

Strength When the Bottom Falls Out

1 Samuel 30

*“And David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters. **But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.**”*

Introduction: On April 18, 1942, 80 brave young men boarded 16 B25 Mitchell medium bombers, took off from USS Hornet in the Pacific Ocean, without fighter escorts on what they knew was a one-way trip. Five months earlier the port at Pearl Harbor had been bombed in a surprising raid by Japanese air power, leaving many Americans shocked, bitter, and angry. One of these angry young men on the last bomber to leave the deck of the carrier was **Jacob DeShazer** from Oregon, who grew up with believing parents but was a committed atheist. His comment after the Pearl Harbor attack: *“Japan is going to pay for this”*. Known as the *Doolittle Raid*, these 16 bombers inflicted light damage on Tokyo, Yokohama, and DeShazer’s plane that hit Nagoya, but the psychological toll on the people of Japan was immense. Once believed they were untouchable and able to knock the US quickly out of the war, the attack at Pearl truly woke a sleeping giant.

As each of the raiders dropped their ordinance, they knew they did not have enough fuel to carry them back to the carrier, meaning each one would try to reach the mainland of China and work their way back to Allied hands. Of the original 80 men who took off, 3 died in the initial crashes while 8 more were captured and were made POWs in Japan. Three of those were executed, another died of malnutrition, leaving four to endure a brutal 40 months of solitary confinement, hellish torture to draw out confessions, and the knowledge that execution was a breath away. It was here that **Jacob** kept himself going by cultivating an **intense hatred of his Japanese captors**. In time, the Emperor of Japan changed the way POWs were to be treated, and some basic amenities were granted to the captured airmen. One of those resources was an English Bible, from which Jacob read for three weeks straight. He saw the true Jesus, the One prophesied of in the OT and confirmed in the NT. As he came to **Romans 10:9**, he received the grace of God to believe, confess his sins, and know the joy of God’s forgiveness. He later wrote: *“How my heart rejoiced in my newness of spiritual life, even though my body was suffering so terribly from the physical beatings and lack of food.”* **In the lowest depth of agony, God had given life to Jacob DeShazer’s soul.**¹

In a world that seeks comfort and with hearts that desire pain-free existence, we try our best to avoid low points in life, and when they do come, it brings out negative things in our hearts. We all have experienced times where we think we could not take one more piece of bad news, not one more criticism, or one more negative circumstance, only to be knocked down by something *worse* than we could have imagined. I remember when Erin and I went with a team to Kyrgyzstan with our church and Erin got massively sick on the way home, and her only comfort leaving LAX was to crawl into her bed and see our cat. Before heading up the stairs to our house, a good friend leaned in to inform me, *“by the way, while you were gone, your cat ran away!”* **Could have done without that! But sometimes God has to bring us low before our hearts are able to change, either for salvation or significant growth.** This is where we find David in a pivotal chapter of David’s final transition from anointed but waiting king to his opportunity to take the actual throne.

¹ Don Stephens, *War and Grace: Short Biographies from the World Wars*;
Testimony of Jacob himself - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBD3bxix_Kg

Remember, each David and Saul were brought low by the Lord. Saul at his moment of desperation, surrounded by an insurmountable force, turned **away** from the LORD to a worldly or demonic answer, and found only judgment. David had fled the persecution of Saul, seeking refuge with the Philistines, and adopted a life of deception as he secretly made war on Israel's enemies. However, his cunning ways were *too successful* as king Achish believed David had turned traitor in body and mind, and he invited David to join him in attacking Israel. At the close of chapter 29 we saw that God was gracious to release David and his men to leave the battlefield, freeing him from consequences of deception and an unknown outcome of war. As he and his 600 men made their 60 mile, three-day march back to Ziklag, they were anticipating seeing their wives, sleeping in their own beds, and enjoying their homes. But if they were hoping for peace, they soon found devastation, and *could have done without that*.

