

Stand Firm in God's Grace (Part 7)

Introduction:

Does this sound familiar?

The armies were lining up on opposing mountainsides. The vicious sounds of their war cries echoed through the intervening valley. The rattle of shields and the ringing of swords proclaimed the frenzy of energy pent up in the warriors. The stomp of marching feet beat the rhythm of impending battle. One young man had travelled at his father's request to get word from his three older brothers fighting in the war. As he spoke to them in the ranks, a shocking thing occurred. A giant stepped from the ranks of the Philistines into the valley. He was at least nine feet tall. His coat of mail weighed 125 lbs. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam and the spearhead weighed nearly 8 lbs. No doubt, the restlessness of the waiting armies ceased. Silence fell and Goliath's voice shattered it. "I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together" (**I Samuel 17:10**, ESV). The army of Israel fled from this one giant of a man. Army was ready to face army, but no individual was ready to face the giant. But the young man, David, was not afraid. He went to the king and offered to fight. Despite the king's protests, David insisted. Turning down the aid of the king's armor, David stepped into the valley. Goliath mocked him, "Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?" (**I Samuel 17:43**, ESV). David responded with confidence, reached into a pouch, grabbed a smooth stone he had retrieved from a nearby brook, placed it in a sling, and slung it directly into Goliath's head. The giant collapsed. David took the giant's sword and cut off his head. If this little boy could do that to the giant, what could the rest of Israel's army do to the Philistines? The Philistine army fled and was routed.

We know this story well, but I have one question. Last week we asked, "Who killed Goliath?" We all knew the answer. God killed Goliath. David may have been God's weapon, but God killed Goliath. I have a different question for you this week. If God killed Goliath, what did God do? David stepped out onto the battlefield. David selected the stone. David put the stone in the sling. David swung the sling. David let loose the stone. David wielded the sword. David cut off Goliath's head. David did all of that. What did God do? Did He slow Goliath down as he charged David? Did He simply give David the training with the lion and the bear so David would be ready? Did He guide David's hand as he aimed the sling? Did He increase the velocity of the stone so it would pierce a bronze helmet? What did God do?

Here is the confusing answer to our question. I don't know. Neither do you. And herein lies one of our biggest problems with the study of grace. We want to know but most often we just don't know what God does. But this also leads to one of our biggest lessons about standing firm in God's grace. We have learned that if we are going to stand firm in God's grace, we must recognize our need for God's grace, we must listen to God's word, we must hope fully in God's grace, we must live by faith and not by law, we must keep God's grace pure, we must rely on God's strength. Today, we learn that if we want to stand firm in God's grace we must Give God the Glory as David did in **I Samuel 17:46-47** even when we don't know what God did.

Discussion:

I. God's grace defies dissection.

- A. This is our biggest problem with God's grace and the cause of most of the arguments and debates about it. We want to dissect it, cross-sect it, systemize it, and quantify it. We want to know the whens, whys, wheres, hows. We want to know where God's grace ends and man's work begins. We want to treat grace like an engine that we can take apart and put back together again. We want to be able to say, "This part here provides 25% of the power, this part provides 35% of the power. The pistons do this. The spark plugs do that. The fuel does this." We want to be able to answer all the questions about it to keep anyone from ever abusing it. The problem is it just can't be done. I love the statement from Philip Yancey that he modified from E.B. White's comment on humor: "[Grace] can be dissected, as a frog, but the thing dies in the process, and the innards are discouraging to any but the pure scientific mind."¹ That is exactly what happens when we try to dissect grace. It dies. Its meaning and comfort is lost. Grace defies dissection.
- B. Allow me to illustrate. There are plenty of stories in the Bible that show exactly what God, in His grace, did to provide victory for His people.

¹ Philip Yancey, What's So Amazing About Grace, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, 1997, p 16.

1. When Israel escaped Egypt, we know what God did. He turned the staff into a serpent. He sent the plagues. He divided the Red Sea and then brought it crashing down on the Egyptian horde. Moses did the talking (**Exodus 7-14**).
 2. When Joshua fought Jericho (**Joshua 6**), we know what God did and we know what Joshua did. Joshua marched around the walls. God brought the walls down.
 3. We know about Samson. God gave him super-human strength. Samson just messed everything up until the very end (**Judges 13-16**).
 4. When Sennacherib defied God and tried to conquer Judah, we know how it worked. Hezekiah prayed. God sent His angel to kill 185,000 Assyrians in one night (**II Kings 19:14-37**).
 5. These stories make us comfortable because we think we can quantify them. We can see what God did and what man did, we think.
- C. But it is not always that way. In fact, there are plenty of stories that throw all of this into a cocked hat and cause us to throw up our hands and claim we just don't know.
1. When Deborah and Barak defeated Sisera and Jael drove a stake through his head, the text says God gave the victory. He routed the enemy. He subdued the king of Canaan. But what did God do? All we see is Barak's army fighting Sisera's and Jael conning him into going to sleep (**Judges 4**). Where did God's work end and the army's work begin?
 2. When Esther went into Ahasuerus and overthrew the plot of Haman, the whole point is that God delivered his people. But what did God do? Where did Esther's work end and God's work begin (**Esther 1-8**)?
 3. When Paul's ship was wrecked on the island of Malta, God's angel had told him everyone would survive. Then it says they all either swam to shore or they grabbed planks and floated (**Acts 27**). Where did God's saving begin and the men's swimming end?
 4. And again, when David slew Goliath (**I Samuel 17**), what did God do?
- D. The fact is God's grace defies dissection. We have to become comfortable with the words, "I don't know." The more we try to dissect grace, the more we kill it. Further, the more we argue, the more we destroy the confidence God intends it to bring. Some in dissecting God's grace push and push to show all that God does and fear that we don't glorify God if we show man working. They try to dissect out everything that man does and somehow try to fit it into God's work. On the other end of the spectrum, others, afraid we will give men permission to sin, seem to try to dissect out everything God does and somehow explain it all away as part of man's working. Why can't we just accept that God is working and man must surrender to Him and we can't always determine where one ends and the other begins?

