

Superheroes

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 December 2018

Preacher: Nick Louw

[0 : 00] Thanks, Alan. Good morning, St. Mark's. Okay, I want to ask you, who's your favorite superhero? And don't tell me you don't have one. Everybody's got a favorite superhero.

What's your favorite superhero, Karina? Batman. Batman. Well, Batman, you know what's great about Batman is that he doesn't actually have a superpower. He's just got really cool toys, Batman. So I like Batman as well, but I must tell you, my favorite superhero is actually Superman. Because, I mean, well, he's Superman. He can do pretty much anything. He can beat any of those Marvel clowns any day of the week.

So Superman's my favorite. I want to know who your favorite superhero is. Now, superheroes are quite popular, aren't they, in today's culture. Not only today's culture, but they've always been popular.

Even in ancient myths and legends, they had superheroes. They had these great warriors, these great heroes of legend. And we've still got them today. We've got these superheroes who swoop in and save the day and do justice to the people who need justice.

[1 : 02] But why? Why do you think they're so popular? I mean, the Marvel movies, they're the most successful series of movies ever made, money-wise. I don't think they're that good. But DC movies are much better.

But they made over \$14.5 billion in box office. Because people love the idea of superheroes. Why? Well, because I think, the reason we like superheroes so much, because I think there are times in this world where we would just love a superhero to swoop in and save the day, wouldn't we? When bad people are getting away with evil deeds in our world. When we hear of murders. When we hear of muggings. When we hear of hijackings.

Here in our own community in Plumstead, sometimes we wish we had a local Plumstead Superman, you know, who would just swoop in to those dark alleys when those bad people are getting away with their evil deeds and he would show them some justice.

Wouldn't we like that? Wouldn't we love a superhero? You see, we like the idea of superheroes because the truth is we can't fight evil by ourselves. Now, Israel, at the time of Isaiah, which is, in fact, the passage we're going to be looking at this whole month, Isaiah 9, Israel desperately needed a superhero.

[2 : 19] They were in a very bad way, both in their own communities, the sin and corruption that plagued their society, as well as politically. They weren't in a very good situation at all.

They had a very intimidating enemy in Assyria who was preparing to invade their land. And so if they ever needed a superhero, it was now.

If they ever needed someone to swoop in and save the day, it was the situation they were in in Isaiah. And so you can imagine what these words in Isaiah 9 would have meant to them in that situation.

Isaiah is foreseeing what God is going to do for his people. And he says these words, Now it starts there.

As in the day of Midian's defeat. And I'm going to get into that in a second. But this is a promise from God. This is a promise from God to his people. And what he's promising is that he's going to send a hero.

[3 : 40] He's going to send a hero to swoop in and save them from the enemies that seek to harm them. And he describes what he's planning to do by comparing it to an event that already happened in Israel's past.

Right at the beginning there. It starts as in the day of Midian's defeat. So he's saying he's going to do the same thing in Isaiah's time with Israel as he did with Midian. Now, who's Midian?

And what did God do? What is he talking about? Well, to find that out, we have to go right back to Judges chapter 6 and 7. We read the beginning of that story earlier. But let me summarize it for you.

Israel was under the oppression of a great invading army, the Midianites. Now, those are modern day Saudi Arabians. That's where the Midianites come from. The grand desert of Saudi Arabia. And for seven years, the Israelites suffered. Thousands of Midianite soldiers would come riding on their war camels, bringing their tents, settling on Israel's land, and just ravishing their crops and their towns.

[4 : 50] So many Midianites came during this time that the Bible describes them like a swarm of locusts. So they would invade and destroy the crops and abuse the people to the point that the Israelites began to hide away and live in caves, we're told.

Now, eventually, the Israelites got some sense and they cried out to the Lord to help them. He had helped them in the past. He miraculously helped them escape from Egypt, at least their forefathers. And so they figured he could do it again. It's just a pity it took them seven years to figure out that they should pray. But be that as it may, that's what they did.

