

## *Lead Me in the Way Everlasting*

The rugged young man paused at the brook, stooped, and from the creek bed gathered a handful of smooth stones. This he had done many times before, as a matter of habit. Rocks worn smooth with the rushing of water had frequently served him as perfect projectiles to be used against the enemies of his flocks. At his side, in his shepherd's pouch, they awaited the moment of necessity; stones destined for his sling. A bear, a lion, perhaps a wolf who ventured too close to his bleating herd would feel the sting of a creek-born stone launched with stunning accuracy like a rifle shot from his sling. The quiet slip of stone against leather and the spinning shrill of his sling were the only warnings more than one predator had heard before God had delivered it into the shepherd's hands.

The Lord had done it before and he would do it again. He would do it today, now. In the presence of Saul, the great King of Israel, the young shepherd had confidently made this boast. No one who assaults the flocks of the Almighty with such contempt will stand unchallenged. This one too, assured David, will suffer the same fate as the lion and the bear.

The mighty Philistine, twice a day for forty days had stood to defy the armies of Israel. A giant of a man, wearing enough armor to suit two of Israel's soldiers, both at dawn's early light and at the going down of the sun, had stood across the valley as the sun glistened on his armor rehearsing his well-worn words of contempt. Israel's soldiers by now knew it by heart. "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other."

There they stood. Goliath, with the Philistines on one hill, issuing the challenge and Israel across the valley opposite him, responding day after day in terror, "Who can go against such a man?!" Not a single soldier had stepped forward to meet the God-defying giant; not a sword had been raised, no battle-hardened warrior was prepared to risk his life, not a single man in all of Israel until the ruddy young shepherd from the hills marched into the valley, and with one eye on the mighty Philistine gathered five smooth stones from the brook.

Goliath bellowed when he saw David with shepherd's staff in hand, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" He then proceeded to curse David in the name of his gods. "Come here and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!"

David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a

God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands.”

David sprinted towards the Philistine and as he ran reached into his pouch for a stone from the brook. The shrill of the sling and the whir of the stone were all that Goliath heard. The water worn projectile sank into his forehead and moments later, with mighty Goliath's sword in hand David removed his head and held it up for Israel to see. The Philistines fled in disbelief before the armies of Israel as they now, with renewed faith, roused their enemies.

That night the young shepherd turned warrior slept in his tent next to the weapons of the once mighty Goliath. Once more God had delivered David from his enemy. Once more the flocks grazed in peace, another predator laid waste by stone and sling. What prayers did David pray that night?

Surely this is one of the greatest stories of heroic faith in the Old Testament. A young shepherd by faith defeats a giant. Who isn't moved to greater faith in light of this story? But who, on the other hand, can really identify with David? Killed any Goliath's lately? Have you been the one to stand and fight while all others cower in fear? Have you taken your foe's weapons into your tent lately? Most of our lives don't look like David in this scene. But do you want to know what's comforting? Most of David's life didn't look like this scene either.

In very short order this same man would be found scrambling from cave to rocky crag to hideout deep in the Judean wilderness fleeing from the man who ought to have honored him. Saul, the king of Israel in a jealous rage hotly pursued David seeing him as a threat to his throne. The hero David, now treated like a villain, forced to live in a hostile and inhospitable place, fearing for his very life, day after day after day. Forsaken, hated, despised and mistreated by the king; what did David's prayers look like in the wilderness? Doubt, despair, fear, and anxiety are part of the wilderness. Perhaps our hero is now more familiar to us.

David had great moments yet in his future; moments when his faith was richly rewarded. But he knew his share of ugliness and despair as well. Pinnacles of faith often appeared adjacent to valleys of sin and despair. The glorious King in his worst moment bows to his own passions and at the sight of a beautiful bathing woman lowers himself to adultery followed by murder. The story of David and Bathsheba is heart wrenching and faith rending. We find ourselves cheering against our hero as he sinks into sins clutches. His life in tatters, the prophet has spoken, his son is dead and his future to be filled with turmoil. What words will this man speak to God now? Where is the young ruddy shepherd who slays giants by faith? Does he ever pick up Goliath's sword, turn it over in his hand and ponder those earlier days? Is this any closer to where you live?

The wonderful thing about David's faith journey is that we aren't left just to speculate about what he struggled with. We're not left to simply read between the lines in his life's story pondering what he was praying, guessing at what he struggled with, wondering how

strong or weak his faith was. We are not only incredibly privileged to read of David's astounding life of highs and lows we are blessed profoundly to hear his prayers, to experience his heart's longings and to follow him in his journey with God. We have all of that and more in the Psalms. The Psalms urge us to journey with David. They urge us to pray his prayers. They give us voice to our doubts and fears. They give us words for the mountain tops and words for the valley and everything in between.

