

In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day

A Message Offered by
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Have you ever had a bad day? I'm talking about the kind of day when nothing seems to go right. You oversleep for work. You put Brylcreem on your toothbrush instead of toothpaste. You spill coffee on your pants. You're ready to "cry, 'Uncle,'" and you haven't even left the house yet. And then there are the really bad days. Like the day when you found out you had cancer. Or that your husband was leaving. Or that you lost your job. If you have ever had a really bad day, I want to introduce you to a new friend of mine. His name is Benaiah:

Benaiah son of Jehoiada was a valiant warrior from Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds; he struck down two sons of Ariel of Moab. He also went down and killed a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen. ... He was renowned among the Thirty.... And David put him in charge of his bodyguard.

2 Samuel 23: 20, 23

Did you catch the little intriguing detail in the middle? "Benaiah also went down and killed a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen." Benaiah was in a *pit*, with a *lion*, on a *snowy* day. Of all the things that I would not want to have happen to me, being in a pit, with a lion, on a snowy day would be high on my list. But that day may have been the day of Benaiah's greatest triumph, his best day ever.

It was about 3000 years ago, the time of King David. Israel was still largely unsettled, wild, and dangerous. Jackals, foxes, hyenas and packs of feral dogs roamed the countryside virtually unchallenged, looking for easy prey. Bears from Syria and lions from Asia were common sights. They menaced flocks and sometimes people when paths crossed. Knife, sword, sling shot, and spear were hardly a match for one of these predators. Asian lions weigh up to 500 pounds. They stand up to four feet tall on all fours. Their bodies can be eight feet long, not counting the tail. God designed our

bodies so that when we see an animal like this -- and there's no fence between us and it -- everything inside us wants to run the other way.

But Benaiah was chasing the lion that day. Lions don't fall into pits naturally. They are experts at sniffing out enemies, sensing the terrain, and avoiding dangers. Like all cats, lions are very sure-footed. I think the pit was a trap. Maybe Benaiah was sick of having his goats eaten. Maybe Benaiah was tired of his children being afraid to play on the mountainside. So he decided that instead of living in fear he was going to do something: dig a pit, cover it with sticks, and lead that lion to its end.

Things didn't work out quite the way Benaiah planned. Somehow he ended up in the pit, too. The Bible doesn't exactly spell this out, but think about it. What spear would be long enough or strong enough to do the job from many feet away away? And killing a lion from a safe distance doesn't exactly make a person "a valiant warrior," does it? I think there came a point when Benaiah figured out that he had to get into that pit, with the lion, if he was going to be close enough to kill it.

Sometimes the only way out of danger is through it. Confronting our fears – and the evil behind them – is dangerous stuff. It takes courage and confidence and a certain level of desperation to get so close that you can smell a lion's breath and then snuff it out. "Normal" people, rational people, do not chase down lions; but God's people aren't always rational. We walk by faith and not by sight. And sometimes we *run* by faith – not *from* danger, but *toward* it, because it's the right thing to do. When it comes to lions, the Christian prayer isn't so much, "Keep me safe," as it is, "Make me brave."

Whether it was God's plan or his, the pit that trapped the lion, trapped Benaiah, too. Only one could emerge victorious. And maybe that was a good thing. Because for once in his life Benaiah couldn't run away. Getting into the pit meant that he was fully committed to victory. No half-measures would do.

Benaiah wasn't the Crocodile Hunter. Killing the lion – not taming it, not rehabilitating it, not relocating it -- was the plan. Some forms of evil simply must be stopped. Too often we work out moral compromises with the evil around us – and in us. We make peace with it or we look the other way instead of fighting it to the death: its death or ours.

That's no way to live. Some evil is like a fire; as long as the tiniest ember is burning, it can be re-stoked. You have put it out, completely out. Some evil is like a snake. Billionaire businessman Ross Perot used to say, "When you run into a snake you don't appoint a committee on snakes. You kill the snake." And some evil is like a lion. You can't a lion out. The longer you let a lion live, the larger it grows. You'll be old and weak before it will be. Don't waste another moment waiting for the lion in your life to go away on its own, waiting for an addiction to weaken, a colleague to stop bugging you, or a marriage to improve. While you are doing nothing, while you are debating, while you are trying to tame it with kitty treats and nice words, while you are trying to convince yourself that it is only an overgrown cat, the lion is having babies and the problem gets worse. I don't regret a single lion I have chased, but I do regret the ones I let get away. They lived to fight me or someone else another day. I should have dealt with them when I had the chance.