Yet, eventually, after suffering enough, they called out to the Lord. Now, it's funny. We look back on Israel and say, that was dumb. They should have prayed right at the beginning. And yet, we look at our own lives and we see a little bit of ourselves, don't we, in Israel.

When we're in a time of difficulty, is that really our first port of call? Or do we try to solve it ourselves? When we're under oppression, whether that be from people or from spiritual evil, let's be honest.

[5 : 54] Typically, it takes us a while before we start seriously praying. After all the other avenues are exhausted, it seems like often we treat God as our last resort, just like Israel did, before we realize that we actually can't fight this by ourselves.

And God will often send those times of difficulty into our lives to teach us, to remind us, we can't fight this by ourselves. But our pride stops us from realizing that, just like it did for Israel.

It took them seven years. Hopefully, it'll take you a little less. But you see, we're not that different to the Israelites. Anyway, what happens? They pray, and God graciously answers.

Even though they don't deserve it, he sends them a hero. By the name of Gideon. Now, Gideon, if you read on in Judges 6 and 7, he's not a perfect man by any stretch of the imagination.

But still, he is the man God has chosen to deliver his people. And that's exactly what Gideon does. So go home today and read Judges 6 and 7.

[6 : 59] It's a really exciting story, but I'll tell you the highlights. Basically, Gideon uses 300 men to defeat, in the end, a Midianite army of over 135,000.

That's incredible. And it happened. And it's obviously a work of God. This is not something that people can pull off. In fact, Gideon had originally, you'll read, started out with a bigger army. And God said, no, I want you to send most of your soldiers home. God wanted to make a point through this event that it was him rescuing the Israelites from an enemy they could not rescue themselves from.

And so that's why, in the end, Gideon was only allowed to have 300 men to defeat this huge army of Midianites. But as you read Judges 6 and 7, there's something else interesting about the Gideon story.

God told Gideon to do something before fighting the Midianites. I wonder if you know what it is. Well, if you don't, read Judges 6. Because what you'll find is before this battle, before Gideon was told to get these soldiers and go fight the Midianites, before he called Israelite tribes together, God told him to destroy the altar to Baal and the Aserah Poles, where the Israelites had been worshipping false gods, where they had been worshipping idols like the nations around them.

[8 : 25] And the reason God told Gideon to do that before fighting the Midianites, was it turns out the reason the people are suffering at the hand of the Midianites in the first place, was actually because of their idolatry, their sin against God.

Right at the beginning of the story, if you were listening carefully when Alan read it, we were told the reason the Midianites invaded. And that reason was this. I'll read it again. Judges 6 verse 1.

The Israelites did evil. The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. And for seven years, he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. God did it. God actually sent the Midianites to punish Israel for their sins.

Even though the Midianites had no idea they were being used by God to do that. Now if you know me, you'll know that I'm not the biggest fan of cats.

Especially unknown mangy cats who come and make a mess on our property. When we lived in Lakeside, we had a little garden, but it had the best sprinkler system I've ever seen.

[9 : 33] It had sprinklers all around that you just switch them all on at once with one push of the tap. And we also had a very arrogant neighbor's cat who thought he owned the world.

Who would just come into any property he wished. And these two things were match made in heaven. Because I would wait. I would wait to see this cat come and settle in our garden thinking he owns the whole place.

And I would wait a few minutes until he's nice settled in the middle of our garden. And then I'd turn on the tap. And it was quite a show. Anyway, I can't do that in our current home.

We, you know, water restrictions, all that kind of thing. And so we don't have a sprinkler system I could use. But I do have a dog who likes to chase things. And there's a similar cat in our neighborhood who sometimes needs a reminder that he's trespassing.

And so all I need to do is open the front door. And Finan, our dog, will do the rest. Now, those of you who love cats, you may need some counseling from me. But those of you who love cats, don't worry.

[10 : 39] Because Finan's too dumb ever to catch the cat. He just gives it a fright. But you see, Finan, my dog, is my instrument of judgment. Even though he doesn't know it.

He's just reacting to his instincts. But I use those instincts to carry out my sovereign will in my home. But you see, that's what God did with the Midianites.

