

“Joy in the Victories”

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Unless otherwise indicated, Scriptures quoted are from 2011 New International Version.)*

Don't miss the chance celebrate on the heights.

2 Samuel 5:1-10; Psalm 21:1-7

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The best years

There's something about nearing retirement that prompts reflection across the years. This week, prompted by our Scripture text this morning, I was wondering, "What were the best seasons of our lives?" The happy times, great family times, stable health, close to the Lord. Before I tell you mine, what was yours? If you were to graph the ups and downs of your life – spiritually, physically, materially, where would the highest highs be concentrated? All your prayers were thanks. No "God, why me? Why now?"

For Linda and me it was in the early 1990s. The kids were in those golden ages between 5 and 11. They were out of diapers and all in schools they loved. We had fun family outings and nightly family devotions. Linda and I both had close friends. Linda was elected President of the PTSA at the elementary school. We didn't have a lot of money, but we lived in the nicest home we've ever had – a fairly new ranch style brick parsonage with a full, unfinished basement where the kids could play inside if they wanted. It also had a wide open back yard of a couple of acres, all just across the street from the church. The people of the church loved us.

Then God said, "I don't want you that comfortable. I am sending you to a church called Corinth." Don't get me wrong; we would never reverse the decision to come here. But the first decade here was hard and by the time Corinth got it together our children grew up and moved away. We love our empty nest, but now we have old people aches and pains. We are incredibly grateful for our time here, in part *because* challenges along the way have forced us to lean on the Lord and learn more lessons of faith. But if I think about the years when in the moment we would be most likely to say, "Life is good," it would be in our mid-30s.

Shepherd and ruler

I think King David would agree with me. His golden age of life was in his mid-30s. To be more precise, I think David would say his best moment was at age 37 ½. That's how old he was in 2 Samuel 5 when "All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, 'We are your flesh and blood'" (5).

If you have read chapters 2-4 of 2 Samuel, you didn't see that coming. Almost immediately after Saul's death, David was anointed king in Judah, but Saul's general and chief-of-staff, Abner, preempted that effort and placed a previously unknown, maybe even illegitimate, son of Saul named Ish-bosheth on the throne. So David settled in Hebron, the leading city of Judah, and waited.

The chapters that follow are bloody. The nation descended into Civil War. David's men fought Saul's men. Abner first fought David's general, Joab, then switched sides and declared his loyalty to David but was killed by Joab. Abner and Ish-bosheth quarreled. Ish-bosheth was assassinated by David's men, but not at David's command. David executed the assassins.

Instead, "all the tribes of Israel" now send messengers to David and ask him to reunite the kingdom. "We are your flesh and blood," they say.

They acknowledge David's military legacy. "In the past, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on their military campaigns" (2a). Before Saul's jealous rage led to attempted murder and then to David's exile, as a young warrior who killed Goliath and led successful defensive and offensive campaigns, David was a hero.

There's also theological rationale in their entreaty. "And the LORD said to you, 'You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler'" (2b). The other tribes acknowledge David is God's choice.

"Shepherd" is a common metaphor for leadership in the ancient world. If you were taught that they were a despised underclass, rethink that. Shepherds were wealth managers. A shepherd might have a small flock but they could also be a rancher overseeing thousands of sheep and dozens of under shepherds. Shepherds were called to take care of the sheep – provide, protect, and guide them. "The Lord is my shepherd," David wrote in his most famous psalm. "I am the good shepherd," Jesus said.

By now all Israel has now heard of David's anointing by Samuel when he was about 15. He was to be their "ruler." Your Bible translation may say "prince, which is the literal translation. The word was used early on of Saul (1 Samuel 9:16; 10:1), but it's also the word God used of David in the same verse where he called David "a man after my own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14).

If vv. 1-2 was an initial feeler by messengers from the other tribes, David apparently consented. Verse 3 continues the story: “When all the elders of Israel had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a covenant with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel.”

