

## Growing in Greatness

### 2 Samuel 5

Today we are going to think about greatness – our greatness as individual followers of Christ and our greatness as one small part of the body of Christ. We aren't going to think about greatness as the world does – position, fame, and power. We are going to think about greatness as Jesus conceived of it; we are going to think about greatness in kingdom of God. Jesus said things like, “whoever wants to become *great* among you shall be your servant” and “never in Israel have I seen such *great* faith.” Greatness in the kingdom is a matter of things like servanthood and humility and faith and the fruit of the Spirit.

This morning I want to challenge us – both individually and as a church – to pursue greatness in the kingdom of God, making it our ambition to be great in the ways that really matter: great in faith, great in humility, great in servanthood, great in love. I realize that this might sound strange to your ears. You might even think that it's wrong to even think in these terms. Isn't it better just to seek God and not think about greatness? Doesn't thinking about your own greatness leads to pride and an air of superiority?

Well, I certainly think there's a caution here. It is possible for pride to grow on our virtues (as William Law pointed out). We do need to guard ourselves from pride. But the type of greatness I'm thinking about addresses even that. The alternative is to settle for being mediocre when it comes to faith, servanthood, and love.

This whole theme is suggested by the next passage we are going to consider in our study of the life of David, 2 Samuel 5. This passage describes how David “greater and greater because the Lord God of Hosts was with him.” David's greatness was a function of the presence of God in His life. He was great in position and status because he was king. But his greatness was much more substantive than that: his greatness was a manifestation of the presence of God in his life. I'm going to argue that God wants to give us the same type of the greatness we see in David because God is “with us” every bit as much as He was with David.

#### ***David's Growth in Greatness: (2 Samuel 5:1-10)***

After Saul's death David became king over the tribe of Judah (2 Samuel 2:1-4), ruling from the city of Hebron. One of Saul's sons (Ish-bosheth) was king over the other 11 tribes of Israel. For seven and a half years, these two nations fought against each other. We read in 3:1:

1 The war between the house of Saul and the house of David lasted a long time. David grew stronger and stronger, while the house of Saul grew weaker and weaker.

This statement furthers the plot of 1 and 2 Samuel: God was fulfilling His promise to David to make him king over all of Israel. By the time we come to 2 Samuel 5, the stage is set for David to move into this God-given role. We see here that the eleven tribes that Saul had ruled came to the conclusion that David should be their king.

1 All the tribes of Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "We are your own flesh and blood. 2 In the past, while Saul was king over us, you were the one who led Israel on

their military campaigns. And the LORD said to you, 'You will shepherd My people Israel, and you will become their ruler.'"

The tribes of Israel came to David and confessed three significant facts. First, they acknowledged, "We are your own flesh and blood." The fact that they were blood relatives suggested that they shouldn't be at war with each other. Second, they remembered that even when Saul was their king that David had led them in battle. When David returned victorious from battle, the women sang a song that went, "Saul has slain his thousands, but David his ten thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7) – which drove Saul crazy with jealousy. The point is that David had a track record of being their most successful commander.

Third, and perhaps most significantly, they acknowledged that the Lord had told David, "You will shepherd my people Israel, and you will become their ruler." This theme of David being a shepherd-ruler will be developed more fully later. But the basic idea is that David wouldn't rule over Israel with an iron fist like the kings of other nations. David would shepherd the people the same way he had once cared for and protected his father's sheep. As a shepherd of God's people, David's leadership anticipates Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

In light of these three facts, we read in verse 3:

3 When all the elders of Israel had come to King David at Hebron, the king made a compact with them at Hebron before the LORD, and they anointed David king over Israel.

Verses 4 and 5 summarize the duration of David's reign:

4 David was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned forty years. 5 In Hebron he reigned over Judah seven years and six months, and in Jerusalem he reigned over all Israel and Judah thirty-three years.

Beginning at age 30 David reigned a total of 40 years: 7 ½ years over the tribe of Judah and an additional 33 years over the all Israel and Judah. After being on the run for ten years, God gave David a long and prosperous reign over all Israel.

Verses 6 through 10 record a very significant event in the history of Israel: David captures the city of Jerusalem and establishes it as the capital of Israel.

6 Now the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land, and they said to David, "You shall not come in here, but the blind and lame will turn you away"; thinking, "David cannot enter here."

The Jebusites (who occupied Jerusalem) mocked David by saying that the blind and the lame could defend Jerusalem against his army. They thought that the city was impenetrable.

7 Nevertheless, David captured the stronghold of Zion, that is the city of David.

David's words recorded in verse 8 need to be read in light of the Jebusites' earlier taunt:

8 David said on that day, "Whoever would strike the Jebusites, let him reach the lame and the blind, who are hated by David's soul, through the water tunnel." Therefore they say, "The blind or the lame shall not come into the house."

