

## In The Shadows of Giants

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Mark 4:26-34

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“Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, ‘Neither has the Lord chosen this one.’ Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, ‘Neither has the Lord chosen this one.’ Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, ‘The Lord has not chosen any of these.’”

Now, Eliab and David, those names we remember. Especially the latter. We usually remember the first and the last, don’t we? Not to mention the tallest. The loudest. The charming. The handsome. Basically, the most beautiful, right? And Eliab and David, well, they embodied all of those compliments in spades, didn’t they?

Eliab, you might remember, was the first born, and had such an agreeable physical appearance that the Lord goes *way* out of the way to reprimand mortals for assigning too great a value to his superficialities. And David, you’ll recall, was the baby, and in addition to being a talented orator and musician, as we learn some verses later, he was also “ruddy,” extraordinarily handsome, and his eyes, well, they were just gorgeous.

But I guess those middle children... Abinadab, Shammah, and the rest of their irrelevant siblings weren’t pretty enough for the Lord’s affirmation. For not a single superlative would be given, nor even the most basic acknowledgement of all in simply recording their names. Damn.

*December 27, 1988*

*Daddy got me this diary for Christmas. I stopped believing in Santa two years ago. I am now six years old. The diary is nice. It is red and has lots of pages. I am writing this on page 1. Daddy says I should write what I think. That I’m really smart and stuff. He tells me he and Mommy love me and that God loves me too. But sometimes I don’t know. I know what I see. I see lots of stuff. I am too quiet Mommy tells me, but I like seeing.*

*I see Brittany, and Jessica, and I see Mommy. They laugh a lot together. They don’t laugh a lot with me. I gave Jessica a tree ornament this year. I made it in school, in art class. I put lots of time into it. Jessica opened the box but she left the ornament behind. In the box. Mommy gave Jessica a big hug and kiss.*

*Brittany got lots of clothes and older-girl stuff. She’s older than me and Jessica is younger than me. Brittany is great at soccer and school and is really pretty. Mommy spends a lot of time with Brittany. They go shopping together and both look really pretty. I think I am ugly.*

*I like this diary. But it would be nice to look pretty like Brittany and Mommy. I hope Mommy buys me a pretty shirt next year. Or gives me a big hug and kiss tonight, like she gives to Jessica. Okay. Goodnight.*

You’ll remember that God cautions Samuel about Eliab: ‘Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.’

But here's a question... if that is indeed true, then why does God's Word in Samuel also make it a point to describe David as being drop-dead handsome, ruddy, and in possession of two magnificently beautiful eyes? Why make a point of mentioning his outward appearance at all? Why not something like, *but the Lord saw that he had a beautiful heart, was kind and generous to others, and so, was in the eyes of the Lord, handsome?* Wouldn't that have been more consistent with God's message?

Now, some apologists have argued that by commenting on the beauty of David's *eyes* in particular, 1 Samuel was creatively alluding to the beauty of David's soul. As in, the eyes are the lamp to one's soul, and thus, God had envisioned that only a beautiful soul like David's could be anointed as king so to one day lead God's people, unite a nation, and write all of those moving and breathtaking psalms, etc. Hmm... Perhaps. Others have suggested that the line about beauty was thrown in there sarcastically, as if to say that no matter what God decreed to be important (i.e. matters of the heart), mortals, indeed the very scribes and hearers of scripture, would nonetheless revert back to their own conception of what was important (i.e. physical superficialities).

But perhaps there was yet another reason altogether as to why God passed over Eliab for young David. Perhaps it was simply because God, our God, is the God of the "least of these." And in antiquity, in Biblical times, the very "least of these" would have also been synonymous with being the "youngest of these;" the children furthest down the pecking order in claiming any right to their family's inheritance and their father's or master's affections. And so, since our God is the compassionate Father of the weak, God thereby turned the tables and gave to this youngest, and no doubt the poorest, the treasures that our world would have otherwise designated only for the eldest and the richest.<sup>1</sup>

But now, even after having said all that, I wonder... wouldn't the poorest in this case, in this story, actually be the Abinadabs and the Shammahs of the world? Those poor little middle children who have no recorded name, who weren't even worthy of the slightest of footnotes? Wouldn't they, these who have been resigned to history as but a forgotten number in the shadow of their siblings, actually be the true "least of these," and perhaps then, the most deserving of our God's anointing and procuring love? Wouldn't they?

*May 6, 1997*

*Nine years have passed and I still have this diary. Clearly I don't write in it very often, as often as I should.*

*This morning I turned 16. 6:34am to be exact. And at 6:34am I sat alone at breakfast and ate some yogurt that I found in the back of the fridge. Dad was the first to join me. He had a gift and a card, clearly wrapped and written in his own handwriting, though signed as "from the both of us." His card was sweet. He always finds a blank card and writes his own message. He says it's more real that way. Anyway, it was three paragraphs in length. Each paragraph ending with his trademarked "always remember who you are – you are special, you are beautiful, you are loved, both here and above." I wish I could believe him.*

*The truth is I don't feel that I'm special. I don't feel that I'm beautiful. I don't feel that I'm loved. I mean, sure my father feels that way, and maybe God too, but when everyone else around*

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<sup>1</sup> God does this time and again throughout scripture – elevating the young/the poor. Isaiah over Ishmael; Jacob over Esau; Joseph over his brothers; Ephraim and Rachel alike. Heck, even Jesus himself who emerges from the most humble of beginnings as the King of kings.

