that were with him lifted up their voice and wept." They sobbed and wailed. This was the wailing wall created long before it was raised up there in modern Palestine. They wept; they wailed until the fountain of their tears were dried. And they had no more strength even to convulse with sobbing and the brokenness of their heart.

"And David's two wives were taken captives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess, and Abigail the wife of Nabal the Carmelite. And David was greatly distressed...(vv. 5-6a)." Sometimes you have to use a couple of English words to translate one Hebrew or Greek word, but here you have two words in the Hebrew. The one intensive: "David was greatly distressed." And this word "distressed" has the idea of pressure much like the Greek word "lypethis" (to pressure, to compress). David was greatly pressured/pressed in by the reality of these circumstances. He looks about him and sees the charred city. He knows that his wives have been taken captive. And then added to that pressure is what we read in the middle part of the verse: "...for the people spake of stoning him, because the soul of all the people was grieved, every man for his sons and for his daughters." Here is David. He has sobbed his eyes out. And with his fellow soldiers, he can sob no more. The Holy Spirit underscores that apparently at this time the realization: "My two wives have been taken captive." And as he looks around at his men, he notices that the eyes of some of them are darting around, and they seemed to land on any stone that is big enough to be picked up and kill a man. And then he sees their eyes go from the stones to him. And David realizes that these people now when they whisper, they're not whispering, "Hey guys, what can we do to go get our wives and our kids?" They're whispering, "Let's get him." That's what the text says: "...the people spake of stoning him." Think of it. These men who owed their lives to David's leadership are now so vexed and frustrated by this set of circumstances, they don't turn on God and curse Him; they turn on their appointed leader and say, "Let's get rid of him. Let's kill him."

Now, if ever there was a time when dejection, depression, and despair were legitimate, you've got it right here. David's wives are gone. The people have turned against him. And some of them were scoundrels. You read on in this chapter in another incident with this same group of men: "Then answered all the wicked men and men of Belial, of those that went with David...(v. 22)." He didn't have a crack troop of honorable men. Some of them were a bunch of scoundrels. That's what the text tells us. And in another situation, they showed their scoundrel-like heart. Maybe they were the ones who turned on David. We don't know. But this much we know, that in this situation of great distress--look at what our text says David did: "...but

[contrary to all natural expectation; contrary to everything we would excuse in a good man in these circumstances] David encouraged himself in the LORD his God." That's why I've given as title to our sermon this morning, "The Duty and the Privilege of Every Child of God in a Period of Great Distress." What is it? To do precisely what David did. To strengthen yourself in Jehovah your God. Now I want to unpack the text under four heads.

First of all, it was a conscious deliberate activity of the man David. Look at what the text says: "...but David strengthened himself." Now, some of you kids who are learning to break down the sentence, the subject of the sentence is "David." The verb is "strengthened." The object is "himself." It is not a passive construction, "David was strengthened," and we have to supply the agent (God, his men, the beautiful scenery, or the birds chirping in the sky). It doesn't say that David was strengthened in the Lord or that someone strengthened David in the Lord. This was a conscious deliberate activity of the man David. David did something. In the midst of this grief; in the midst of this crushing pressure, great distress, David did something. He wasn't paralyzed by his circumstances. He did something. David did it. He consciously, deliberately engaged in an activity. He didn't let his circumstances dictate to him; he dictated to his circumstances. He determined that looking straight in the eyeball of every real circumstance that said, "David, you've had it. You ought to curse God and die." He looked straight through the circumstances to the realities of the unseen world, and he strengthened himself in God. Now, why do I press the fact that it was a conscious, deliberate activity of the man David? Because David said to himself, "I will act and not be acted upon." And if you and I don't learn that lesson, we'll be bullied by our circumstances till we go to our grave and never come to any spiritual stability. We as a church have come into our greatest period of corporate distress in our 31 years of history. That's a fact. But it is not a fact that the circumstances dictate to us what we shall be or do. There are bigger realities than those circumstances. I'm not angry if my eyes pop out. I'm just excited. You'll have to forgive me. When I get excited my eyes pop out. The truth of this, dear people, you don't lie down and let your circumstances bury you in despair, despondency, dejection, and unbelief. You look through them to realities that will result as it did with David till you strengthen yourself in the Lord. It was a conscious, deliberate activity of the man David.

