

God Gives the Victory

I Kings 18:29-39, Acts 12:1-17

Everybody loves a good contest...and next Sunday millions of people will be watching the annual football contest known as the Super Bowl. Will Matt Ryan and the Atlanta Falcons be up to the task of beating Tom Brady and the New England Patriots? Will it be a highly competitive game or will one team dominant as this each did last Sunday? Of course, since the Eagles aren't in it, maybe you don't really care. And for others, they might just watch the game in order to see the commercials. Advertising for this year's Super Bowl is expected to cost around \$5 million dollars for a 30 second spot. Compare that with the first Super Bowl in 1967 when the cost was \$42,000.

The Super Bowl is a big deal for a lot of people...this special contest and competition between two teams. But you know contests are not limited to the sports arena. There are academic contest, spelling competitions, video competitions, beauty contests , dance competitions and of course those sweepstakes contests like Publisher's Clearing House where you can thousands of dollars every year for the rest of your life or forever. I thought you couldn't take it with you! And isn't it interesting that you are always one of the finalists in those contests. Somehow you can be one of five finalists and then find out there are thousands of others who also are one of five finalists.

I guess you could say that contests are very much a part of our human existence. And maybe even life presents itself that way. Because everyday we face different obstacles and we go through life's struggles and personal battles that challenge us and we wonder if are up to the task of beating those challenges.

It's interesting that the Bible is full of stories about contests, battles and persons facing difficult challenges. Over and over again you read about how the people of God face some experience that seems like an insurmountable obstacle or hurdle.

One of the most powerful stories of a contest in the Bible is found in our reading today in the book of First Kings. It's the story of the prophet Elijah and

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the prophets of Baal. If you visit the Holy Lands you may go to Muhragah which is the traditional site of Elijah's sacrifice. It is situated on the Mt. Carmel range overlooking the plain of Esdraelon. Here's the context of this contest. It takes place during the days of the wicked queen, Jezebel. After her marriage to King Ahab, it was her intention to introduce Baal worship in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Now Baal was a god of the Canaanites, whose practices were considered an abomination to the ways of God Yahweh. Baal was known as a god of rain and the god of the thunderstorm and worship of this god was seen as a great evil. He therefore symbolized all that was contrary to the ways of a holy God. And so the prophet Elijah is raised up to confront this worship of Baal. He persuades King Ahab to assemble both the people and the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel where he challenges the prophets to a contest. You heard the story. The prophets of Baal with much effort and pleading try in vain to get fire to come down from heaven and burn their sacrifice. No matter how hard they tried, they fail to succeed. Then making the contest even more dramatic, Elijah has water poured on the sacrifice and then offers this simple prayer: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, so these your people will know that you, O Lord are God and that you are turning their hearts back again." And then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, and everything around it. When it was all over, the people fell prostrate and cried: "The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!" What a demonstration of the power of God! What a contest...even better than any Super Bowl game!

Well, there are a number of incidents like this in the Bible. Stories that show the awesome power of God. Moses and the people trapped by the Egyptians and delivered across the Red Sea. Joshua and the walls of Jericho, David and Goliath, Deborah and the Canannites. Significant stories about contests and battles. And when I try to see a connection to the living of our own faith, I notice several common factors in these events.

For one thing, it doesn't matter how difficult the challenge, how high the hurdle, how big the enemy, when you're talking about the power of God,

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nothing is impossible to overcome. And sometimes it seems as though God allows the situation to get to the point where you have to concede that there's no way humanly possible to win the battle in your own strength. I think of the story of the judge Gideon and his battle with the Midianites. He started about with 30,000 men to hope to defeat the Midianite people, but after continuing to follow God's orders to reduce number on his side, it finally came down to only 300 persons to go up against his enemy. By breaking jars, and blowing trumpets, and making a lot of noise, they put the enemy on the run. What seemed like impossible odds ends up in great victory. I believe there is an important spiritual principle here for us to grasp. When we are facing life's challenges, when we are facing difficult circumstances we have to come to realize that in our own strength we can not overcome them. It is then that we are drawn by faith to acknowledge that I must depend on God to see me through. And I need to trust that God will make a way to come through in spiritual victory.