They were just following their desires. They weren't obeying God. They didn't even know Israel's God. And they certainly didn't know that he was, in fact, God of the whole world. And that he was actually in control.

They were just following their instincts. They just wanted to invade Israel. They wanted the plunder. But God was behind it. Using their instincts to carry out his sovereign purposes.

And he is still doing that. Let's just pause and remember that. He is still doing that. He is in sovereign control of the events that happen in this world.

[11 : 36] Even though the people involved in those events do not know it. We think the world is out of control. Governments rise and governments fall. Questionable leaders rise into positions of power.

And we start worrying, oh no. The country is going down the toilets because of this and that and corruption and blah, blah, blah. But we think it's out of control. Well, it's not. The Bible over and over again shows us that God is in control of events that seem out of our control.

And they are out of our control. Events that seem out of anyone's control are still under the control of a sovereign God who is directing the course of history to carry out his will in this world.

And nothing will frustrate his plans. So remember that when you read stories like Israel with the Midianites. They thought it was all just chaos.

This foreign army invading them. Not knowing God was actually using them for his purposes. He was using the Midianites to discipline his people and show them that their sins were serious.

[12 : 39] And so if that's the case, if God was using the Midianites to show his people that their sins were far more serious than they thought. In order for them to be saved from the Midianites, guess what they needed to be saved from first?

Their sins, right? And so that's why Gideon had to cut down these idols. So now fast forward to the time of Isaiah. Centuries later, Israel are in a very similar situation.

There's a great army of Assyrians on the border ready to invade. But it turns out when we read Isaiah that these Assyrians were exactly the same as the Midianites were all those centuries before.

They were God's instrument of judgment against his people who had again started worshipping idols. We read this in Isaiah 7. They had again fallen into unrepentant sin.

And God was using the Assyrians without their knowledge. The Assyrians again were just invading. They thought, yay, a weak Israel plunder. Let's go get it. But God was using them to help Israel realize the seriousness of their sin.

[13 : 47] And that God does not ignore sin. He never ignores sin. But you see, that's what God does. He graciously reminds his people of the seriousness of their sin.

And he often uses adversity and suffering to do that. God hasn't changed his methods from the Old Testament. He's the same God. And today, too, when people fall into unrepentant sin, sometimes he will send particular suffering and difficulty to wake us up and to do something about those sins. Now, that's not the only reason he sends suffering. But it was with Israel. He sent this. And it was a terrible suffering that he sent through the Assyrians. But he sent it to help them to wake up and realize that their sins were serious.

And yet, this is the amazing thing about God. He's a God of justice. Absolutely. And we worship him for that. We worship him that he's a God who upholds complete justice.

He never sweeps sin under the carpet. He never ignores it. And yet, despite that, at the same time, in Isaiah 9, God promises to save his people from the very enemy that he is sending to judge them. [15:06] Now, this is bizarre but beautiful and amazing at the same time. God promises to save his people from the very enemy that he is sending to judge them.

He promises to send someone to rescue them from his own judgment. But now, what that requires, of course, is that the cause of that judgment, their sins, is dealt with first.

We read on in Israel's history. And we find that that prophecy, that promise to send someone to rescue them from God's judgment, is partially fulfilled in King Hezekiah of Israel.

In a string of bad kings, you get King Hezekiah. Hezekiah coming out. And he is a good king. He follows after God's own heart. No, he's not perfect again. But again, like Gideon, he's an instrument of God's salvation.

And Hezekiah destroyed the idols that Israel were worshipping, like Gideon did. He called out to the Lord for deliverance, with the Assyrians literally at the gates of Jerusalem.

[16:09] And God miraculously delivered them. You can read this in 2 Kings 19. But during the night, the angel of the Lord went through the Assyrian camp and put to death 185,000 Assyrian troops in their camp.

The angel of the Lord was pretty scary. I'm just thinking it's Christmas time and carol concerts and stuff. And you see angels. We think of little people in, you know, 90s with wings and halos.

No, the angel of the Lord killed 185,000 hardened Assyrian troops. That's the kind of angels God uses. Anyway, so again, like with Gideon, God sends a hero to address Israel's sins and deliver them from their enemy, Hezekiah.

