

## “Proclaiming the Victory of the Champion”

Introduction: *The Jesus Storybook Bible* is a wonderful resource for your young children or grandchildren. Subtitled, “Every story whispers his name,” the Bible’s editors do a wonderful job of showing children how each biblical story, especially in the OT, ultimately points to Jesus. So, for instance, in the encounter of David and Goliath, which we’ve been pondering for the last couple of weeks, David’s improbable victory is concluded in this way:

When the Philistines saw Goliath was dead, they ran away. And when God’s people saw them running away, they cheered. God had saved his people. David was a hero! Many years later, God would send his people another young Hero to fight for them. And to save them. This Hero would fight the greatest battle the world has ever known.

That’s a wonderful description and good theology. It gets kids thinking, at a very young age, how David, the Israelite champion, points us to Jesus, our ultimate champion. It reveals that, like the Israelites, we need a champion to represent us and fight for us against the giants of sin and evil and death. Of course, what it doesn’t do, and probably appropriately so, is describe how David ran around with Goliath’s decapitated head in his hand, and how, in addition to cheering, the Israelites chased after the Philistines, littering the road with their dead bodies, and then returned to the Philistine camp to plunder it! Does anyone remember hearing that part of the story as a child?! Certainly, these are not the images that normally come to mind as we think of strengthening, or sharing, our faith.

And yet this ending is an important part of the event that the narrator wants us to know about. It is, actually, the missional part! He wants us to know that after the victory of our champion, there is still work to be done. Yes, a great victory has been won, but we are then called to proclaim that victory, to bear witness to it, not any longer with killing and plundering, but with words and deeds of love and mercy. Let’s begin in David’s world and see how we can build a bridge to our own.

### I. Proclaiming Victory in the Ancient Near East

A. In David’s world, in the Ancient Near East, the nations and the gods were closely connected. There was no such thing as a separation of church and state; one’s religion and one’s nation were aligned. In fact, your military strength was equated with your nation’s god. So, it was assumed that any nation that conquered another did so because of a superior god. Even more, gods were thought to be localized, not only in terms of being limited to a nation’s boundary lines, but in terms of geographical distinctions. So, for instance, in 1 Kings we read that the advisers to the king of a nation known as Aram believed that the Israelite god—the LORD—was only a god of the hills and not the valleys, which is why they had recently lost a battle to the Israelites: “Their gods are gods of the hills. That is why they were too strong for us. But if we fight them on the plains, surely we will be stronger than they.” In response, hear what the prophet tells the King of Israel: “Because the Arameans think the LORD is a god of the hills and not a god of the valleys, I will deliver this vast army into your hands, and you will know that I am the LORD” (1 Ki. 20:23-28).

B. Thus, military victories that the LORD brought about were in part a demonstration, working within the “language” of the day, that he is not just a localized deity but the Lord of heaven and earth who seeks to reveal his power and presence, his holiness and justice, and his goodness and grace, to the nations. So the overwhelming and miraculous defeat of the

Egyptians, for instance, and all of the accompanying events of the Exodus, in which the God of one nation rescued his people from in the midst of another, were meant to reveal the LORD's gracious deliverance of a defenseless Israel, and his superiority over and against the greatest and most oppressive military power of that day. It was a word for the Egyptians, and also for Israel herself: "You were shown these things," Moses later tells the people of Israel, "so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other" (Dt. 4:35).

C. So, too, did the placing of the head of Goliath in Jerusalem, and the armor of Goliath in his tent, and the subsequent killing and plundering by the Israelite soldiers, all symbolize the superiority of the LORD, so that, as David put it, "the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel" (v. 46). It is how, in the language of that day, a great victory was proclaimed. Important to remember in all of this is that both at the Exodus, and here with David and Goliath, in addition to the LORD demonstrating his authority over all pretenders, he also had a counter cultural message for his people: victory was not accomplished through military power but through trust and reliance on Him. The battle was the LORD's; David was simply the LORD's instrument of salvation.

## II. Proclaiming Victory in the Post-Modern West

A. So how does this translate to us, who now live 3,000 years later in the post-modern West? What remains is the call to proclaim the victory of our champion; what changes is its content. Critical to remember is that we now live after God's promise to Abraham to bless the nations has been fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus, the hero to whom David points, has come. In his death and resurrection, he fought the greatest battle the world has ever known, and won. Importantly, the people he represents in this victory are not just the nation of Israel but Gentiles—all nations—as well. God's chosen people have moved from being one nation in the world, to be the church throughout the world. Further, his victory was achieved with a cross, on which God meted out his judgment on himself. Therefore, while victory still needed to be proclaimed, the proclamation is not to be done with military power, or political power. Instead, we are to live, as it is sometimes said, a cruciform life. That is, a life that proclaims the ironic power of a crucified Lord with the power of gracious words, and an even more gracious life that supports these words.