There's another important principle that I find as a common theme in these victories. Often connected to these victories are prayers of faith. It is the story of the apostle Peter in the book of Acts. Peter and the early disciples have been facing intense persecution because of their faith, and now we find Peter in prison. And Herod who had killed James had similar intentions for Peter. It appeared to be an impossible situation, but notice something about this incident which is common to many of the other stories in the Bible. Deliverance is usually connected with prayer. That in times of struggle, in places of persecution, in situations that seem overwhelming and even impossible, it is the means of fervent prayer that opens the door for God to act.

Elijah offers a humble prayer seeking a demonstration of the power of God. We read in Acts 12:5 – “So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church. And the answer to that prayer was Peter's deliverance. Over and over in Scripture you see people's prayers of faith connected to deliverance. I think the message is clear: When we are in a spiritual battle, when we are facing some contest of life, overcome with the impossibility of our situation, one of our best recourses is prayer...prayer that is

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humble, prayer that is earnest and fervent, prayer that believes in the power of God to be victorious.

Obviously, God's answers to our prayers do not always come in the way we may want them to, or expect them to, and the deliverance may not always be as dramatic as the prophet Elijah's. But the principle of coming to God in faith, of trusting in the wisdom and strength of an almighty God still applies. The contests of life must be dealt with in the spirit of honest, earnest prayer. Prayers or faith that allow us to face our circumstances with confidence. Earnest prayers that seek to bring us to a place of assurance and victory. As Paul declares in I Corinthians 15: "Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!" Those words were written in the context of Christ's victory over death because of the resurrection: I like one of the paraphrases of that verse: "What seems overwhelming in life to us is simply God showing us a victory through Him."

It was the fall of 1961, when 8 unemployed men all hesitant and somewhat skeptical showed up at their church....the Memorial Park United Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh, Pa. it began with discussions about how they could help each other. But as they discussed their employment problems, it became apparent that many of them were dealing with more than the loss of job. Many of them had become bitter and belligerent. Their confidence was low, they were discouraged and some were depressed. They had little motivation or initiative. One of the members of the church by the name of Kirwan Flannery urged them to try a unique experiment. He asked them to be willing to try prayer. He asked them to pray for 30 days, with the focus on just one thing: a mind to work. Soon their weekly meetings doubled in attendance. 20 days after one man began praying, he received a better job than he had hoped for. As this prayer experiment went on, the men were beginning to find jobs that would fit their qualifications. A steel worker who had been jobless for over a year and a half admitted to the group that he would sit at his window every morning cursing the lucky man he saw on his way to work. At first he scoffed at the idea of prayer, but he acknowledged the wrong attitude in his heart and found himself praying for his attitude as well as for a job. Soon he received an answer

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for both. The church called their prayer program Employment Anonymous and many did find jobs and more importantly many discovered the power of prayer.

We know there is a lot of anxiety and uncertainty that people are facing these days. Some are related to our world situation, some are related to a new administration in our country with questions about how this will affect our future. And some of our fears and anxieties are connected to our own personal battles and struggles and we are called upon to bring them to God and to believe that we are often facing a spiritual battle that requires a deliverance that only our faith in Christ can bring. And there may be steps of faith and action that we may need to take to change our situation but first It is committing ourselves to believe in the power of prayer and in the power of God to give us the strength to go through whatever we may be facing, whatever is contesting against us.

Elijah called for that kind of commitment even before this contest began. He asks them this soul-searching question: “How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord Jehovah is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. The people’s response was telling: “The people did not answer him a word.” They were hesitant to make that commitment, But when they saw the hand of God at work, they finally came to the place of belief: They fell on their faces and said: “The Lord is God, the Lord indeed is God.”

And that really is an important principle to remember when we speak of deliverance and victory. When you look at life’s contests and you face life’s challenges and battles, remember it is God who is with us through the struggle and it is God who gives the victory. We do not make it alone, we do not conquer in our own strength. It is God who delivers, it is God who gives the victory. It is God who allows us to win the contest, who sets us free from the imprisonment of life’s burdens that weigh upon us. One of the most powerful declarations of this truth are the words of the apostle Paul in the book of Romans: Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...His answer to that question: “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” What

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are the contests you are facing today, the battles, the challenges that confront you. We turn this day to the One who brings our deliverance. We come in prayer and faith and look for to the God who gives the victory.

“O victory in Jesus, my Savior forever! He sought me and bought me with his redeeming blood; he loved me ere I knew him, and all my love is due him; he plunged me to victory beneath the cleansing flood!”