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David III: Sacrifice – 2 Samuel 23:13-17

This is one of those odd little bits of Scripture that are easy to let slip by. It can be skipped over as bragging, extraneous information, historical curiosity, without hooking our reflection.

But this story really is very important: it shows us how the “old covenant” of God with God’s people anticipates, prefigures the “new covenant” we have with God because of and with Jesus Christ. Today, it is a practical “just what happened” for us in Christ.

There’s no doubt at all that David was courageous, devout, wise, and an inspiring leader – today’s lesson does nothing to take away from that. The “mighty men” and “the Three,” their feats of valor – and their dedication to David, even when he was opposed, criticized, under attack – are testament to his personal charisma.

When I was commissioned in the Navy, our handbook told us that the expressed desire of a superior officer was to be considered a direct order. That seems to be a tradition already alive and well in David’s time, because all he does is wish out loud of some of that sweet water

from the well by the gate in Bethlehem, his home town, and they go off after it.

And when, after they've fought their way through the enemy lines and back, they give it to David, he is stunned.

I've had the great honor of meeting several who received the Medal of Honor: a Marine, a Navy Captain, and a soldier. One thing that struck me about all of them was that they were all quiet, dignified, humble gentlemen. If you haven't met one of these examples of heroism in person, you've had the opportunity to hear several of them speak on TV in the past few years, and perhaps you'll agree with me that one thing that sets all of them apart, that really flashes the signal "hero" about them, is that all of them testify about their deeds in the same way: they all say something to the effect that they didn't do anything particularly special, just what anyone else would do if they found themselves in the right place at the wrong time.

General S. L. A. Marshall, who interviewed and studied those who went through combat as close to the fight chronologically as possible, wrote that in the final analysis, the people he interviewed weren't fighting for some great ideal, like "King and Country" or Democracy, but for those around them, in their units, their friends and comrades in arms. And something more: fighting in desperate circumstances can bring out in you, paradoxically, the selflessness those heroes had. You

may have heard Shakespeare's words from Henry V: "We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; For he to-day that sheds his blood with me Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile, This day shall gentle his condition..."

The true heroes I've met saw those around them as more important than themselves – no matter what they were like in ordinary times, and those heroes often say the honors they receive should not be seen as theirs, but an opportunity for them to draw attention to those who were alongside them.

I have heard these bona fide heroes say that someone else really did more than they did; that they don't deserve the attention. They do not consider themselves worthy, in themselves, of the accolades – they accept them, graciously if grudgingly, in order that the story of their comrades can be known.

So, David, and this little story. If David weren't the subject, then we probably wouldn't even know this thing. How many died to get him that cup of water? The wish that David just blurted out, never expecting anyone to try and accomplish?

We're not told; but there had to be some, perhaps many, as the three fought their way through the enemy lines to the spring in Bethlehem and back again, just to get their commander his cup of water.

That's the story. But in the end, this is a tale of two cups. One, David's cup of water, which he knew he was unworthy to drink, since it had been purchased with human lives – and at the risk of human life, as he says, “Isn't this the blood of men who risked their lives?”, and poured it out in honor of their sacrifice. He poured it out, even though they got it for him, because even though he was all the great things he was, he was not worthy to drink it.

The other is the cup we will soon share, that sits here on this table. We are unworthy of it, as well, because it, too, was bought for us at the cost of lives – one life, in particular – but we are commanded to drink it, since its contents were poured out *for* us.

I'm truly not certain there is any cause worth sacrificing someone else's life for. I do not feel worthy of the sacrifices of the millions who have died for my right to stand here; in your heart of hearts, would you agree?

Think then of the sacrifice God made to make it possible to know his salvation through the death of Jesus. The clear message of Scripture is that we are not worthy, cannot make ourselves worthy, of the sacrifice of Jesus for us. It is impossible to be worthy of the sacrifice of any human, as David realized; how much more beyond our human reach can be *deserving* Christ's death?

There is only one way. David knew his place, in his time: he poured out the water brought to him. Christ had not yet come to bring us this cup of salvation, the cup of the new covenant, the new relationship between us and God.

But now he has, and that is the only way we are – we can be - worthy of this cup, this representation of and mystical participation in Christ's sacrifice, for us: God makes us worthy, by his own act, by his own word. There is no way we can take this lightly, or feel it's our right to drink this cup, eat this bread, because we cannot, as humans, be worthy of God's gifts *unless God makes us worthy*. And, in Jesus Christ, a sacrifice we did not ask for and do not deserve, and in our realization of our unworthiness, we are made free and given the privilege of this sacrament.