This is a chapter that reminds us that our *view of God, His grace and sovereignty, is truly tested when the bottom falls out, and our decision at that very moment shapes the outcome of our lives.*

Finding Strength in Disaster (1-6)

*Now when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, the Amalekites had made a raid against the Negeb and against Ziklag. They had overcome Ziklag **and burned it with fire** 2 and taken captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great. They killed no one, but carried them off and went their way. 3 And when David and his men came to the city, they found it burned with fire, and their wives and sons and daughters taken captive. 4 Then David and the people who were with him raised their **voices and wept until they had no more strength to weep.** 5 David's two wives also had been taken captive, Ahinoam of Jezreel and Abigail the widow of Nabal of Carmel. 6 **And David was greatly distressed, for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.***

It was a scene out of some post-apocalyptic movie. A group of tired soldiers seeing their most desired place of family, but as they get closer and closer, the smoke that rose from the distance was strange, not matching the normal family fires but something different altogether. It was the stuff of nightmares. The entire city was burned to the ground, with pieces of homes and possessions still smoldering under their feet. EVERYONE was gone! Wives, sons, and daughters were nowhere to be found. If there was a slight solace it was clear that no blood was shed, but a marauding force would only keep women and children alive for one reason, and that would be to sell them into slavery. It was here that David's character and leadership were tested, like every leader when the bottom drops out.

This was a scene that was not David's fault, but was his responsibility. He did not *deserve* this, but that did not mean God was not intimately involved in what just happened. His men, after weeping and wailing until their strength wept, did what people do when they feel out of control – *they looked to BLAME someone, and David was the most logical source.* Now, David himself lost his two wives, leaving him hurting as well, but people do not typically consider the leader and his feelings. In their *bitterness of soul*, they began to murmur about **stoning David**, since this WAS HIS FAULT. This is not the first time God's people turned unfairly on their leader, as Israel sought to stone Moses when they were thirsty (Exodus 17:4) and when the Promised Land did not live up to expectations (Num. 14:10). All of this, even though Moses was the meekest or humblest man on the earth (Num. 12:3). This is what crushes a leader: *conflict and pain OUTSIDE and loyal loved ones turning from the INSIDE.* If there was a time that David would throw up his hands in resignation or shake his fists at the LORD, now was the time. When

the bottom dropped out for Saul he went to a demonic witch! **What David did next changed everything, for him and as an example to everyone who has the bottom drop out.**

“But David strengthened himself in the LORD his God”

Remember, when Saul was in distress and asked for answers from God, God did not answer. But this is NOT what David did. **First**, he strengthened himself in **His God**, noting that God was not a distant Genie but a personal Savior and LORD. Before asking for answers and complaining upward, he simply sought his God and found the strength he needed to continue on. But what does it mean to “strengthen yourself in your God”?

It means to *remind our minds and hearts about God’s nature and promises, since we so quickly forget these when the bottom drops out and we lose what we thought we can control.* Remember back when Jonathan caught up with David in the Wilderness after the people of Keilah gave him up to Saul. Jonathan *“strengthened his hand in God”*, by reminding David of God’s faithful promise to put him on the throne (1 Sam. 23:16-17). We need to remind ourselves often since we so quickly forget and have a hard time connecting the promises we have with everyday life.

*“To strengthen ourselves in God means we remind ourselves of what scripture says about God and His promises, and we bring those truths to bear on every situation. Every trial causes opposing voices to ring in the ears of the child of God. One is the voice of our circumstances, telling us that our situation is hopeless. The other is the voice of faith, telling us that **God is sufficient for the trial.**”²*

The Scottish pastor named Andrew Bonar experienced this sufficiency. He noted in his diary entry for **October 15, 1864** that he had been meditating on **Nahum 1:7**, *“The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; He knows those who take refuge in Him.”* Later in the day, Bonar suffered the death of his dearly beloved wife Isabella, and he **remembered the verse he had studied.** He commented, *“Little did I know how I would need it half an hour later.”* For years afterward, Bonar would record Nahum 1:7 in his diary record for October 15. In this way, he was strengthening himself **in the LORD with the Word of the Lord.**³

Why do I give such an extreme example? Because we often think our bottoming out is so much worse than others, or that ours is too extreme for Scripture to speak to. That is a lie from the pit. God gives us the answer to our needs in the worst of circumstances that are wrapped up in His person and Word. Does that mean we will always get out of situations??!!! That is NOT THE PROMISE, but we DO know nothing will separate us from His love, nor will He ever leave us, nor will He ever compromise our future with Him!