David isn't saying that his soul hates those who are literally lame and blind. He is probably playing off of the Jebusites' taunt that the lame and the blind could defend Jerusalem against his army. David seems to be turning their insult back upon them by calling the able-bodied Jebusite soldiers with 20/20 vision "lame and blind."<sup>1</sup> We don't know the details, but apparently David's men entered Jerusalem through the tunnels that carried water into the city.

In verses 9 and 10 we have the statement of David's increasing "greatness."

9 So David lived in the stronghold and called it the city of David. And David built all around from the Millo and inward. 10 David became greater and greater, for the LORD God of hosts was with him.

[The Millo refers to the "stone-filled terraces" upon which the walls of Jerusalem were built.] David was 37 when it was written that he "became greater and greater, for the Lord God of hosts was with him" (it could be translated, that David "grew in greatness"). This isn't merely a statement of his military might; it's a statement about his character and influence. This is a statement about David's growing maturity. Most commonly in the Scriptures, "great" is an adjective used of God; but because God was "with him" David grew in greatness.

David's growth in greatness wasn't an isolated event; it was the byproduct of a life lived in the presence of God. We've seen that David was trained early in life by ordinary roles and responsibilities. All his years of music lessons paid off when Saul hired him to play the harp in his palace. All his years as a shepherd, defending the sheep against predators such as lions and bears, paid off when he fought Goliath. His ten years in the wilderness running from King Saul definitely honed his leadership. He learned to deal with wicked and worthless men; he learned how to receive the forgiveness of God when he sinned (we saw that his deception was responsible for the death of 85 priests in Nob); he learned to curb his own desire for revenge; he learned to accept the sovereignty of God (most people who endured what he did would be bitter and angry at God). In other words, everything in David's life – both the good and the bad, the pleasant and the bitter – contributed to the person he had become. And this growth continued when he became king.

Even though David was flawed and inconsistent, he "became greater and greater, for the Lord God of hosts was with him." Whereas the Spirit had departed from Saul, the Spirit was mighty in David's life. David proves that you don't have to be perfect to become "greater and greater." What really matters is that the Lord God of hosts is "with you" and that you participate with His work in your life. When you read the Psalms that David wrote in response to specific experiences, it's obvious that David was participating in God's work in his life.

There is a sense in which it should be said of every single believer in Jesus Christ that s/he “became greater and greater, for the Lord God of hosts was with him/her.” Jesus emphasized over and over to His disciples, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28), “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18), etc. When you read the book of Acts, it becomes very clear that when Jesus and the Lord God of Hosts are “with you” through the indwelling Holy Spirit, you become “great” in ways that are impossible on your own. After all, Jesus had told His disciples that the “least” in the kingdom of heaven is “greater” than John the Baptist.

I imagine that when I talk about “greatness” some of you are thinking, “Hold on a minute. The Christian life isn’t always ‘up and to the right’ (in the sense that we never regress or struggle in our faith). What about seasons of discouragement? What about the dark night of the soul where a genuine believer can’t sense God’s presence at all? This talk of greatness sounds overly optimistic at best and triumphalistic at worst.” Those are good points. Growing in greatness (as I understand it) isn’t incompatible with seasons of discouragement or even times of disobedience. As with David, God uses everything in our lives and in our past to bring about this growth in greatness. God doesn’t waste a thing. He doesn’t waste your failures and sins, circumstances beyond your control, what your enemies do to you, etc.

Here’s the challenge: *If God wants us to grow in “greatness,” shouldn’t we want the same thing?* Shouldn’t we want for ourselves what God wants for us? And shouldn’t we trust that God will use everything in our lives to do this work as we seek Him?

David was 37 when it was written that he “became greater and greater because the Lord God of hosts was with him.” Quite honestly, by the time many believers have reached the age of 37, the dream of greatness in the kingdom of God is a distant memory. Actually, I’ve talked with lots of believers in their 30s, 40s, and 50s who feel that their glory days (spiritually speaking) were in high school or college. There’s certainly nothing wrong with having powerful spiritual experiences in high school or college, but God *never* meant for us to peak spiritually in our early twenties.

But quite often that’s what happens. We get more guarded and cautious in relation to God and church and all things spiritual. When I was in college the attitude was, “All-night prayer on Friday night? Sure, I was just going to be sleeping anyway. . .” But now, it’s a big deal to commit to praying for 30 minutes on a weekend. My hunch is that God wants me to be somewhere in between where I was in college and where I am now. We become more cynical (some even become scoffers – mocking those who aren’t cynical). We become less spontaneous – perhaps less sensitive to the leading of the Spirit. We often have less anticipation that the Spirit of God within us might do the miraculous and extraordinary in our lives. Some of us need to fight these tendencies.