The “elders” were those with the clout to act on behalf of the tribes. “Covenant” is the most common word for a contract or compact (*berith*). It usually indicates a top-down agreement. It’s the word used of God’s covenant with Israel, and they are not equal partners. In other words, the elders of the tribes are placing themselves under the leadership of their new king. They do so “before the LORD.”

A summary of David’s reign follows. “David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years” (4). This is typical language in and outside the Bible when a king formally takes the throne. We have further explanation in verse 5: “In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.”

The city of David

Two key focal points of all of God’s redemptive plan take place back to back in 2 Samuel 5. The first is David’s anointing as king. From this moment on, salvation history will pivot on David. Messiah will not occupy the throne of Abraham or the seat of Moses. Jesus comes from the line of David and inherits his eternal throne.

Neither is Hebron the eternal city. We’re not looking forward to “the new Hebron” coming down from heaven. Jerusalem becomes the holy city of foundation and anticipation – not just for Jews but for Christians and then for Muslims as well. David’s first initiative as king over the united kingdom of Israel was to march to Jerusalem and capture it. There are several reasons named or implied in the text.

1. *Location (6)*. Jerusalem was in the tribe of Benjamin. Saul was from the tribe of Benjamin. David was uniting the house of Saul and the house of David. Benjamin was also close to the border. But Jerusalem had never been captured or occupied by the Israelites. It was a Canaanite island in the middle of Israel. It was like choosing Washington, D.C. as America’s capital. It was neutral, everyone’s city.

2. *Completion (6)*. The Jebusites had never been dislodged. The Jebusites were among the people God had told Abraham (Genesis 15:19), Moses multiple times (Exodus 3:8, 17; 13:15; 23:23; 33:2; 34:11; Numbers 13:19; Deuteronomy 20:17) and Joshua (3:10) would be driven out of the Promised Land. But neither the tribe of Judah (Joshua 15:63) nor Benjamin (Judges 1:21) were able to dislodge the Jebusites from Jerusalem. Even at this moment they mocked David. “Even the blind and lame can ward you off.” He devised a clever strategy and returned the insult with sarcasm: “The ‘lame and blind’ are David’s enemies.”

3. *Bastion (7)*. This was a “fortress.” It was move-in ready as a walled city. That’s why it had successfully resisted the Israelites’ attempts for centuries. There was also a reliable water supply, the Gihon Spring, which still provides water to Jerusalem. Once David occupied it, it would be his secure home for generations.

4. *Elevation (7)*. This is the first of 150 uses of “Zion” in the Bible. We don’t know exactly what “Zion” means, but apparently it has something to do with height. “Fortress on a ridge” or “eminence” are two possible meanings. The name indicates importance. Zion literally and figuratively rises above everything else. When Solomon built the first temple on an adjacent but even higher elevation of rock, the word “Zion” was transferred there. Still today, everyone refers to going “up to Zion” or Jerusalem.

5. *Recognition (7)*. This would be the “City of David.” This would be named for David, and would represent his throne, his reign, his enduring legacy. This place had been sacred since the time of Melchizedek, “the king of Salem.” Abraham had taken Isaac to this very height, willing to offer him as a sacrifice.

6. *Progression (10)*. Both militarily and architecturally, David gets something done immediately. David fortifies the millo (“terraces” in the NIV) to further strengthen the city. We note our leaders’ progress in the first 100 days. “And he became more and more powerful” from the moment he occupied Jerusalem. Soon the king of Tyre is sending laborers and materials to build his palace.

7. *Revelation (10)*. Why did David become great? Because “the LORD God Almighty was with him.” This title for God, “God of hosts” or “LORD of hosts” (or both) was first used in the Bible in 1 Samuel 1. “Hosts” means “army.” David had cleverly and bravely used the water shaft to infiltrate the city, but a more invisible army was in control of these events. All of this is God’s story, not David’s.

So what do we do with this story?

Joy in the victories

Name your victories. Sometimes as believers we are hesitant to own and celebrate our accomplishments and achievements. Certainly there’s a balance, and maybe even it’s a hard balance to find. Perhaps we’ll never find the perfect balance.