The **second** blessing we have to strengthen ourselves in the Lord is having **bold access to a High Priest who sympathizes with us and lavishes grace and mercy on us in our time of need** (Heb. 4:16-18). Far too often we fail to approach God as our primary help because He is our ultimate joy and value. When trials come, we first turn to our spouse and family because we know they’ll be there no matter what. That is why we turn first and relentlessly to God in Christ, because He completely understands, has the power to help, and will walk us through.

² Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King: Learning from the Life of David*, p. 119.

³ Dale Ralph Davis, “1 Samuel”, p. 314

Providential Care out of Disaster (7-20)

Once his prioritization of pursuit of the Lord was established, he then inquired of the LORD through the ephod of the priest which would have included the urim and thummim. This was the ordained way to seek God's will, and David was right in doing it. We do not have the privilege of drawing rocks to understand God's will, but we have a complete canon of Scripture that informs us of all we need to know and to have sufficient information to make every decision. Here, God told him to go after the Amalekites and he would overtake them and rescue the families. So David set out with 400 men, since 200 men were too exhausted to go on. We'll come back to these in a minute.

We may take for granted how hard it would be to find a group of wandering marauders in a desert where the wind blows over tracks and a group who were experts at avoid and evade tactics. Here is where we see God's **providence accomplishing God's will**, as David's band of men needed help if they were going to catch the perpetrators. Along the way there was an **Egyptian** slave of the Amalekites who was left behind because he fell sick and couldn't keep up. After giving this man some food (including fig newtons) which revived his strength, the man told David that his group had been raiding throughout the Southern Negev, including burning **Ziklag with fire**. After getting David to commit to not kill him or return him, he vowed to show David where the Amalekites were located. This is how God's providence is seen and experienced. We do not always know **how** He'll provide for us to accomplish what He wants from us, but He WILL provide means.

The next scene is one of great justice and vengeance. The Amalekites were celebrating their hugely successful raids throughout Philistia and Judah, and were drunk on their own accomplishments. Feeling secure, they danced without putting up a watch, and allowed David and his bitter men to sneak up and utterly wipe them out. The text says the slaughter went on for hours, with only 400 escaping, which means there must have been many more than that who fell by David's sword. There are **two clear emphases on this victory after defeat: 1)** Everything that had been taken, from life to possession, was restored; **2)** David is emphasized. The author uses David's proper name 26 times in the chapter, and here, he used "DAVID" six times, instead of the pronoun "he". The victory was for David as it is clear that the tide had turned in his life, and God was bringing him imminently into the role of active king. Ziklag was burned, not to be rebuilt, his credibility was restored, his faith confirmed, and God's hand was clearly on him. This all pivoted when he strengthened himself in and trusted the Lord when the bottom dropped out. He epitomized **Psalms 27:14**: "*Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD.*"

A New Course out of Disaster (21-31)

The victory was great, but the conflict was not over. Leaders must deal with conflict, whether it's in a marriage, family, church, job, or community. As long as we deal with sinners (leaders included), conflict will be the norm, so **how** conflict is walked through is paramount.

The first issue was with the schism between his soldiers. The 400 who had followed David and physically took it to the Amalekites were frustrated and bitter at the 200 who stayed behind, trying to convince David NOT to divide the spoil among them, but simply return their wives and kids. On one level, we could understand their frustration. "*We did the work. They were too weak to fight and too flabby to run with us. WE risked our lives, WE defeated the enemy, and WE deserve the spoil. All they did was watch the baggage!*" Do you see the logic? Part of us resonate with this thought. But this was absolutely going

to cause a division with his men, creating a tier system and allowing one group to look down on the other, devaluing those who did not go on and fight.

