

# In the Lord's Army

by Keith Keyser

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*David's Mighty Men were a group of unlikely heroes who were recruited from a motley crew of disenfranchised and disenchanting wanderers, and who demonstrated bravery, loyalty, and devotion to their king.*

**Scripture:** 1 Samuel 22:1, Psalm 20:7, Proverbs 3:5, 1 Corinthians 1:26, 2 Corinthians 5:17, 2 Corinthians 10:3, Ephesians 6:17, Philippians 4:13, Hebrews 4:12

**Topics:** "Spiritual Warfare", "Faithfulness"

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## Description

Keith Keyser preaches on the parallels between the valiant warriors of Special Operations forces in modern armies and David's Mighty Men in Biblical times. He highlights how David recruited unlikely heroes under extreme conditions, similar to how Jesus calls individuals from all walks of life to serve Him. The sermon emphasizes the importance of relying on God's strength, being faithful in little tasks, and the spiritual warfare Christians face, drawing lessons from the Mighty Men's dedication and bravery.

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## Transcript

The recent fighting in Afghanistan has cast the spotlight on extraordinary soldiers, referred to as Special Operations or Special Forces. All major armies have their elite troops, who are reserved for difficult missions, requiring bravery and skill in superlative degree. The Israeli Defense Force has its celebrated paratroopers. The British have the Special Air Service (SAS) and the Royal Marines. While the United States military has numerous different Special Operations units (e.g. The Navy Seals; Marine Recon teams & Scout-Snipers; & the Army Rangers, Green Berets, & Delta Force.) In Biblical times, there were also valiant warriors, who possessed courage, loyalty, & faith. Champions like Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson performed great martial exploits in delivering Israel from their enemies. Perhaps no other group of men in the Scriptures deserve the title of Special Forces more than David's Mighty Men.

Most great military leaders form their commando squads from the ranks of experienced professional soldiers, who are ideal physical specimens. Furthermore, wise commanders seek intelligent men, who have a strong sense of esprit de corps. In our day, we might look for university-trained officers, products of our prestigious military academies, or at least, graduates of officers candidate school. In the case of the mighty men, however, David recruited unlikely heroes under extreme conditions. 1 Sam.22:1-2 gives the account of the arrival of his first troops: "David therefore departed thence, and escaped to the cave Adullam: and when his brethren and all his father's house heard it, they went down thither to him. And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented,

gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them: and there were with him about four hundred men." (Italics mine) Truly, David garnered the nucleus of his armed forces from a motley crew of disenfranchised and disenchanting wanderers. They came to him when he was rejected and unrecognized by the nation of Israel. Saul sought to murder him, and he was reduced to dwelling in a cave. Many of the Mighty Men first joined David at this low point in his history.

David's recruiting policy of taking in defaulters and other vulnerable people reminds one of the Lord Jesus' tactics in forming His forces. His servants are culled from the teeming masses of slaves to vice, enemies of God, recalcitrant rebels, and spiritually debilitated debtors. As Paul describes it in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29: "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to naught things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence." Ordinary human thinking would seek followers from the upper echelon of society; but God changes His soldiers from the inside out into a "new creature." (2 Cor.5:17) In the Master's service, the hated tax collector (Matthew) and ardent political partisan (Simon the Zealot) are changed into devoted apostles of Christ. Fishermen become fishers of men (e.g. Peter & John); and council members bow to the "Wonderful Counselor" (e.g. Nicodemus & Joseph of Arimathea.) Only the Lord Jesus could take an inveterate enemy of the Gospel like Saul of Tarsus and transform him into its greatest proponent. In more modern times, committed atheists like C.S. Lewis have converted to Christ, as well as sinners of every demographic and description.

It is interesting to note the authority structure of David's Mighty Men. Officers' ranks were attained by first proving oneself on the battlefield. For example, Josheb-basshebeth, the first man on the list in 2 Sam.23, was rewarded with high position in the army on account of his loyalty and accomplishments in combat. He also earned the nickname Adino the Eznite (loosely translated, "One of the sharp spear") due to his slaying of eight hundred enemy soldiers on one day. This remarkable feat was performed without the aid of modern firearms or explosives; Adino did it with just a spear! Such a heroic performance was rewarded with a responsible position: "the chief of the captains" (probably the equivalent of our modern Major General-Joab would have been over him as the supreme general of the armed forces. See 1 Chr.11:4-6.) Similarly, the Lord Jesus apportions positions of service based on diligence in lesser tasks. In the assembly, He says that an elder is not to be "a novice." (1 Tim.3:6) The men who were put in charge of the distribution to the widows of the early church were "Men of honest report [indicating their responsible character as demonstrated by past performance], full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom." (Acts 6:3, bracketed comments mine.) The Lord Jesus further demonstrates this principle in His comments on authority in the Kingdom of God (Mat.25:14-30.) Those who are faithful in little are reassigned to greater duties.