Secondly, it was an activity that was focused upon Jehovah. Look at the text: "David [strengthened] himself in the LORD his God." It doesn't say he strengthened himself in himself. Don't you get nauseous with all of this chuck yourself under the chin "You can do all you want to do, and you can be all your want to be"? What a bunch of nonsense. When I hear this "You can be anything you want to be," well, you know, there are many times I look out my picture window in my study and I see those carefree birds (and we've got about ten different kinds of birds in our backyard), I say, "Man it must be nice to jump off a limb, flap your wings and catch an updraft." I'd like to be a bird. But the day I think I can be anything I want to be and jump out my study window, you're going to be visiting me in the hospital or in the morgue. I can't be anything I want to be. That's nonsense, and yet that's being pummeled into this generation of self-actualization and self-realization and self-expression. Thank God, David knew nothing of that heresy. It doesn't say he strengthened himself in himself. Nor does it say he strengthened himself in his 600 warriors. At this point, it wasn't much comfort. They were looking at stones. I'm not going to look for help from people who are picking up stones to kill me. It doesn't say he looked forward in the hope of better days. No, he looked not to himself, to others, to circumstances. It says he strengthened himself in the things pertaining to Jehovah. Now, what did that mean?

Well, if you want the lifetime commentary on it, just live in the Psalms, because in the Psalms, we have David's own inspired commentary on what it means to strengthen oneself in Jehovah. And time after time in the various Psalms written in this very period of David's life, what does he do that constitutes strengthening himself in Jehovah? Well, let me just throw out several heads and a couple of illustrations as seminal thoughts.

He first of reminds himself of the changeless being of Jehovah. He strengthened himself, not in Elohim; he strengthened himself in Jehovah his Elohim (his God). It was God as the eternal I AM, the God of the burning bush, who when Moses said, "When I go on Your behalf, God, whom shall I say has sent me? And God says, "You tell them I AM has sent you. I AM THAT I AM. I WILL BE THAT I WILL BE." "I am the LORD, I change not" (Malachi 3:6). Again and again in the Psalms, David reminds himself of the changeless being of Jehovah. What of God had changed when the town of Ziklag burned? Nada, zilch, nothing. When the town stood shining and bright and welcoming, it didn't affect God. And when it was burned to the ground, nothing of God twitched or was changed. What changed when David's wives were taken captive, and the wives and children of all the warriors? Not a thing. God is the changeless, eternal I AM. Though involved in even the falling of a sparrow and the hairs you left on your pillow last night, He has not changed in His being by anything that happens in His world. You want to be strengthened in the Lord your God? Stand in the midst of the acrid smell of the smoke of dashed hopes and burnt relationships and feel the pang of the severance of deep ties and say, "What has changed in God?" And the answer is, "Nothing."

David reminds himself of the immediate presence of God. Think of Psalm 23: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." And in all the imagery, what's the baseline? "For Thou art with me." Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength.... The LORD of hosts is with us." What more do we need to say? He is with us. You want to be strengthened in God? You remind yourself of the changeless being of Jehovah. He is the eternal, changeless I AM. Remind yourself of the presence of Jehovah. He is with us.

David also reminds himself of the past dealings with Jehovah. You see him doing this when he goes out to meet the Philistine. When they wonder how in the world David is going to be a match for him, you remember what he does. He said, "Look, I remember when I was a shepherd. And when the lion came and the bear came, they were no match for me. I took them on with my bare hands. Who is this uncircumcised Philistine?" One can only wonder how much of David's history was rehearsed in his mind as his eyes smarted with the smoke of the ruins of the city as he went back and remembered all of the ways he had seen the mighty works of God.

Dear people, this present crisis does not negate 31 years of the footprints of Almighty God in the life of Trinity Church. It doesn't obliterate a one of them. And those footprints become the footprints pointing to the fact that this God is our God forever and ever, and He will be our guide even unto death. When you've been in the way 46 years and you meet a crisis like this, it doesn't bug you. You look back to the time when God put His hand upon you as a pimple-faced insecure teenager and changed your life and set your face toward heaven, and set it against anything that would stand in your way, and you say, "God, this is what You did, and this is what You did, and this is what You did. You're no fickle God to leave me now." Some of you have been surprised. Do you think I'm a good bluffer? Or maybe God is real to me in these

days. I'm not bluffing, folks. And no little part of strengthening myself in the Lord my God is just to look back and see His footprints in my life and know that He's no fair-weather God.