There are a few clues in the text to how David handled this deftly. 1) It is clear in the text that part of the 400 were **wicked and worthless fellows** (30:22). They were apparently good soldiers but did not possess the highest of character. In fact, we know that these were described as those in distress, debt, and bitter in soul BEFORE they joined David (22:2). They were bitter again at the beginning of the chapter. A mark of this kind of man is one who plays the victim, blames others easily, believes they are never wrong, are slow to take responsibility and think of themselves first through a myopic lens that cannot see the big picture. Know anyone like that? 2) David acted **shrewdly** in order to **bring unity out of conflict**. Notice that in verse 23 he calls the complainers “my brothers”, bridging the gap between the angry and attacked. Then he reminded them all that **God had given victory and preserved**, so there was no insignificant person in the whole campaign. In fact, this became a statute moving forward, that those who were on the front lines or those that stayed to protect the supplies were both entitled to share in the spoils. Unity in the midst of diversity, and understanding how each role in a kingdom is valued and necessary for the whole to thrive.

It is a good reminder of how **God’s church functions together in unity, service, and gifts:**

1 Corinthians 12:22-26 - *The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” 22 On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23 and on those parts of the body that **we think** less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, 24 which our more presentable parts do not require. **But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, 25 that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”***

There is no insignificant person nor gift in the church! Whether you have the gift of teaching and preaching or serving in a way that is behind the scenes, we are uniquely united together, and what WE tend to value is NOT what God values. We think the “seen” gifts are greater, but that is not in the church. This is how we have mutual care, love, and affection in this place among such a diverse group of gifts, ages, experiences, and abilities.

The chapter concludes with David distributing the spoils gained in his victory to his friends back in Judah, most likely those who helped him in his time of running and hiding. Instead of focusing the victory God had given him on himself, he gave away the praise and the rewards. He once again had his mind and heart fixed rightly, strengthened in the LORD his God. He moved from a place of distress when the bottom dropped out to a place of kingly leadership and character. His focus was on the Lord, others, on caring for ALL, and beginning to expand beyond his ‘family’ band. Strengthening ourselves in the Lord not only gives us the opportunity to live in **freedom and joy, but allows us to lead others in a proper and successful way.**

Jacob DeShazer moved from bitterness and hatred in his cell to praying for his captors and persecutors, as well as the people of Japan as a whole. When the war ended, he enrolled in a Bible college to become a missionary. His country of choice: *Japan for the next 30 years, starting in 1945, just three years after being freed.* He wrote a gospel tract describing his conversion from a POW to a new creation in Christ, which he distributed throughout Japan. He would go on and start a church in **Nagoya**, the very city that he had bombed a few years earlier. One of the men who picked up his tract was named **Mitsuo Fuchida**,

the Japanese air commander who led the raid against Pearl Harbor, and who had fallen in despair after his nation's defeat. When Fuchida read Luke 23:34 where Jesus uttered "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*", he yielded his life to Christ, knowing that he was forgiven for what he had done in life and war because of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. **DeShazer and Fuchida** went on to hold evangelistic meetings together, taking the blessings that God had graciously given to them in Christ and giving the gospel message of salvation to many others who believed and were saved.⁴

From the bottom dropping out to renewed trust in the Lord, leading to fruitfulness. This is the joyful freedom of the gospel of Jesus Christ, knowing that no matter what happens, what circumstances we face, what pain we endure, what trial we experience, what bottom floor we fall to, we have a Savior and Lord who cares, who gives grace, and never wastes a thing. May we have the boldness and wisdom to strengthen ourselves in our God, no matter what place we find ourselves in today.

⁴ Richard Phillips, "*1 Samuel: Reformed Expository Commentary*", p. 507-508.