I take great courage in the fact that by the Spirit, it’s possible to continue growing in greatness in the kingdom of God our entire lives. A great example of this is a man named Henri Nouwen. Nouwen was a famous author and speaker. You may know his book *The Parable of the Prodigal Son* which contains reflections on Rembrandt’s painting. For twenty years Nouwen taught pastoral ministry and theology at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. As you might imagine, most people thought he was doing well since he was a famous author and speaker who taught in

prestigious universities. But inwardly he was dying. He writes that his success “was putting his own soul in danger”; he was spending less and less time in contemplative prayer and more and more time on the urgent. And so he prayed for God to deliver Him.

God’s deliverance came in the form of an invitation to join a community of mentally challenged adults outside of Toronto. When he was 54 years old, Nouwen moved from Harvard to Daybreak, “from the best and brightest wanting to rule the world, to men and women who had few or no words and were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society” (*In the Name of Jesus*, p. 11). He entered a community that could care less about his accomplishments and reputation. It was there that Nouwen learned invaluable lessons about leadership – about greatness really.

Stripped of everything that the world uses as criteria for greatness (reputation, fame, achievements, status, etc.), Nouwen realized that the main thing he had to offer the residents of Daybreak was *himself* – his “vulnerable self” as he calls it. Here’s how he describes it:

These broken, wounded, and completely unpretentious people forced me to let go of my relevant self – the self that can do things, show things, prove things, build things – and forced me to reclaim that unadorned self in which I am completely vulnerable, open to receive and give love regardless of any accomplishments. (p. 16)

He learned that greatness in the kingdom is a function of receiving and giving love – both from God and from others. He grew in love. He grew in servanthood. He grew as a shepherd of others’ souls. Nouwen “descended into greatness” (to borrow an expression). Until the day he died of a heart attack he pursued greatness in the kingdom because the Lord was with him. What a way to go.

Does his example stir up anything within you? What if you and I had the ambition to pursue greatness in relation to love?!? Instead of loving when we feel like it or loving in ways that people expect us to love, what if we pursued “greatness” in relation to love? That’s what Paul urged upon believers. When he wrote the Thessalonians, he acknowledged that they were “taught by God to love one another” – love was a real strength in their fellowship. But do you remember what Paul told them next? ***But we urge you, brothers, to excel still more!*** (1 Thess. 4:9-10) Don’t settle for being good at love; make it your ambition to be great at loving one another. And love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous (1 Cor. 13:4).

Or perhaps God would stir you up to be great through humility. We read this in Matthew 18:

1 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 2 And He called a child to Himself and set him before them, 3 and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

What if we became great because we were in the habit of humbling ourselves before God and each other? Or perhaps God would stir you up to be great through servanthood. Listen to Matthew 20:

25 But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. 26 "It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, 27 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

What if we knocked ourselves out putting the needs of others above our own? And what if we actually enjoyed it instead of resented it? That's greatness in the kingdom.

How might God want you to grow in greatness? What is God stirring up in your heart? In the kingdom we can be great in a lot of ways: in love, humility, servanthood, faith, a shepherd's heart, purity, zealous for good works, patience? I'm convinced that God wants to give us these things far more than we could ever want them. As with David, if we become "greater and greater" in the kingdom of God, it will be because of the presence of God in our lives. And so ultimately, the challenge to pursue greatness in the kingdom is a challenge to experience God.

In our response time today, consider whether or not you're in a place to experience God so that you might grow in greatness in the kingdom. The place to begin is to enter into a relationship with God so that He is now "with" you. We do this through Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me." You can come to the Father through Jesus Christ. He died on the cross as payment for your sin – the only thing that separates you from God. When you believe in Jesus, you enter into a relationship with God. He is now with you. Entering into this relationship is the place to begin.

But if you've entered into that relationship, is there anything that is keeping you from experiencing God? Maybe you've quit believing that He can transform your life. Maybe there's some sin that is keeping you from experiencing God as you should. Maybe you have no idea what's going on in your life and you need Him to break through your confusion and bring clarity. Whatever the case, let's wait on God now.

**Note:**

<sup>1</sup> If you've been here for this series on the life of David, you know that we're not trying to justify all of David's attitudes and actions. Even though he was a man after God's own heart, he sinned in some spectacular ways. But the idea that David's soul hates "the lame and the blind" (in the literal sense) doesn't seem particularly consistent with what we learn about David elsewhere. In chapter 9 specifically, we'll see that David showed great compassion toward Saul's son Mephibosheth who was lame in both of his feet; David even gave him a regular place at his table. It seems best to understand his comment to be a jab at the Jebusites' based on their earlier taunt.