

Attaining Unto the First Three (2 Samuel 23:8-12,19)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon challenges believers to strive for spiritual excellence and take personal responsibility in fulfilling God's purpose.

Scripture: 2 Samuel 23:8

Topics: "Spiritual Excellence", "Commitment to God's Purpose"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of spiritual excellence through the example of David's mighty men, who exemplified different levels of commitment and effectiveness in their service to God. He highlights that while many served David, only a few attained the highest standard of greatness, which requires a deep perception of God's will, personal responsibility, and spiritual stamina. The sermon challenges believers to strive for a first-rate spiritual life, recognizing that true greatness involves enduring commitment and faith in God's purpose, even when it seems risky or unpopular. Sparks draws parallels to the Apostle Paul, who also sought to attain the highest calling in Christ, urging listeners to reflect on their own spiritual journey and commitment to God's full thought. Ultimately, the message calls for a response to God's call for deeper dedication and service.

Transcript

"These are the names of the mighty men whom David had... Adino... Eleazar... Shammah" (II Sam. 23:8-12).

"(Abishai) was made their captain: howbeit he attained not unto the first three" (II Sam. 23:19).

We are not so much concerned at the moment with the details of the exploits of these three men as with the fact that David had a number of mighty men who came to him when he was in the stronghold in the wilderness, shut up because of Saul, and that the thirty chief men were divided into groups, each group representing a standard. The thirty were, shall we say, of one more or less general standard of excellence, and then they were divided into smaller groups, each of which represented a higher standard of excellence, until we arrive at the three named above, who are called the first three. Of all the others it is said that they attained not unto the first three. The point which I want to deal with is that of attaining unto pre-eminence in the estimation of the Lord.

Why was this story written? Why have we the record of these men and their feats of strength? Do you think it is just to include in the Bible some thrilling stories of wonderful things that certain men did? Sometimes some of them seem almost phenomenal. But do you think that the record is here just for that purpose? If the Bible is written really on the basis of spiritual principles and not just to record human stories, earthly things, there is something which is spiritual behind everything.

Different Categories Of Spiritual Greatness

If we look behind these exploits for the principle which the Lord has desired to enunciate and illustrate, surely we find it to be this - that it is possible to be first, second or third rate people; that is, it is possible to be put into different categories of spiritual greatness and effectiveness. That is the first thing. Paul sought to encourage Timothy to be no second-rate servant of God, but to attain unto the first, to be outstanding and not just one of a crowd; to be of particular, special account to the Lord. That is the principle, I think, lying behind all that is here. We can be classified. We can be of the thirty, of that category which has a certain quite real spiritual value, significance and accountability. Such people are not by any means nominal. Indeed they are something far more than the nominal crowd of men in Israel. But even so it is possible to go more than one step higher: you can go further and then still further. There is a place which is represented by the first three. I think Paul himself was the embodiment of the spirit of the first three when he said, "One thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14). "What things were gain to me" (and they were not wrong things at all), "these have I counted loss for Christ. Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:7-8). "The excellency"; the thing which excels; the excelling knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord. That is the embodiment of the spirit of that which is first with the Lord.

A Question Of Attaining

Now Paul uses this very word 'attain'. "If by any means I may attain . . ." (Phil. 3:11). It is a question of attaining. This has nothing to do with our initial salvation. We do not attain unto salvation in the initial sense, for that is not the result of any effort or resolve on our part. Salvation, in the sense of our being brought from judgment to reconciliation to God and the abundance of forgiveness and assurance, and so on, is given to us. But then there does arise again and again in the New Testament the matter suggested by this word 'attain'. One man came to Jesus and said, "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17). The Lord Jesus did not say you cannot inherit it. He said substantially that you can inherit it, but that there is also something more to be attained unto. Attaining is something beyond our conversion, it is something more than our receiving the gift of eternal life. There is a position to be reached of value to the Lord which is the position par excellence, the supreme position. The Lord wants to find in us the determination that, by His grace, we are not going to accept anything less than the highest and the fullest that God means in respect of our value and usefulness to Him.

