

I DESTROYED MY FOES

by Steve Zeisler

The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior!" This is how the angel of the Lord addressed Gideon in Judges 6:12. Gideon had trouble believing he was a valiant warrior, and so do most of us.

You may remember the story. The Midianites had terrorized the children of Israel, and they were a beaten people. The Midianites regularly stole their food when it was harvested. Verses 11-16:

"Then the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, 'The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior.' Then Gideon said to him, 'Oh my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, "Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?" But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian.' And the Lord looked at him and said, 'Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?' And he said to Him, 'O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house.' But the Lord said to him, 'Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man.'"

Threshing was normally done by animals that would tread on the wheat. It was usually a public event done in an open place, a time for celebration in the life of an agrarian society. But here was Gideon doing the work of an ox in a wine press, treading out a small amount of grain, hiding from his enemies, the farthest thing from a valiant warrior. And yet the word of the Lord rang clear: "God is with you." God saw a valiant warrior where Gideon couldn't see any such thing.

That's what we want to consider in this message. We've been working our way through this prayer of David's in Psalm 18. It's the story of the thrilling rescue of a drowning soul when all appeared lost. And not only the story of a rescue, but the story of restoration. The phrase we focused our thinking on in the last message was, "You stoop down to make me great." David discovered the desire of God to make us great. What once was lost and useless he wants to strengthen and establish.

Part of that process is fighting our enemies. That means neither running from them, nor denying the devastation they've caused. It means choosing to "fight the good fight."

Let's read verses 36-42:

You broaden the path beneath me,
so that my ankles do not turn.

I pursued my enemies and overtook them;
I did not turn back till they were destroyed.

I crushed them so that they could not rise;
they fell beneath my feet.

You armed me with strength for battle;
you made my adversaries bow at my feet.

You made my enemies turn their backs in flight,
and I destroyed my foes.

They cried for help, but there was no one to save them---
to the Lord, but he did not answer.

I beat them as fine as dust borne on the wind;
I poured them out like mud in the streets.

Human enemies and spiritual enemies

Once again, David is taking the pen of an artist and drawing a picture. It is a remarkable picture of grinding one's enemies to dust and pouring them like mud into the street, to be lost forever. This vivid imagery raises some hard questions. Consider Jesus' word about enemies in the Sermon on the Mount: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you..." (Matthew 6:43-44). David advocates stomping his foes to a fine dust and pouring them out into the street, and Jesus is bidding us to love our enemies. How do we reconcile these two ways of dealing with enemies?

Paul wrote to Timothy: "Those who oppose him [the servant of the Lord] he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:25-26). There are human beings who are arranged in opposition to you and your service to God. But they are held in the sway of the devil when they do hurtful things to oppose you. They are trapped by someone who is destroying them and using them in destructive ways in the lives of other people. The appeal Paul is making is that we should want to see them converted. That's behind Jesus' statement as well. Human beings are never our enemies ultimately, even when they do the most terrible things.

I don't want to gloss over the fact that you may have been treated terribly by someone. There are more than a million refugees in eastern Africa right now who are living in absolutely heart-wrenching conditions. And this has happened not because of some natural disaster such as a famine, but because of hatred between peoples in that part of the world. Real human beings have wreaked this destruction on other human beings. We can't minimize the capacity of humans to accomplish destruction and evil.

But God loves all of us--even his enemies (Romans 5:10). Every human soul is invited to know Christ. Because they're beloved of God, we can pray for those who persecute us and long for the grip of the devil to be broken in their experience. And we must, lest in our hatred we become like them.

But there are enemies for whom no redemption is possible. There is a company of demons that gathers around an evil prince called Satan in Scripture---the adversary, the enemy of God. In Revelation 9:11 he is named Apollyon, the destroyer of human beings. These evil beings are implacable in their hatred of God and his purposes, and he has determined to destroy them. Jesus said of the devil, "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44). The devil, in Jesus' definition, is characterized by two things: murder and lies. These are true of him to the core. And this enemy deserves our hatred and our unflinching opposition. It is this enemy against whom we should go to war.

There was a time when the dominant thinking of our culture ridiculed people who imagined that unseen spiritual realities such as angels and demons could be discussed or appealed to. Man was the measure of all things. But such ridicule is much less common today. More and more observers recognize an evil force that resists all our best efforts and degrades all innocence. Even people who refuse to believe in God believe in the devil; an aggressive, malevolent, crafty mind that we are no match for in our own strength.