We all face lions of one kind or another, forces with the capacity to consume us and the people we love. Call it the Devil. Call it something else. Evil is a real power in the world. We would be naïve to think that it does not exist in others, in us, and in the systems that we are a part of. Cancer is evil. Child sexual abuse is evil. Greed is evil. Addiction is evil. Certain political systems are evil.

People, however, are not evil, not in themselves. But they do get thoroughly caught up in evil schemes and systems. When we find ourselves in battle we need to remember who the real enemy is; it's not a person, it's a problem. St. Paul warned us, saying,

our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12

When we make battles personal we are forgetting the "powers and principalities" rule. It is evil systems that turn enemies into animals and people into predators. That's not how God made them.

So what are the lions in your life? They aren't an endangered species around here, are they? Maybe your lion is

- Grief
- Guilt
- Job stress
- Worry over finances
- Relationship trouble
- Depression or other kind of illness.

Remember, take on the problem, not the person. The *problem* is your lion.

Benaiah dug his pit and waited for the lion. Everything was set. And then it began to snow. Doh! It only snows in Jerusalem about one day every three years; even less often in the low-country. What are the chances? This is a huge setback for Benaiah. He's going to be cold. The ground is going to be hard, wet, unforgiving, and slippery. The task is even more dangerous. A less faithful person would have decided to wait for a better day.

But it's never a "perfect" day to take on the lions in our lives. Al Roker is never going to say, "It's a perfect day to kill a lion in your neck of the woods." We will always have excuses: "It's snowing," "I might get hurt," "I could make things worse." Fear makes a few flakes look like a blizzard.

You know the best time to take on a lion? When you can. When the opportunity presents itself. When your life is on the line. If you have planned, if you have weighed the options, if you have prayed about it, then it's time to go hunting. What are you waiting for?

I knew a woman in New Jersey a while back who wanted to move to North Carolina, but she was afraid. She would have to sell her home and she might take a loss on it. She would have to start a new job. It might turn out badly. She might not like it in North Carolina. She knew that it was the right thing to do for her family, but she wouldn't go. She told her husband that she needed a sign from God. So she sat at her kitchen table each morning and prayed about it. And prayed about it. And prayed about it. Then one morning after she had said, "Amen," she looked up and there, hanging from the ceiling, was a yellow post-it note. "Move to North Carolina," was all it said. Surprisingly, God's handwriting turned out to be much like her husband's. She moved.

What's your excuse for not doing what you know you need to do? If it's snowing in your world, so what? Who says the snow was bad only for Benaiah? Humans can adapt to cold weather and slippery ground; lions can't. We can put on a coat or boots; lions can't. Lions slowdown in the cold. Maybe the snow was actually a plus for Benaiah. We need to trust that God is working even through the adverse circumstances of our life, bringing us closer to victory.

Some of you know the true story of Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsy. (Read their story in *The Hiding Place*). They were in the Ravensbruck concentration camp during World War II: Christians imprisoned by the Nazis for protecting Jews. The conditions in their bunkhouse were appalling. It was completely infested with lice, fleas, and other vermin. Spending even a few minutes inside left the German guards covered and scratching. The bugs bit the prisoners from head to toe and caused infections; the itching was maddening, especially at night; the women could barely sleep. Corrie felt sorry for herself, but Betsy insisted that they must thank God for all things and all circumstances. As the months went on they noticed that they were treated differently than other prisoners. They had more freedom to pray and lead informal Bible study than prisoners in other bunkhouse. And the guards didn't abuse them sexually the way they did the other women. Why this favored treatment? The guards left them alone because they didn't want to get lice and fleas. This thanksgiving give thanks to God for the fleas, lice, and snow in your life. When we can thank God for every circumstance then we are on our way to fully trusting God.

A few questions before we end. What's your lion? Are you ready to be done with it? Are you ready to dig a pit, and chase it down, and get into that pit, and stay there as long as it takes until one of you comes crawling out, tired and bleeding perhaps, but victorious?

King David rewarded Benaiah's bravery by putting him in charge of his personal bodyguard; when you've chased a lion and killed it, people notice. You walk differently. You hold your head higher. Your voice is stronger. It's a good feeling. And once you've killed one lion, you don't have to kill too many more. Lions and their cubs tend to walk the other way, looking for easier prey.

Would you pray with me? Help us, Lord, to be brave like Benaiah. Give us courage to confront our fears and all the challenges of life that surround us. Help us to trust that you will be with us in that pit, fighting alongside us and for us, assuring us of victory. Amen.

To learn more about Benaiah read 1 Kings 1:5-10, 32-34, and 1 Kings 2: 23-25.

The title of this sermon comes from the book, "In a Pit with a Lion on a Snowy Day," by Mark Batterson. The book explores this obscure passage in great depth in a very accessible manner.

Dear Friend,

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