David strengthened himself in the Lord his God. No doubt, he reminded himself of the promises of the Lord. "I shall one day perish at the hands of Saul." Down to the Philistines he goes. This is the end result of that period of what appears to be backsliding and unbelief. And could it be that in the charred ruins of this city that had become his illicit refuge, David experiences a personal revival and says, "What a dope I've been. Perish by the hand of Saul? God through Samuel said I shall be king in Israel. I felt the drops of oil upon my head. That God cannot lie." And amidst the charred ruins, he feeds upon promises of God, and he strengthens himself in the Lord his God.

Dear people, this is what we desperately need, not only to engage in an activity as did David, but in that activity focus upon Jehovah Father, Son, and Holy Spirit-- Jehovah God, the Father, Jehovah Jesus, and Jehovah the Spirit. The things that really matter have no relationship to how many people are in these pews. Do you believe that? I hope you do. If you don't, you're in bad trouble. The things that matter are not related to any human relationship. They are related to realities that neither life nor death nor judgment can alter. And if you're to be strengthened in the Lord your God, you need to be engaged in that activity that focuses upon Him.

Thirdly, it was an activity with respect to Jehovah as his own personal God. Look at the text: "David encouraged himself in the LORD his God." And that brings us right into the heart of God's covenant engagements in grace. What's the crowning blessing of God's gracious covenantal commitments to His people. Is it not that found in the language of Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36, quoted in Hebrews 6; quoted again in Revelation 21? "I will be their God, and they shall be My people." And when you come to the book of the Revelation and there you see the consummation of redemption in the new heavens and the new earth, that's stuck right in the middle of it: God Himself shall be with them and be their God, and they shall be His people. You see, David was sucking sweetness from the whole Biblical doctrine of God's gracious saving covenant. He strengthened himself in Jehovah, not the God or a God, but His God. His in the possession of faith, his in the framework of God's gracious, free, sovereign covenantal commitments to be the God of His people. And you see, anyone who's in that framework knows that in himself, he's offended God. God ought to cast him off as a sinner. But the God of the covenant reveals the framework of His covenantal commitments, and that's always in terms of a mediator. And you trace that through the Old Testament. When God commits Himself to Abraham, He gives him these directions about strange sacrifices. What's He doing that for? God's saying, "When I covenant with sinners, it will be in the context of blood because I'm covenanting with sinners. And My wrath must be turned away by propitiatory sacrifice." And that's why in Psalm 51, David confessing his sins says, "Purge me with hyssop [that material they sprinkle the blood with], and I shall be clean." He knows that he needs the blood of expiation. He needs the blood of atonement. So this is the David, who strengthening himself in the Lord his God, is not doing that as a perfect man. There is every indication that this period found David in a least a somewhat backslidden state. And yet he doesn't grovel in his sin. He lays hold of covenant promises: "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared." And in the midst of our present distress, many of us have discovered new depths of our own sin. We

are not a sinless people. This is not a sinless preacher. But we can say we have walked in integrity before God, seeking to follow the Word of God. And God says, "I shall be their God, and they will be My people." You see, you can't strengthen yourself in Jehovah unless He's your God. And He's not your God in any other framework but His gracious covenant that involves the work of Mediator. And when you come in the nakedness of your need and lay hold of the Savior Jesus Christ, God commits Himself to be your God and calls you His people, and even says you are His inheritance. Think of it, what's your inheritance? God brags and says, "My people, purchased with the blood of My own dear Son." Everything else is slated for the junk heap. That's what hell is. His possession is His people. And David had that joy.

Then fourthly and finally, it was not only a conscious, deliberate activity by the man David, an activity focused upon Jehovah, an activity with respect to Jehovah as his own God, but an activity that produced undeniable results in David and all around him. How do we know this just wasn't some kind of mystic experience? David said, "Whoa, I feel great. I'm strengthened in the Lord my God. Now I'm going to write a book about it." No, look at the passage. Verse 7 begins with a conjunction: "And David said...." Now watch all the verbs of action: "And David said to Abiathar the priest...." Verse 8: "And David enquired at the LORD...." Verse 9: "So David went...." Verse 10: "But David pursued...." Following this strengthening of himself in Jehovah, activity is described as an undeniable, demonstratable fruit of being strengthened in the Lord. He said; he went; he enquired; he pursued. When you boil it down, there are two major things that stand out in the passage. Here are the two activities that were the fruition of David strengthening himself in Jehovah:

1. His renewed strength in Jehovah resulted in a renewed commitment to seek Jehovah in prayer. Notice the first thing he does--and there's no record he did this since chapter 23:9 and 10--he calls for an ephod. That was the priestly garment. And David would put it on when he would perform priestly functions, not sacrifice here but seeking the face of God for guidance. In chapter 23, it's the last time we read that David enquired of the Lord. That's why many commentators believe that in this period, David was in a backslidden state. He did some very questionable things. But be that as it may, what we know is marked out by the Holy Spirit as the first fruit of his being strengthened in Jehovah his God is that he gives himself anew to prayer. And I found a wonderful statement by John Flavel with respect to what God does in the midst of trials in order to renew our prayers. Flavel said,

"By these troubles and distresses, David was in great distress. By these troubles and distresses, the people of God are awakened to their duties and taught to pray more frequently, spiritually, and fervently. Ah, what drowsiness and formality is apt to creep in upon the best of hearts in the time of prosperity. But when the storm rises and the sea grows turbulent and raging, now they cry as the disciples to Christ, 'Lord, save us or we perish.' They say music is sweetest upon the waters. I'm sure the sweetest melody of prayer is upon the deep waters of affliction. For these among the other righteous, wise, and holy ends, the Lord permits and orders the trials and distresses of His people. Thunder and lightning is very terrible weather but exceedingly useful to purify and cleanse the air."

Do you see the point? All of this great distress comes upon David. He strengthens himself in the Lord his God, and he says, "Bring the ephod. I'm going to enquire of Jehovah." For David, the accumulation of distress became the catalyst for the renewal of the spirit of prayer.

But then secondly, his renewed strength in Jehovah resulted in present zeal to do the revealed will of Jehovah. Verses 8-9a: "And David enquired at the LORD, saying, Shall I pursue after this troop? shall I overtake them? And he answered him, Pursue: for thou shalt surely overtake them, and without fail recover all. So David went...." He had a word from God by direct revelation. We neither ask such nor expect such. And we're suspicious of all who claim such. But the will of God in this Book is never done with alacrity while all you do is stand and weep by the ash pile. Do you know what I mean? You don't do the will of God when you stand and weep by the ash pile. "O, my town is burned! My possessions are burned! My loved ones are taken from me! Woe, woe is me!" No, he strengthens himself in Jehovah; he goes to the throne of grace, and comes away a man invigorated to do the will of God. And even some of his younger fellow soldiers are so weary from that three-day trek, they can't go. You come to a town that's burned, there isn't any food; they hadn't eaten for a while. But David outstrips them in strength and leads his troops to recapture his wives and the children. Read the rest of the story. As Paul Harvey would say, "Now you know the rest of the story." Where did that vigor come from in a man that was so weary he couldn't weep anymore? "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31). Dear people, it's true. I told the preacher who called me this morning that if God continues to give me the strength He's given in these days, I'll accomplish more in the next 10 years than I did in the previous 30. I'm not doing speed, and I'm not drinking extra coffee. But as you people pray, and as I have sought God, and the Psalms have come alive, it is true: "They that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength." And when we strengthen ourselves in the Lord our God, this is the fruit of it. We are driven anew to the throne of grace, and we come from the throne of grace with our Bibles open and say, "What is my duty with the smoke of the burning city still making our eyes to tear. And we go forth to do the will of God.

What God requires of this church has not changed one bit because of the defection of some from our midst. God has not said, "Beg me leave to rewrite my Word, and weep and mourn and be filled with self-pity while I give you new marching orders." All that God requires of us is in this Book. And He's calling us to strengthen ourselves in Him and commit ourselves to do the will of God as clearly revealed in His written Word.

Well, we come around full circle. You see why so much of our Bible is history and biography. I could have stood up with a New Testament text, such as Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." "Yeah," you say, "that's Paul." But you see David, possibly in a backslidden state, standing amidst the smoke and the rubble, and the heartbreak of his wives, and the children of his warriors taken captive. And he strengthens himself in the Lord his God; he enquires of the Lord; he goes forth with the directions of the Lord in the strength and in power of the Lord. And he soon will be brought to the place which the Lord Himself had said would be his place of service and responsibility.