So we are called as valiant warriors to do battle. We are to love people and wish them converted, and we are to fight against the one who is the father of lies and the murderer of human souls. That's what David is writing about in Psalm 18. David had human enemies who were being used by the enemy, and he fought in battles against real people. But David did not utterly repudiate his human enemies such that they should be ground to a fine dust, and poured out into the mud. David used this language of the evil power behind his human foes.

So how are we to do battle with this enemy? The Lord is with each one of us valiant warriors. The place where we most often and profoundly encounter the enemy is our own hearts. Every one of us has some weakness, vulnerability, pattern of fear, or constellation of temptations. Every one of us feeds some dark hunger or remembers some awful shame. We can hide it and ignore it at times, but that's where the enemy is going to strike, and that's where we need to fight back. God is with us and he wants us to fight, not settle for defeat. He wants us to go after our enemy with divine authority.

The letter of 1 Peter says, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings. And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered for a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:8-10). You are being stalked by one who seeks to devour you. Fight back!

What we do and what God does

Let's look at some details in our passage and see what insight David the king offers us in these verses. The first point, already mentioned, is that we have to choose to fight. This passage has a wonderful pattern of saying, "I did it," and in the next breath saying, "God did it": "You broadened the path...I pursued my enemies and overtook them...You armed me with strength for battle; you made my adversaries bow at my feet. You made my enemies turn their backs...I destroyed my foes." David had to choose to act, to take a step. God didn't do the miracle of parting the Red Sea for the children of Israel before they stepped into the water. He calls on us to steel ourselves, to make choices, to fight, to step out, to take a risk; and then we find, gloriously, that the power of God is there acting on our behalf, that he is with us, that the Spirit himself is overcoming opposition and strengthening us. The new covenant declares that all authority and power come from God and not from us, but it also teaches the responsibility of choosing. We take the step, he supplies the power. Philippians 2:12-13 says, "...Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." We do it precisely because the Lord is there strengthening us for everything we need.

Another observation I would make concerns the chase. Verse 36 talks about ankles being strengthened to run. Then verse 37:

"I pursued my enemies and overtook them;
I did not turn back till they were destroyed."

When we begin to deal with these difficult issues, the enemy may very well back off for a time. And when you get some relief it's easy to quit. "I'm not so miserable anymore, that's good enough." But these verses speak of tracking the enemy; refusing to settle for temporary relief. David was determined to pursue the problem until it was utterly beaten. We must deal with root issues, not quit too soon. David says his enemy ran, hid, and attempted to escape---in order to come back to fight another day.

Remember the parable Jesus told (Luke 11:23-25) of banishing the demon from the house and having seven more come back later, even more terrifying, because only a partial job was done, only the initial steps were taken. David fought the enemy, crushed him to the ground, destroyed him utterly.

The third point I would highlight here is in verse 41. It's peculiar in this context:

"They cried for help, but there was no one to save them---
to the Lord, but he did not answer."

The wounding and destroyers of the soul called to God for help, but God didn't answer. Sometimes it is the devil's strategy to use religion to hurt us. The thing that is crushing your spirit, destroying you inwardly, uses God's name and religious language to batter you even more effectively. It claims the authority of God. A lot of people live with unnecessary guilt and shame. They run from the source of help rather than to it because they think God has been enlisted in the cause of their hurt. But David is clear: "They attempted to use religious

sticks to batter me, but God did not help them. God helped me. He wants to make me great, he's for me. He's not going to be part of the process of ruining me further." Bad religion needs to be done away with in every place it exists.

The last point we should consider here is beating the enemies as fine as dust and pouring them into the mud of the street. This is absolute repudiation of the destroyers. Many of us are so familiar with damaged souls that we feel as if they must have some validity. But this verse is saying no, the liar and the murderer, the adversary of God and the destroyer of the people, the prince of the power of the air, the evil one with his minions who are engaged in attacking God by attacking the ones God loves, has no standing. This is complete and utter repudiation of lies and murder. So they are beaten as fine as dust and poured into the mud of the streets.

"The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior!" Do you ever get up in the morning, look in the mirror, and shout that to yourself? Gideon didn't believe it either, but his story goes on to talk of great victories, and that's what we're being called to. We have to fight back. We can't let the soul-destroyer win at the point of our greatest vulnerability. There is something we can do about it. If we let God fight for us at that point, and if we get engaged in the battle, he will fight for us...

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