The Christian life is described as warfare in the New Testament. Ephesians 6 offers a well-known list of spiritual weapons that comprise the believer's armaments. Likewise, 2 Cor. 10:3-5 points out that "Although we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." Martial imagery fills the New Testament in the exposition of the greater spiritual battles that transpire between the forces of good and evil. Therefore, Christians can learn a great deal from studying the special operations forces of the man after God's own heart.

David's renowned special operations group, the Mighty Men were composed of brave warriors who were entirely devoted to their King. The valiant killer Josheb-basshebeth, also called Adino the Eznite, headed up the first team on the list. He was followed by Eleazar the son of Dodo the Ahohite, who completed several important missions. His name indicates the sort of man he was: "God [is] helper." He relied on the Lord to strengthen him in the rigors of battle. The same attitude has marked all of God's servants through the ages. Samuel readily acknowledged the Lord's help as the source of the Israelites victory over the Philistines. (1 Sam.7:12) Paul told that Philippians "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me." (Phil.4:13, Italics mine.) The Psalmist expresses this same thinking: "Some boast of chariots, and some of horses; but we boast of the name of the LORD our God." (Ps.20:7, RSV) The Proverbs further adds: "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." (Pro.3:5) Those who rely on God for their help will never be ashamed.

Eleazar lived up to his name. 2 Sam. 23:9 tells us of his courage in standing with David when many others had fled. The succeeding verse says: "He arose and attacked the Philistines until his hand was weary, and his hand stuck to the sword. The LORD brought about a great victory that day; and the people returned after him only to plunder." (NKJV) He demonstrated his prowess as a swordsman, but could not put down his weapon after the victory was secured. Heb.4:12 compares the Word of God to a sword; likewise, Eph.6:17 calls the Word of God "the sword of the Spirit." Interestingly, Eleazar was a man who could not put down the sword. Figuratively speaking, Christians need to be devoted to learning and properly wielding the sword. Believers in the West have never had more Bible translations, commentaries, study tools, Bible computer programs, and sermons on tape. This notwithstanding, there is a genuine famine of Bible knowledge among professing Christians. The Church needs more men and women like Eleazar, who will cling to the sword. After his impressive stand on the battlefield, the Israelites who had fled returned to partake of the spoils of victory. In an era of inconsistency, there is a desperate need for godly believers whose faithfulness to the Word will be an example to weaker saints.

Shammah the son of Agee the Hararite stands next on the honor role of David's Mighty Men. His name means "Ruin or Waste." This inauspicious moniker failed to capture the true essence of this able combatant. He may have been a waste to others, but in David's eyes, he was among the Army's most able troops. God still uses those who come to Him with wasted lives; He gives them new life and uses them through the power of His Holy Spirit. Shammah's valor and usefulness is seen in the fact that he refused to forsake a field of lentils in the face of a large force of attacking Philistines. Others may have reasoned in this manner: "It's just a field of beans; it's not worth risking my life." In contrast, Shammah stood & protected it, for it was part of the land that God gave to His people Israel. Christians would do well to mark his example. Today truth is very lightly esteemed. Many believers readily leave New Testament-style assemblies in favor of less Scriptural gatherings on account of a lack of appreciation for the truth of the Biblical pattern. Some excuse this by pointing to the problems and mistakes of the assemblies (one wonders if they encounter perfect believers in the new congregations that they join.) Others argue that they need a fellowship with more programs for themselves and their children. If they are not satisfied with obeying Christ in the manner that He prescribes in His Word, however, they will not find His approval in fleeing to a different local church. Oh for Christians with the heart of Shammah, who stay and become part of the solution.

