

Strength in Numbers

Who Is on Your Team?

Ever since the Warriors won the NBA championship in 1975, I have been a big fan of the team. Over the course of the past two decades they have won four world titles and nearly two others. Their slogan has been “strength in numbers”. It is the philosophy of their culture. They often have team lunches, carpool together and share group texts to keep communication open. On the court nearly every person played. The Warriors established the practice of making frequent passes on each possession so everyone touches the ball and is a part of the plays they run. The humility of their best player, Steph Curry, made this possible because his selfless play invited all the members of the team to be involved and be seen as genuine assets to the Warriors and their success. The players of course aren’t perfect, but rarely do you ever hear one player criticize another to the press. Generally the opposite is the case. Players freely admit when they themselves were wrong, when they cost the team a win. What does strength in numbers mean for you and how would it make your life significantly better? Let’s take a look at one of the lesser known heroes of the Bible, someone who epitomized “Strength in Numbers”. Here is our Big Idea for the day: You will never be truly happy unless you put others before you.

His name is wildly popular among new parents. Who doesn’t know a Jonathan? Yet what do you know about the Jonathan of the Bible? He was the oldest son of the first king of Israel, Saul. Although Saul led the armies of Israel to victory, he was not as known for his valor as his son Jonathan. When the people of Israel were being terrorized by the Philistines, Saul gathered an army to go to war against them. The circumstances were dire. Not a soldier in the Israelite army had a sword or even a spear except for King Saul and his son Jonathan. The Israelite soldiers were quaking in fear at the massive numbers of Philistines they faced. Not only did the Philistines vastly outnumber the Israelites, but the Philistines were well equipped with swords. **The Philistines assembled to fight Israel, with three thousand chariots, six thousand charioteers, and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore. They went up and camped at Micmash, east of Beth Aven. When the men of Israel saw that their situation was critical and that their army was hard pressed, they hid in caves and thickets, among the rocks, and in pits and cisterns. Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul remained at Gilgal, and all the troops with him were quaking with fear.** (1 Samuel 13: 5-7 NIV)

Jonathan however, was fearless. One day, when no one in the army, not even Jonathan’s father King Saul, wanted to fight the Philistines, Jonathan pulled his armor bearer away from the men and invited him to climb up a cliff where at the top, an outpost full of Philistine soldiers was encamped. When Jonathan and the armor bearer made it to the top, Jonathan challenged the Philistines to do battle with him. **Jonathan climbed up, using his hands and feet, with his armor-bearer right behind him. The Philistines fell before Jonathan, and his armor-bearer followed and killed behind him. In that first attack Jonathan and his armor-bearer killed some twenty men in an area of about half an acre.** (1 Samuel 14:13-14 NIV) Jonathan’s valor was used by God to bring chaos to the Philistine forces, leading to Israel’s great victory over the Philistines. **Then panic struck the whole army — those in the camp and field, and those in the outposts and raiding parties — and the ground shook. It was a panic sent by God.** (1 Samuel 13:15 NIV) Jonathan was widely recognized by the Israelite army as the reason for them shattering the Philistine forces and bringing deliverance to the nation. Jonathan was a man of renown.

When David stepped onto the scene, Jonathan was a highly respected national hero. His father was beloved for his own courage in leading Israelite forces into battle, victoriously pushing back the neighboring nations who were cruelly oppressing the people of Israel. The warfare took a strange turn however when the Philistines brought to the battlefield Goliath the giant. His famous challenge was that he would fight any Israelite soldier in a battle to the death. The one who survived, that one’s nation would enslave the other country. You probably remember that David stepped forward with his sling and five pebbles and killed Goliath and the Israelites threw off the Philistine yoke of oppression and routed their army. David’s fame grew as he led bands of soldiers against the Philistines, beating them soundly each time. Returning from the wars, David was serenaded by the Hebrew women for his exploits. **When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."** (1 Samuel 18: 6-7 NIV)

King Saul's reaction was immediate when he heard the singing. **Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?"** (1 Samuel 18: 8 NIV) Many are just like this. They may not become so upset, but they certainly do not celebrate the success of others, especially those they don't like or whose actions diminish their own value. I've seen church members get quite upset that other members got their way in a business meeting. I've known of parents not cheering when one child on their kid's team makes a basket because it wasn't their own son who was passed the ball. It works that way in the office, at school and even in homes. Here is the counterpoint. Jonathan was thrilled by David's success. In fact he generously showered him with gifts. **And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself. Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.** (1 Samuel 18: 3-4 NIV) Quite a contrast between the two. Each was impacted in the same way by David's success. One despised it. The other embraced it. Saul spent the rest of his life jealously loathing David, to the very end trying to kill him. When it became clear that David had to flee for his life from King Saul because Saul was paranoid David would try to wrest the kingship from him, Jonathan made this pledge to David. He essentially gave up to David his right to be the next king. **"Don't be afraid," he said. "My father Saul will not lay a hand on you. You will be king over Israel, and I will be second to you. Even my father Saul knows this."** (1 Samuel 23: 17 NIV)

Keep in mind that neither David nor Jonathan knew at this point that Jonathan would lose his life in battle before he had the opportunity to inherit the kingdom from his father. That is what makes this selfless act of Jonathan so beautiful. He had an amazing future of power, prestige and property awaiting him it seemed, but he gave it all away to David. Many people live to succeed. Some live to help others succeed. Quite a few vacillate back and forth between putting themselves first and others first. Jonathan empowered David to become the most important king Israel ever had before the coming of Christ. He gave David the psychological and spiritual tools he needed to overcome his depression and loss of direction when it all seemed hopeless to him. Listen to what the Biblical record states Jonathan did for David. **And Saul's son Jonathan went to David at Horesh and helped him find strength in God.** (1 Samuel 23: 16 NIV) The crisis for David wasn't over. He still faced many trials and Saul remained an apparent threat to his life, but Jonathan refueled David's trust in God and certainty that the Lord had called him to become king of Israel.

There is an urge within all of us to better ourselves and improve our lot. Those who harm themselves or intentionally ruin their chance at success are often seen as psychologically damaged and troubled. Yet what many would call odd, especially when put into practice, the Apostle Paul laid out clearly was a particular lifestyle of those who become Christian. **Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.** (Philippians 2: 3-4 NIV) It is counter-intuitive to run this approach to its conclusion. There is much to give up, discard, plans to erase if we practice this. Here is the big idea. You will never be truly happy unless you put others before you. And that is what we mean by strength in numbers. You are better when you help others become better. You are more fulfilled when you enable others to be fulfilled. You live a happier life when you make the lives of others happier.

What was the purpose of Jesus' life? Why did God leave the sweetness of heaven to become a hated and wrecked human being? He came to bring salvation to the world. **And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.** (1 John 4: 14-15 NIV) The writer of Hebrews gives this clarification. **Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.** (Hebrews 9: 26-28 NIV) We are on the verge of Easter and as we prepare to honor Christ as Savior and Lord, keep in mind that what was true of Jesus is true for you. If you want to live a happier life, you must develop the practice of giving yourself away for the sake of others. **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.** (Hebrews 12: 2 NIV) If it was so for Jesus, that by giving Himself away to bring us salvation, it brought Him joy, it is true for you also. Pray and ask Jesus this week how you can make the lives of others better by putting others before yourself and then do exactly what He tells you to do.