*me can barely hide their contempt for my existence, well, how miniscule their affirmations soon become!*

*Brittany “the eldest” is graduating college this year. She’s on a free-ride to Delaware. Now, when I say “free-ride” I don’t mean that she is on a scholarship or anything like that. No, she is simply hitchhiking all my parent’s money away as she parties day and night and day again. Mom says, “Oh, calm down, it’s just a phase she’s going through. She is only experimenting. Figuring things out. And good for her, for look how she is enjoying it!” Yeah, whatever, Mom.*

*Jessica “the youngest” is nearly done with Middle-School. We have virtually no relationship to speak of. Not that I haven’t tried. But what good is the gift of my time when she gets the limitless expenditure of my Mother and Aunt “Visa”? She literally gets everything she wants, and even, the things she hasn’t yet dreamed of. It’s ridiculous. If Brittany was Demi Moore, then Jessie will be Madonna. She’s got those mainstream appeal looks, even at a young age. And it’s like my Mom is trying to date the both of them. Jess and Brit. She fawns over their beauty. She tells all of her old friends about them. It’s just boobs and mascara, Mom! Get over it!*

*You know, I’ve gone basically all school-year and can count the compliments I’ve received from my Mother on one hand. That is, one compliment. The other day Mom told me that I smelled nice. I smelled nice. She then added that “Oh, it must have been because I had used Jessie’s shampoo.” She starts every sentence with “oh.” It’s infuriating.*

*I mean, I get it, Mom... I suck. I suck, ok? I am not Brittany, I am not Jessica. I am just me. I am awkward, quiet, and short. I can’t dribble. I can’t shoot. I can’t score. But I am also your daughter! And just because I’m not your oldest or the baby... just because I don’t fit into your idea of what is pretty or successful, doesn’t also mean that I am neither!*

*Honestly... I think only Dad gets me. I think he’s the only one in this family who truly believes in me. But recently, I’m not sure even that’s enough. His little trademarks and compliments, and those little scripture verses he leaves for me, they aren’t as potent now. No, they kind of all feel like scattered seed on rocky ground. And I know that he only means it to help, to mend my wounds, to sow and put me back together again and on a good path, but the truth is, I’m just poisoned soil. The womb that held me didn’t seem to want me, and DNA has coded it into my history.*

Our New Testament lesson comes to us in the form of a parable. A somewhat strange, confusing little message, embedded within a larger lesson. But the meaning of this mustard seed tale is nonetheless quite simple: even from the small and seemingly insignificant, greatness can come. Initially, on the surface, it seems to be an odd choice for Jesus, employing this mustard seed as a descriptor for the **Kingdom** of God. Especially as it’s one of the puniest seeds there is. But you see, here’s the rub: when the mustard seed is intentionally sown, it can become so large it’s almost invasive; it can surpass its siblings, overshadow its neighbors, and can take over the entire garden.

Placed then within the larger parable of The Sower, I think one of the arguments Jesus could be making here is that the Kingdom of God is a realm where even the least of these can own a plot. And more, this plot can turn into an acre, and a hundred acres at that. But to get there, it first needs some nurturing. Some sowing. Someone who can see the potential in this otherwise imperceptible little seed. Someone who is willing to give it his time, his attention, his love. Someone who can see that there is indeed good soil here, even if the rest of the world only deems it to be a brush of thorns and weeds.

June 16, 2018

*I can't believe I never burned this thing. Here it is. Safe, complete, untouched. Some dust has settled and the paper has yellowed, but otherwise, this little red diary is just as I remember it.*

*Reading over these old pages, here at the old home late at night, summons a great deal of sadness in me. Mom, for all of her warts, was not as terrible as I described. Sure, she could have spent more time with me. Given me more of her affections. She could have been more present when I was struggling, and more affirming when I was celebrating. But the truth is, she worked full-time, and had three of us to care for. And those other two, well, let's just say they were not easy. Little attention whores, really. Perhaps she made them that way, or maybe they made her that way, who's to say, chicken or the egg. But in Mom's defense, I think I just got lost in the shuffle. Middle child and all. And no, I'm not trying to make excuses still. The wounds that have since scarred over are still too visible. No, she wasn't perfect. No, wasn't a great mom or wife, but she also wasn't so evil.*

*Brittany... Brittany is married to the wrong man. Cheats on him. Miserable as all get out. Jessica, she can't find a man. None that can meet her ridiculous standards. And me, well, I don't need a man. Bloody useless, the lot of them, I say. Well, most of them...*

*Save for Dad. How he stayed with Mom all these years, only the good Lord above can say. Maybe it was his faith? Maybe a sort of Biblical sense of devotion or forgiveness or hope? Again, only God can say.*

*What I can say is that ~~this man~~, without this man, and his faith which became my own, I wouldn't be writing this today. For too many years I suffered from depression. For too many years I daydreamed of death. I still have the marks up my wrist from cutting when I was younger. But every time I came close, every time I almost threw myself over the edge into the abyss, there was Dad. With his love. With his encouragement. With his belief.*

*Dad and I had dinner this past week. He came over the house and met little Samuel for the first time. Yes, I'm a foster parent for the third time now. Everyone needs someone to love them.*

*Whether you're brown or white, citizen or illegal, youngest, oldest, or middle, everyone needs someone to love them. Someone to say "it's all right." To say "you're beautiful." To say, "you matter." We often think that the only way we are helping is if we are only going to the poorest or propping up the richest. But in my line of work, there is just as much to be done for those in between the margins. For those in the shadows of Giants. For the average. The ordinary. For the middling amongst us.*

*So Dad, I just wanted to say thank you. Because without you, I would have never become who I am today. Better yet, I would have never become happy with being who I am today.*

*So thank you for believing in me. For loving me. For nurturing me and sowing good seed into the garden of my future.*

*For oh, how I needed it. Oh, how we all.*

*I love you, Dad.*

*Me.*