B. We see this throughout the NT. "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" Jesus directs his followers (Ma. 5:44). Scot Sauls, who led yesterday's "befriend" conference, pointed out that when it comes to how love is portrayed in song, Pat Benetar got it right. Pat said, "Love is a battlefield." In fact, it's the battlefield as well as our weapon as we proclaim victory because Jesus calls us to love, even when and especially when we don't feel like it, loving people we don't think deserve it. But of course, that's how and when he loved us.

C. The life of Jesus bears this out. Remember, for instance, the woman caught in the act of adultery? The religious leaders wanted to shame her and condemn her and stone her and make an example of her. But Jesus, when left alone with her, says two things: "I do not condemn you. Now leave your life of sin" (Jn. 8:11). The order here is everything. Reverse the order and we lose Jesus and are left with religious moralism. As Sauls asks, when reflecting on this text, how many people do you know who fall in love with Jesus because a Christian scolded them about their behavior (befriend, p. 18)? Jesus begins with love, with kindness, with dying for us while we are still sinners; *then* he has a conversation about morality with us. Can we approach others in that way? Too often, perhaps, we begin by killing others with condemnation.

D. As he thinks about the content of our victory proclamation, Peter affirms that we are to be both display and declaration people: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” In other words, live in such a way that people begin to ask about the source of the light that they see shining through you. And when they do ask, Peter goes on to exhort us to be ready, not just to be “nice” but to explain why we’re being nice: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you profess. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Pe. 2:12; 3:15). In other words, with love, not with scolding or condemnation.

Illustration: In an interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine, Marcus Mumford, lead singer of the band Mumford & Son, as well as a pastor’s kid, was asked if he still considers himself a Christian. He said this: “I don’t really like the word. It comes with so much baggage. So, no, I wouldn’t call myself a Christian. . . I’ve kind of separated myself from the culture of Christianity.”

E. In general, the problem many in our younger generations have with the culture of Christianity is that it has become too tightly knit to our secular culture, aligning itself too closely with one political party or another, or one nation or another, believing that if we can just get close to the world’s power and wealth we’ll have all we need to bring God’s kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. Sadly, that’s pretty much what the Pharisees believed. But rather than power and wealth, a palace and a throne, God chose a stable and a manger. All through his life, we see Jesus resisting the trappings of earthly power and wealth, preferring instead to bring in God’s kingdom through subversive, countercultural acts of love, justice, and mercy. Christianity, it seems, always works best when it comes from a place of life-giving minority rather than a powerful majority.

F. So, how might you have a conversation with Marcus Mumford, or someone like him? In his words to the church in Colossae, Paul calls them to prayer, that God would open a door for his message, and that they, too, would proclaim wisely and gracefully and fruitfully. A few months ago, we made a prayer card available to help you identify your “six,” six people from your frontline, from your neighborhood, workplace, school, or family, who you regularly rub shoulders with and who need a meaningful relationship with Jesus. The card gives you some ways to pray for these folks and engage with them. When he was with us back in January, Brian Muh, who works with InterVarsity at UNH, left me with their version of a prayer card. It, too, asks the holder to identify six people Jesus has put in your life, and then it provides five helpful “thresholds” that people often pass through on their journey to faith, with next steps for you to think about taking with these persons in the course of your interactions. It’s a helpful addendum to our card and has some helpful conversation starters:

1. Trust: Your friend has little or no trust in Christians. . . Invest in that friendship to build trust. What you do in this stage, more than what you say, is critical.
2. Curiosity: Your friend has some questions about faith but it’s not yet personal for them. . . Ask them questions about their view of God and things spiritual, without getting defensive or argumentative!
3. Open: Your friend acknowledges emotional and/or spiritual needs. . . Ask them how they want to grow, and how they think God might help their growth. Tell them your story. Pray with them.

4. Seeking: Your friend is open to exploring Jesus but doesn't know how. . . Help focus their quest: "If you could ask Jesus one honest question, what would it be?" Encourage, and be willing to field other questions.

5. Follower: Your friend has been exploring Jesus and might be ready to become a follower. . . Ask, "Can I share how someone becomes a follower of Jesus?" Share the good news and invite them to put their trust in Jesus.

Through it all, may we know that the decisive victory has been won by the Champion. In response, may we recognize that we have some proclaiming to do. May we then do it gently and with respect, with both lips and lives, words and deeds, that highlight the cruciform, sacrificial, neighbor love of Jesus.