The profound faith of David was this: Not that he never waived in faith, not that he never doubted or feared, not that he never wished that every last one of his enemies was dead but that his heart always turned back to God. David truly was a man after God's heart. In his victories the praise of God was first on his lips. In his darkest moments of sin it was to God he cried out in agony. Psalm after Psalm after Psalm David prays himself back to faith. He moves from anxiety to peace, from despair to hope, from doubt to faith and if you don't find yourself in need of travelling some of those same roads maybe you should check your pulse. We don't know how we ought to pray, we don't have the words, our prayers beg for real expression, but do not despair God has provided the words for our prayers in the Psalms.

In all of David's ups and downs we can be assured of one thing, God. God was with him, leading him, guiding him, humbling him, sowing life into his soul, planting hope and persistence and undying faith. Take a little journey with me through one of my favorite Psalms of David today.

Psalm 139 (NIV)

### Psalm 139

For the director of music. Of David. A psalm.

- 1 O LORD, (with all of your life laid out before you in plain view, all your struggles and victories all your agony laid aside your rejoicing) O LORD, you have searched me  
and you know me.
- 2 You know when I sit and when I rise;  
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
- 3 You discern my going out and my lying down;  
you are familiar with all my ways.
- 4 Before a word is on my tongue  
you know it completely, O LORD.

This is a picture of our utter transparency before God. We hide nothing. In our better moments we realize this. We are open books before God.

- 5 You hem me in—behind and before;  
you have laid your hand upon me.
- 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me,

too lofty for me to attain.

- 7 Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.  
9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
10 even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.  
11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me  
and the light become night around me,"  
12 even the darkness will not be dark to you;  
the night will shine like the day,  
for darkness is as light to you.

There is a strange tension here for me in these words. At first read this section can come across as God surrounding us like a foe; as if we seek to be free and God surrounds us to keep us imprisoned. And yet this same strange tension exists in our lives. We do seek, in our weaknesses our flesh seeks, to be free from God's constraints in our lives. I wonder if what David has experienced is that tension – his flesh and his spirit at war with one another and all the time and through all things God hemming him in, not giving up on him, insisting on being 'in his face' through all of life. These words to me have become words of comfort and assurance. God knows us so thoroughly, there is nothing about us that is a secret to him and yet how does he respond? He lays his hand on us... not in anger or judgment in this context but in comfort and assurance. The wonder of his hand upon us is beyond our comprehension. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me to attain. If I wanted to run away from you Lord, where would I go? If I wandered away from you Lord where could I go that you were not. If I made my way to the heavens above or if I was cast into the depths of the sea you would be there. If I rose early in the morning and settled on the far side of the sea, even there I would know your touch. If I considered that in the darkness you would be absent I would be a fool. You own the darkness. It is as light to you.

- 13 For you created my inmost being;  
you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
your works are wonderful,  
I know that full well.

"I know that full well." Yet he needs reminding just the same. Just like you and I do.

- 15 My frame was not hidden from you  
when I was made in the secret place.  
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,  
16 your eyes saw my unformed body.  
All the days ordained for me

were written in your book  
before one of them came to be.

<sup>17</sup> How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!

These thoughts are not David's thoughts. They are God's thoughts. This is not David thinking about God day and night. This is about God thinking about David. How precious to me are your thoughts. I don't hear this being David's amazement at how wise and all knowing God is, although that is certainly something to be amazed about. I hear David delighting that God so frequently thinks about him. We are in good hands when we're in God's hands. We can sleep in peace knowing God thinks of us.

<sup>18</sup> Were I to count them,  
they would outnumber the grains of sand.  
When I awake,  
I am still with you.

Is David surprised or confident that when he awakes he is in the presence of God? I read this Psalm, I pray these words understanding that that God's innumerable thoughts for me is his assurance that in the morning I will be with him.

<sup>19</sup> If only you would slay the wicked, O God!  
Away from me, you bloodthirsty men!  
<sup>20</sup> They speak of you with evil intent;  
your adversaries misuse your name.  
<sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD,  
and abhor those who rise up against you?  
<sup>22</sup> I have nothing but hatred for them;  
I count them my enemies.

Is this attitude commendable? Or is it offensive? Whatever it is, it's real. Don't you have times when you relate to it? Just get rid of all my opposition God and all will be well. Be done with those who oppose me O Lord. I hear the honesty in these words. But in the end David knows that his agenda, his longing, his vindication is not what ultimately matters, in fact not what is ultimately important to him.

<sup>23</sup> Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
test me and know my anxious thoughts.  
<sup>24</sup> See if there is any offensive way in me,  
and lead me in the way everlasting.

What a glorious ending to a wonderful Psalm. You know everything about me God. I know that you care for me far more than I know. I'm yours O Lord. I surrender. Do your work in me. Search me, know me, test me and lead me.

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