And they have for a time deliverance. But there's a problem. You know what the problem is? Hezekiah, their good king that God uses to rescue them, Hezekiah died.

And guess what happened when Hezekiah died? Israel fell back again into their sin and idolatry.

[17:21] In fact, that's exactly what happened when Gideon died, too. We read in Judges 8, verse 33, when Gideon died, it says this. No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals.

No sooner. So they realize that it's because of their idolatry that the Midianites were attacking them and making them suffer for seven years. God sends Gideon to destroy the idols, to rescue them.

They're all happy. Thank you, God, for rescuing us. Gideon dies. The next day, they're back worshipping their idols. But that's human nature, isn't it? It's human nature. Again, we see ourselves in Israel.

We get a wake-up call from God. God, that something's wrong. We amend our ways. We pray, sorry, God. I will turn around. I will repent. We pray for God to help us.

And He does. He gives us mercy. But what happens? It doesn't take long, does it, before we slip back into our old habits. Isn't that just human nature?

[18:27] We say to God that we will amend our ways, maybe for half a week. We do. And then it doesn't last long.

But our sin pulls us back. We slip back. Is that your experience? That's certainly mine. And this is just an ongoing cycle of human depravity, human sin.

No matter what we promise to God, we always come back. That's by nature. We always come back to our sin. Like a dog returns to its vomit, the Bible says. We read it in Judges.

We see this ongoing cycle. It just happens over and over again. The people sin. God sends a warning in the form of suffering. They repent. God sends a hero to save them. But eventually, that hero dies.

And what happens? The whole cycle starts over again. The whole book of Judges is just that, over and over again. But then even in the time of Isaiah, centuries later, Israel are still doing that.

[19 : 23] That cycle is still going on. So the question of the Old Testament, really, as we read through this, the question is, how is that cycle going to be broken? How is that cycle going to stop? Well, I'll tell you how. That cycle of sin and repentance and a hero to save them and the hero dies and sin again, that cycle that keeps on going over and over again, will only stop when God sends a hero who doesn't die.

And that is the significance of the second name that God gives to the Messiah in Isaiah 9 verse 6. You see, this month we're going through each of these names in Isaiah 9 verse 6.

The second name is Mighty God. So we looked at Wonderful Counselor last week, Mighty God this week. Now let me explain this name. Mighty, the word mighty in the original language literally means hero.

It's a word that was used to describe people like Gideon. I wonder if you picked up. When the angel of the Lord visited Gideon, the angel called Gideon a mighty warrior.

[20 : 34] Mighty warrior. He was threshing grain. He was a farmer. And yet the angel of the Lord says, Mighty warrior. And so this word was used to describe these heroes that God raised up to rescue people from overwhelming enemies.

In fact, in the original it's a noun, not an adjective like it is in the English. It literally reads, A mighty one. Or a hero who is God. That's what this phrase literally means.

A hero who is going to save us from the consequence of our sins. Who is God himself? Well, I wonder who that could be.

Enter Jesus Christ. God the Son. Who we've already seen last week. Showed that he was the Messiah that Isaiah 9 was talking about.

That the whole Old Testament was pointing towards. And so each of the names we read in Isaiah 9 verse 6 tells us something about Jesus and what he came to do.

[21 : 38] And so this name does that as well. Mighty. The word mighty tells us that Jesus came to be our new hero like Gideon to save us from our oppressor that we could not save ourselves from.

And you know who our oppressor is? Who is your oppressor? Well, it's not the Midianites or the Assyrians. It is sin and death.

Those are your oppressors. And you are a slave to them by nature. You can't but obey them. You can't stop yourself from dying any more than you can stop yourself from sinning.

And so you are by nature a slave to those oppressors. Sin and death. Listen again to how our oppression is described in Isaiah 9. The yoke that burdens them.

The bar across their shoulders. The rod of their oppressor. That's a picture of a slave. Being driven forward with a yoke around his neck.

[22 : 41] Have you ever seen pictures of those old time slaves? They had these big things around their necks that their masters could control them with. The yoke that burdens them.