II. Understand the paradox of God's grace.

- A. A paradox is a statement or proposition that seems contradictory but actually expresses a truth. God's grace is like that. When we start to study God's grace and man's submission, we tend to think in either/or when we need to think both/and. Too many of us think that God's grace and man's work are contradictory so we either become Calvinists or we start teaching a merited salvation. We have to learn to hold both concepts in our hearts at the same time.
- B. Consider the paradox as it is expressed in **Philippians 2:12-13**. We are told to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. That is us working. But why should we work out our salvation? Because God is the one working in us both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Now which one is it? Are we working? Or is God working? The answer is, "Yes." Why do we work? Because God is working. Why does God's work help? Because we are working. If we try to dissect this passage, we are going to destroy it.
- C. Consider the paradox as it is expressed in **I Corinthians 15:10**. By God's grace, Paul was an apostle. God's grace wasn't given to Paul in vain because he worked harder than any of the other apostles. But, Paul says it wasn't really him working, it was God's grace. Now which is it? Was it God's grace or Paul's work? Was Paul working or was God working? Again, the answer is, "Yes." When we try to dissect this and figure out how it was God's grace that was working in Paul or how Paul's working was really what made God's grace work, we'll lose the point. God's grace is not in vain when we work; our work is not in vain because of God's grace. Tie this in with Paul's conclusion of this entire section in **I Corinthians 15:58**. "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (ESV). If we are laboring in Christ, our work isn't in vain. Why? Because of God's grace. What really matters, our work or God's grace? "Yes."
- D. Anytime the divine intersects with the human, we are going to struggle to understand. How was Jesus both human and divine at the same time? I don't know. How exactly did God inspire the Bible through man? I don't know. How does God's grace work in accordance with my submission? I don't know. But I know that it does because that is what God says. I think this paradox is well-summarized by the statement attributed to Augustine of Hippo, even if we may not mean exactly what he meant by it: "Without God, I cannot; without me, God will not."

III. So, get to work, but give God the glory.

- A. If David hadn't stepped out on the battlefield, what would have happened to Goliath? Goliath had defied Israel and their God for 40 days (**I Samuel 17:16**) and God did nothing. But when David killed Goliath, to whom did he give the glory? God. Could David answer the question any better than we can? Did he know exactly what God did? Did he know where his aim, strength, courage ended and God's grace began? If so, the text doesn't indicate it. He simply accepted the fact that he was God's instrument and he gave God the glory (**I Samuel 17:46-47**). David epitomizes what we need to grasp about God's grace. We need to get to work, but give God the glory.
- B. Since we cannot see God's involvement or quantify God's involvement, we have a tendency to ignore God's involvement. **Proverbs 3:6**, however, tells us to acknowledge God in all our ways. That is, we need to recognize that God is involved and we need to give thanks for that involvement. As **Acts 17:25, 28** say we live and move because of Him. In one sense, without God, we can't do anything. We need to acknowledge Him in everything. That is why **I Thessalonians 5:18** says we should give thanks in all circumstances, because God is involved in all of it even when we can't see it. Does that mean we sit on our thumbs and just wait on God to do His work? No. It means we get to work, but we give God the glory.
- C. When we have fought the giants and come out victorious, we may only see what we have done. But we need to know that God was doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. When we boast to others about our victories, we need to boast about our weakness and God's strength (**II Corinthians 12:9-10**).
- D. **Proverbs 16:9** provides a great statement of this. "The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps" (ESV). We plan, we execute, we work, but God establishes whether we can see what He is doing or not. So, we need to give God the glory.
- E. All of this is an important part of standing firm in God's grace. If we don't give God the glory, we tacitly are giving ourselves the glory. That was the exact problem of Israel in the judges. When they came into the Promised Land and got comfortable, they didn't give God the glory. They forgot God. Then they fell. We will do the same. When we forget that God is working on our behalf and forget to glorify Him, we will start to rely on ourselves and that is when we fall. "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall" (**I Corinthians 10:12**). That is, let anyone who thinks he is standing because of his own strength take heed, that is when we will fall. Yes, work hard, but acknowledge God in all your ways. Give God the glory.

Conclusion:

I understand that for people caught up in the world and the flesh, today's lesson makes absolutely no sense. It seems foolish to tell us to glorify God when we don't even fully know what He is doing. It is as foolish as the message of the cross (cf. **I Corinthians 1:23-25**). But to us who are being saved by the grace of God, giving Him the glory even when we cannot quantify His work is the power of God for our victory. We know what it was like to try to overcome on our own. We know how we failed. We know that victory only comes through Him and His strength. When we have victory, we will glorify Him...always.