Marks Of Supreme Greatness

(A) The Perception Of God's Full Thought

You will ask, Well, what are the marks of this kind of pre-eminence? I do not know that it was altogether what these men did that made them excel, although what they did was certainly outstanding. There were others who did very remarkable things. One other went down into a pit and there slew a lion, in time of snow. Well, get into a pit with a lion! A lion at bay is quite a proposition; it presents a challenge and needs

a good deal of courage. Others engaged in battle with mighty giants and slew them. These were exploits. These three, perhaps, did something even more outstanding than that. But I do not think it was altogether in what they did that their superiority lay. Of course, Adino slew three hundred men single-handed. (I Chronicles 11:11 gives the number as three hundred, and II Samuel 23:8 as eight hundred; the discrepancy we will not discuss at the moment.) Singlehanded he tackled this overwhelming situation, and did not stop until the task was accomplished and the last man lay dead. Then of Eleazar we read that there was a band of Philistines threatening to attack a plot of ground full of barley. The rest of Israel fled before them, but Eleazar stood in the midst of the plot and defended it, and slew the Philistines until his hand was weary and clave to his sword (1 Chron. 11:12-14). And what of Shammah? In similar manner he defended a plot of lentils from the marauding Philistines when all others had fled, and slew the enemy, and thus preserved the food of the people of God.

The above exploits may have their own symbolic significance, but that is not the point. The point is this: these mighty men lived in a day when things were in transition. Something not according to God's full thought for His people was holding the ground. Saul was on the throne, and that was not God's thought. The people had been brought under the domination of this other order of things, and were therefore all the time in peril of spiritual starvation, of defeat, in weakness, bondage and uncertainty. They did not know where they were nor which way to go. Everything was indefinite and in a most unsatisfactory state, because another thought than God's thought was prevailing amongst the Lord's people. God's thought in fulness was centred in David; and the first characteristic of the mighty men, all of them, was that they perceived the state of things. They saw that the word of the Lord revealed as God's mind something more and other than what was prevailing, and that 'seeing' was the beginning of the movement, the transition, the secession, to David. That is the first thing - to see what is not generally seen by the Lord's people: the thing which the Lord really would have: that which, if only it were established, would mean such a big change for the people of God. In what greater fulness and on what a higher level they would be living! That is the beginning of the greatness that in principle is here before us. They perceived the thought of God, the direction in which that thought lay, and they said, 'We have done with this other! We have been a part of it, but we have finished with it. From now on, we are out for God's full thought, and we are not going to take anything less.' They committed themselves to it. That was the beginning of the greatness.

(B) A Sense Of Responsibility

Then you find these men were characterised by a very real sense of responsibility. They seem never to have needed any encouraging, or to have anything said to them, to urge them on. They took the initiative in the matter of responsibility. They each one said, in effect, 'Well, this supreme matter of God's full thought becomes a personal matter with me; I bring it right down to myself. The others may have gone, there may be no one else here for it, but because I have seen it I refuse to abandon it. I take this thing up myself.' And so, whether against three hundred or eight hundred or the whole unnumbered band of Philistines, these men take their stand, though alone. It is the whole responsibility of this full testimony taken up by the individual as though it rested upon him alone for the time being. That is superior greatness. There are people who can move in crowds, and who will act when they have others supporting and encouraging them, but many fade out when it is a case of facing this tremendous thing alone. Superior greatness is shown by taking personal responsibility whether others do so or not.

Look at Paul. From his conversion to the end of his life he seems to have been like that. At the end we hear him saying, "All that are in Asia turned away from me" (II Tim. 1:15). This one has gone, that one has gone - "Only Luke is with me" (II Tim. 4:11). He is practically alone, but he is not giving up. It is just at that

time, more than ever, that he stands for God's full thought; and we get the fruit of his stand in his prison letters. Superior greatness is willingness to stand for what God has revealed as His will, though we have to stand alone. It may be one against many, there may be a considerable amount of aloneness, but that is where the test of our spiritual measure comes in, in initiative and responsibility that does not wait for an organisation to come into being to deal with the situation, but makes it a personal matter - and a thorough-going one, too.