The bar across their shoulders. And the rod of their oppressor. The rod is what was used to beat the slave to keep him going forward. But that's such an accurate picture of sin, isn't it?

It enslaves us. Those things that we do that we know are against God's will. That we know are wrong. And often they hurt us and others. They are rods. They cause pain. And yet we keep on doing them.

Despite the fact that they hurt us. And they hurt other people. Because we have no choice. We are burdened. We are shackled. It's the yoke that binds us.

We are, as Paul says in Romans, by nature slaves to sin. And so we need a hero to rescue us from our oppressor.

[23 : 42] Just as much as Israel needed in the days of Midian and the days of Assyria. They needed a hero to fight an enemy that they could not fight in their own power. And likewise, you and I cannot fight sin in our own power.

We need a hero to fight it for us. And God has sent us that hero in the person of Jesus Christ. He shattered the yoke that burdens us.

When he died on the cross for our sins, he broke the power of sin over us. That was his victory. Over the greatest oppressor this world has ever known. Sin and death make Midian and Assyria look like your friendly neighbors that you borrow a cup of sugar from.

You know, they're nothing compared to the true oppressors of this world. Sin and death and Jesus shattered their power when he died on the cross. That's where he broke the power of sin and death.

He rescued us from sin there. But here's the thing. Unlike the limited heroes of old who only rescued their people for a time before they died and the people went back to their old ways, Jesus didn't stay dead.

[24 : 59] He rose again and he ascended to the right hand of the Father where he received all authority to rule. And he is there right now using his mighty authority to continue his work of liberating us from our oppressors of sin and death so that we don't slip back into those old patterns like the Israelites carried on doing.

And that's the glorious thing about this hero. That's what makes him different to all the other heroes of scripture. Because what this hero did when he rescued us from the power of sin and then rose again to rule and continue rescuing us from the power of sin in our lives, what that means is that you never have to be a slave to sin again.

Let me tell you that again. You never have to obey sin again. You never have to be a slave to sin if Jesus, the mighty God, is ruling in your life.

If he is your mighty God, who has broken the power of sin over you, if you've put your faith in what he did for you on the cross, then he continues today to be your mighty God, your hero who is God. He continues each day through the power of his Holy Spirit to break the yoke of the oppressor, to break you free from the slavery of sin so that you don't have to obey it. But remember, if you're no longer a slave to sin, Paul goes on in Romans and he says you are now a slave to him.

[26 : 34] You are now bound to him, bond to him, because only as long as you are bound to him, following him as your king in your life, as your master, as your mighty God, only in so far as that can he keep you from the slavery to sin.

You've got a choice. There's no middle ground. Slavery to sin or slavery to Jesus Christ. And that's not bad slavery. And because Jesus is mighty God, if he is your God, if he is truly not just the person you sing about on Sundays, but the person you worship and follow and obey Monday to Saturday, if Jesus is your mighty God, remember he is God himself.

Mighty God. That means you can be completely confident that he is in total control. Just as God was in control of the situation of Israel throughout their history, Jesus Christ right now ruling from the right hand of the Father is sovereign over all your circumstances that ever happen in your life, good and bad, and he is able to give you in those circumstances all the aid you need to overcome sin and death and enter eternal life.

But don't be right like the Israelites and think you can do it yourself. You need a hero. And we have a hero. And so there's only one thing left to do. Well, there's two things left to do.

We follow that hero. We rely on that hero. But then we trust and worship him because he is God. And so let's do that now as we sing our next song, Mighty to Save.

[28 : 12] As the musicians come up, I'm going to pray for us. Father God, we are not capable of fighting our overwhelming enemies of sin and death by ourselves. We are helpless.

And we need your mercy. We need a hero. Lord, thank you for sending us one. Thank you for sending your son, Jesus, to fight our enemy, to conquer the power of evil in our lives, and to save us by his death on the cross.

Thank you also that he rose from the dead and continues to deliver us from our enemies day by day. And so help us, Lord, day by day, to trust him and follow him as our mighty God.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.