I want to close by telling you how Spurgeon affirmed this truth in his own life. He has a sermon on this passage that I read after I prepared my own sermon. And I said I've got to stick this in there somewhere. He said,

"I, the preacher of this hour beg to bear my little witness that my worse days I ever had turned out to be my best days. And when God seemed most cruel to me, He was

then most kind. If there's anything in this world for which I would bless Him more than for anything else is for pain and affliction. I'm sure that in these things, the richest, tenderest love has been manifested toward me. I pray you, dear friends, if you are at this time very low and greatly distressed, encourage yourself in the abundant faithfulness of the God who hides Himself. Our Father's wagons rumble most heavily when they are bringing us the richest freight of the gold of His grace. Love letters from heaven are often sent in black-tinged envelopes. The cloud that is black with horror is big with mercy. We may not ask for trouble, but if we are wise, we should look upon it as the shadow of an unusually great blessing. 'Thou didst cause men to ride over our heads, but you brought us out into a wealthy place' (Psalm 66). Dread the calm. It's often treacherous, and beneath its wing, the pestilence is lurking. Fear not the storm. It brings healing in its wings. And when Jesus is with you in the vessel, the tempest only hastens the ship to its desired haven. Blessed be the Lord whose way is in the whirlwind, and who makes the clouds to be the dust of His feet. May some such thoughts as these help you to encourage yourself in Jehovah as David did."

Dear people, it's an ancient story, but it's a real story that had real grief and real pain and real distress. But it marks out the real path that you're to walk in the fellowship of David's greater Son, even the Lord Jesus. He went through the path of suffering to glory. But He brought you in His train, and He brought me. God's purpose for all of His own is marked out by the pattern of His Son: suffering and glory to follow. And frankly, I've been a bit disappointed with some, who thought they even had to think, "Is it worth the fracturing of a few friendships to remain loyal to Christ?" What in the world would you do if you were thrown in a hot box and beaten and starved for days? The history of my life has been the fracturing and betrayal of friends. I hadn't been converted three months when the father who prayed me into the kingdom turned against me. And at the age of 17, kneeling by my bed saying, "O God, can I bear to have my own father against me?" And my dear mother came in and knelt to me and said, "Son, don't turn back." Thankfully, it wasn't long before my father's heart was turned to me again. But there was no choice. Christ died for me, not my father. Christ rose for me, not my father. Christ will judge me, not my father. When all the buddies I played football with turned against me and mocked me and broke their friendship with me except one because I wouldn't listen to their dirty jokes, and I witnessed to them. Do you think I twice thought, is it worth it when I could for the first time in my life open my Bible and hold communion with the Son of God? What's Mike Potenza, and who's Renaldi, and who's Donny Goines? Who are they when the Lord of the universe holds communion with me, a sinner saved by grace? I won't give you the rest of the litany. But it's not preacher's rhetoric, dear folks. The history of my life has been the history of broken friendships and betrayal in the path of obedience to Christ. But none of them died for me. And none of them will answer for me in the last day. May I use the current term: get real fellow brother or sister. You claim to be saved by the blood of incarnate deity. Are you even tempted to weigh a few human relationships? God have mercy on us. God have mercy on us if we do not strengthen ourselves in the Lord our God. Is the pain real? Yes, David's pain was real. He with his men wept real tears. Is my pain real with the allegations that float around about my character and that of my wife? It is real, deeper than I've ever known in my 64 years, but not real enough to turn away from my God, or turn away from my post of duty, or turn away from the confidence, all now mysterious shall be bright at last. It shall be. It shall be. Strengthen yourself in Jehovah your God.

If you have time this afternoon, study 1 Samuel 23. We're going to look at what Jonathan did to David. He strengthened David's hand in the Lord. We're going to look at the horizontal expression of this spiritual discipline tonight, God willing. May the Lord help us to do what David did. No one can do it for you. You can't say, "Lord, do it." No, David did it. David strengthened himself. You've got to do. But you say, "To do means I've got to get out of the paralysis of pity and self-absorption." Yes, you do. Yes, you do. And you may find Mrs. Luther coming into your room today. Did you hear what on one occasion Katy Luther did? Luther was in the pits. He had forgotten his own hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." And poor Katy couldn't get him out of the doldrums. So you know what she did? She put on her black mourning dress. And she put on her black hat like she's was going to a funeral; she put on her saddest face. And she came into Luther's room, and he said, "Katy, Katy, who's died?" "Haven't you heard the tragic news?" "No, no, who's died?" "Haven't you heard?" Luther said, "No, dear, who is it?" She said, "God has died." Luther reared back and said, "God die? Never! He is the living God!" And she said, "Yes, Martin, He is the living God. And if He is, you ought to stop acting the way you are." If the preacher shows up at your home in his black suit today, you'll understand the parable. God lives, dear people. Strengthen yourself in the Lord your God.

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