(C) Spiritual Stamina

Then it does seem that the measure of their endurance in seeing the thing through to a finish was a feature of their spiritual greatness. A thing that seems characteristic of them all is said about one of these men - "his hand clave unto the sword" (I Sam. 23:10); that is, he had held on so firmly and so persistently that he now could not let go when he wanted. His sword had almost become a part of his hand. He is in great weariness with the fight, but he sees it through to the end. And this is very important. There are plenty of people who can take up things and start them with zest, but who leave a whole host of unfinished things all over the place. Their lives are marked by unfinished things. They begin in good spirit, but nothing is carried through to the end. There comes a point of tedium, of weariness, a point where the cost or the danger increases, and then the hand slackens and the thing is not finished. There is a lot in the New Testament about enduring unto the end. Spiritual stamina is a test of greatness. Oh, we do need spiritual stamina to stick to a task and go through with it and not give up, our hand cleaving to our sword: we have got into this thing, and we just cannot let go. It is not even a question now of whether we want to let go, we are so committed that we cannot. A mark of greatness is that stamina which goes beyond the initial zest and the first enthusiasms, beyond all the stimulus of a fresh challenge, of a new situation. When tedium sets in and all romance has gone out of it, it is a grim, grim business: now we have simply to stick at it. So Eleazar's hand clave to his sword. He was weary, but he finished the job; he was not put off half-way through. That is what is written over all that these three men did. They finished the task; it was very costly, but they got through, they proved their stamina. It may be all right to go down into a pit and slay a lion, and get it all over in a few minutes; or to go up to a giant and give him one blow, and that is the end of the business. But it is another thing to stand and fight man after man, raid after raid, rush after rush, repelling constantly-renewed attacks. You may take it these bands of Philistines did not make just one assault on each of these men. One after another the enemies fell before him; they re-formed and others came on - whether it were three hundred or eight hundred of them. They came on until the last of them was done; and David's warriors did not give up until the fight was finished. The stamina of these men is remarkable. In like manner we find Paul continuing to the end. Yes, weary, heart-sick, worn out in the battle, but he can yet say, "I have finished the course" (II Tim. 4:7). There was no giving up.

(D) Inclusively - Standing For The Fullness Of Christ

This is the test of spiritual stature; firstly, seeing God's full thought and accepting nothing less, being committed to that; secondly, initiative and responsibility where that thought of God is concerned so that we do not have to be told what is needed, nor urged nor coerced into doing it: we are alive to it, and on the spot, and doing it because it has become a matter of personal concern to us; and then, thirdly (to change the metaphor), having put our hand to the plough, no looking back, no half-ploughed field, no breaking off because things are getting monotonous or difficult, but going through with it even though it be in weariness.

I do not know that there is much else to say about this. There is no doubt about it, we are in the counterpart of such a situation to-day, and the majority of people are not prepared to pay the price. It is

easier to accept a lesser thought of God, one that is not so costly. But the point is, are we going to attain to the first three, or are we going to be in the second group or in the third group? That is the question we have to answer. When we have said everything else, what does it amount to? In a word, it is the establishment of the Absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ, and of the Absolute Sovereignty of God's full thought as embodied in Him. David represented that. He was the embodiment of God's full thought. Fullness was to come in with him, and it was to come in along the line of his absolute headship, and lordship. Well, that is a type of the Lord Jesus.

A Way Of Faith

I might add this word. It was a day of faith. These men truly perceived that the Word of God for its fulfilment lay in the direction of David, but you must remember David was a lonely man at this time. He had very few with him, and those with him were in a real state of weakness; they had been denuded of everything; and the whole country was with Saul. Saul had the reins of government in his hand. It was a risky thing to break with that. You did not know, humanly speaking, whether David's cause was going to succeed or not, and you did not want it to be one of those small revolts that would be suppressed and then everything would be lost. You were risking everything. Ah, but it was a day of faith, a day when all who took that line had to take it by faith, they committed themselves to the line of faith. Surely it is like that. To abandon ourselves to God's purpose in its fullness (which is not the general objective of God's people) and become an apparently small nucleus who are after something more than the average, and to believe that it is going to have any success at all, a lot of faith is needed for doing that. If you want an easy time, you will not take that way. But there is the test again. Is that not just the whole point of Hebrews 11, when you reach the summary of it all - "What shall I more say? for the time will fail me if I tell of..." You notice that David is mentioned and it is said, among other things, that those concerned "subdued kingdoms... waxed mighty in war..." They did exploits. I think these men of David's come in there, and it was the triumph of faith. That was the test of their spiritual measure.

This challenges us. Are we going to be second-rate, third-rate, or first-rate, recognising that it is an extra cost that is involved, and that the Lord is in need of it? David was desperately in need of this kind of helper, and we are not wrong in saying the same thing of the Lord - He is desperately in need of people like this. There are not many, and His cause is very largely suffering because He has not this type. Surely He is calling us to face the challenge which this presents.

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