After recounting Shammah's impressive exploits, 2 Sam.23 tells a remarkable story of personal dedication to the king's well-being and desires. Some scholars teach that the three protagonists are different from the first three men on the list. It is this writer's belief, however, that this incident flows naturally from the

accounts of Adino, Eleazar, and Shammah; consequently, they are probably the three who performed this dramatic act of selfless heroism. The story takes place during David's exile in the desert, when he was hiding in the Cave of Adullam. The Philistines were then in possession of his hometown, Bethlehem (in fact, they had a garrison of soldiers stationed there.) David longingly said: "Oh that one would give me drink of the water of the well of Bethlehem, which is by the gate!" (2 Sam.23:15) Anyone who has been away from home for a long time can identify with his wistful utterance. The three warriors heard this statement, and decided that David's wish was their command. They set over on the dangerous trek to Bethlehem, where they broke through the Philistine defenses, drew the water, and fought their way back out of the city. They brought the water to their king, who recognized it as an act of devotion that only was fitting as a gift for God. Thus, David poured it out as a drink offering to the Lord. Where are the believers in our age who will care for the desires of the Lord Jesus' heart? The highest use of our lives as Christians would be to seek out our Father's will, and do it unhesitatingly; worship and service are His rightful due.

At this point you could make the following a third article, or you could combine it with the above to make this a two article series. Whatever you choose is fine with me. Should you decide to make it three articles, you may title the third: "Commandos in David's Forces." Or "In the Lord's Army"-Part 3.

The second choice unit in David's special operations force was composed of three dependable soldiers. Abishai the son of Zeruiah was David's nephew, and also the brother of two other famous fighters: Joab and Asahel. When Saul was hunting David in the wilderness, Abishai and David snuck into his camp, and took the king's staff and water jug. This bold act, demonstrated that they could have killed him, but instead showed mercy. On another occasion, Abishai had great success in a battle against the Ammonites and the Syrians (2 Sam.10:10,14.) When King David was older, this valiant officer saved him from death at the hands of a giant Philistine (2 Sam.21:15-17.) 2 Sam.23:18-19 asserts that he commanded the second group of three due to his impressive slaying of three hundred men in one battle. Truly, he was a very accomplished warrior.

Benaiah the son of Jehoida served under Abishai in this second unit. Bravery was in his blood, for His father is described as "a valiant man of Kabzeel, who had done many acts" (2 Sam.23:20.) Often the sons of great men find living in their father's shadow awkward. Nevertheless, Benaiah was a "chip off the old block"; if anything, his exploits outshone his fathers mighty deeds. He killed two lion-like warriors of Moab. This description conjures up images of ferocity, but Benaiah did not find these bloodthirsty savages to be much of a challenge. Next, the chapter tells us how he slew a lion in a pit on a snowy day. One cannot help but be impressed with this feat. Bravery aside, however, one wonders why he would undertake such a dangerous mission. 2 Samuel is silent on the matter, but perhaps someone feared that the wild beast would get loose and wreak havoc among the local Israelites. Rather than see them suffer anxiety, Benaiah eliminated the threat. He also put on an unparalleled display of martial arts skill in disarming a large Egyptian combatant, and then killing him with his own spear. It is reminiscent of David killing Goliath with his own sword. Moreover, it also was the same tactic that the Lord Jesus used in defeating Satan and death itself. As Heb.2:14-15 says of Christ: "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." Thanks be to God, the Christian can sing "O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" with assurance, knowing that "we are more than conquerors through him that loved us" (1 Cor.15:55; Rom.8:37.) Benaiah's courage and talents earned him the important position of head of the King's guard (the equivalent of heading up the Secret Service. The marginal reading says that David made

him head over his council, so there was probably some advisory capacity involved in this job.)

The soldiers who comprised David's Mighty Men came from all sorts of backgrounds. It is surprising to see the wide variety of people that are represented on this list. They were drawn from every corner of Israel and beyond. Some, like Zelek the Ammonite, were Gentiles. Elhanan the son of Dodo of Bethlehem was from David's hometown. In contrast, Ittai the son of Ribai was from Saul's hometown and tribe. Ahithophel, the advisor who defected to Absalom's side, had a son who was numbered with the Mighty Men. Similarly, the Lord Jesus draws His troops from every race, tribe, nation, and language group. All of these diverse soldiers are united by their love for and devotion to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

Although his brothers and armor bearer are listed, the cunning general Joab, who figures prominently in 1 and 2 Samuel, is absent from the role of the devoted warriors. His many acts of brutality and perfidy disqualified him from the honor roll of the Mighty Men. Poignantly, the list ends with the name of one of David's most dedicated soldiers: Uriah the Hittite (ironically, also a Gentile.) It is a sad reminder of David's treachery towards one of his faithful servants. Thankfully, members of the Lord's army need never fear that Christ Jesus will ever disappoint us. He is faithful, and promises to be with us until the end of the age, at which time He will take us home to be with Him forevermore. Furthermore, He will reward us, and we will share in His glory.

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