I love it when Pastor Paul holds up a trout or proud parents post a beautiful baby or a family makes it to Disney World or a graduate beams with pride over a degree.

We began this worship service with a psalm of David. We don’t know if it was about his coronation. There are a number of royal psalms that fit David and at the same time can and do point forward to an even greater king, the Messiah, Jesus.

David was certainly gifted at putting words to his laments. But he also knew how to name his victories, as he does in Psalm 21 –

*You came to greet him with rich blessings
and placed a crown of pure gold on his head.
Through the victories you gave, his glory is great;
you have bestowed on him splendor and majesty.*

There's nothing unspiritual about living them, even sharing them. Count your many blessings, name them one by one.

Stay humble and beware. Our narrator is certainly aware that this season of David's rest and glory is temporary. There is trouble ahead. Some of it is David's own doing. David had seven wives and six sons in chapter 3. By the end of chapter 5 he will add more concubines and wives, and eleven more children. It almost seems like David becomes infatuated with one woman, takes her into his harem, and when she gets pregnant he moves on to someone else. For so many reasons that's wrong, including the prohibition Moses had made in Deuteronomy against polygamy for future kings. These rival wives and children will cause David much heartache later in his reign.

Also by the end of chapter 5, the Philistines will be on the attack once more. Remember, he was their resident and ally in 1 Samuel. War breaks out here, and repeatedly through David's reign. He ends up winning most of them, but David loves a good war. He expands and secures Israel's borders far beyond what Saul had done, but he will not be allowed to build Israel's temple because he is a man of blood.

Looking back on our own golden years three decades ago, there were hidden aspects of our story that we didn't understand at the time. Almost never is success and peace the culmination. It's more like preparation, like you're tanking up. You have to be extra careful of what's happening to your heart, of what you're not noticing or seeing.

Success calls for an intentional humility that recognizes only God could have done this. Pride or just complacency can eat at your soul. You begin to think this is a kingdom you built, and that you are better than those beneath you on the ladder.

Success is a great time to get connected to a small group of believing friends, the kind of group we're urging you to sign up for after our worship services today. Maybe it's because they need you. Maybe it's because they can see in you what you can't see in yourself.

Failure and struggle are also great times to be vulnerable enough to admit you need others to get you through. There's never a bad time to be in a community of people who rejoice when you rejoice and mourn when you mourn. It's always hard to

explain to people after they get into crisis how that season would have been easier to bear if they had already established deep bonds with other people who love Jesus and will help them through.

Rejoice and give thanks. Let's get back to the primary point of today, the theme of the entire worship service. David begins Psalm 21,

*The king rejoices in your strength, Lord.
How great is his joy in the victories you give!*

He ends the psalm with these words:

Be exalted in your strength, LORD;

We will sing and praise your might.

When God shows up in unexpected ways – those are times we need to mark, to celebrate, to share. I heard such a story this week from Meghan Young. She and Roger have just sent their oldest to the Citadel. Those are challenging times for a Mom.

Roger and Meghan went to the mountains for their anniversary. During the hike Meghan asked the Lord for a specific sign, a butterfly, to assure her that Tripp was going to be ok. She wanted peace. On their hike she saw 3-4 butterflies. They gave her comfort, but they were also in area where butterflies would not be unusual.

As they returned to Hickory from their anniversary trip and began to unpack, Meghan heard flapping on the window. A butterfly was inside the house! Then it landed on her hand. When she walked outside to tell Roger the story, the butterfly remained on her hand. Now every butterfly she sees reminds her that God's got this. She can trust him with her children.

What is your story when God showed up, when he felt especially close? Maybe it was a single provision or maybe it was a season of life. Take time for joy. Give words to gratitude. Take a picture. Write a poem. Sing a song. Paint a scene. Gaze into a sunset. Plan a party. Take a hike, or maybe a long nap. Do something that will outlast the time of joy and provision and extend into the hard times. These God moments and God seasons of our lives are designed to fill our tanks with joy and gratitude. We will need them down the road. David did, and we will too. Amen.