

David and Goliath • I Samuel 17

It was a thousand years before the birth of Jesus Christ and King Saul was on the throne of Israel. He was tall, handsome and godly—everything you would expect a king to be. God had appointed and anointed him to the throne at the request of the people who said they wanted a king. He led the nation in a war against the neighboring nation of Philistia. They had repeatedly threatened the Hebrew people and often controlled the land of Israel.

King Saul started well but he ended poorly. He started out humble but became proud. He was once godly but he became sinful. He had been a highly competent king and leader but he became erratic and dangerous. So God decided to end his rule and appoint a new king.

God chose an old prophet named Samuel to be his agent in the selection of this new king. At first Samuel was reluctant because if King Saul found out he was anointing somebody else to be his replacement it would be interpreted as an act of treason and could cost Samuel his life. But God insisted so Samuel obeyed and went to Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was a little village in the hill country of Judah about five miles from the better known town of Jerusalem. In that obscure and unimportant place lived the family of Jesse and his eight sons. They were shepherds.

Led by God, Samuel narrowed the royal search down from the nation of Israel to the tribe of Judah to the family of Jesse. When he first saw Jesse's oldest son Eliab he thought he had found the next king of Israel.

Eliab was tall, experienced and simply had the look of a leader. But God said no, telling Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7, "*The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*" In other words, what seemed to Samuel the obvious choice was not God's choice.

Next came Jesse's second oldest son Abinadab. He looked good to Samuel, too, but God said no. Son Number 3 was Shammah; again God said no. Samuel reviewed seven sons and God rejected ev-

ery one of them. They were running out of candidates to be the king of Israel.

Samuel asked if there were any more sons and the answer was a reluctant yes. There was the youngest son, David, but he was hardly a suitable candidate for anything important. He was too young. And he was out taking care of the sheep. But David was God's first and only choice. He had beautiful eyes, a great complexion and was quite good looking. But his looks had little to do with this selection. God saw inside David. He was the kind of person God wanted to bless. David had a heart for God and that was more important than his age or others' opinions of him.

We need to learn to see others as God sees them. We so easily form our opinions on externals. The most likely characteristic for us to notice is gender, then age, then height, weight, beauty, clothes and all the other externals. Not that we will ever not notice these characteristics. Even the Bible records David's good looks. But, God clearly teaches that the heart on the inside is more important than the things we usually consider to be more important on the outside.

God chose David for great leadership. Samuel anointed David to become the king. And what happened next was . . . nothing. Samuel left town. David went back to caring for sheep. Bethlehem and the family of Jesse returned to normal. God was still preparing David.

Meanwhile, miles away in the Philistine town of Gath

there was another family whose son just kept growing and growing. No matter how tall the rest of his relatives and ancestors may have been, everyone must have been surprised when he grew to become six, seven, eight, nine feet tall and more. Call it genetics. Call it an abnormality. Goliath was a giant. There was no NBA to draft him for basketball so the Philistine army drafted him to fight.

Gath was one of the five major cities of the Philistines. It was not on the Mediterranean coast

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but a few miles. It was a significant and powerful city on the Mediterranean coastal plain.

The Philistines were the archenemies of Israel. They were powerful and aggressive. The name of Palestine comes from the ancient Philistines. At times they were at peace with Israel but often they adopted politics of expansion and moved their armies eastward into Israel's territory. In a sense there was a prolonged state of war between Israel and Philistia.

King Saul and the army of Israel wanted to stop the Philistines once and for all, so they recruited and trained an army and had them ready to fight. They were determined to have a permanent peace. But they never expected Goliath.

Ancient armies had different rules of engagement than we have in modern warfare. Typically, opposing armies would line up on a flat battlefield opposite each other and they would advance toward one another slaughtering each other. It was the worst of movie scenes from *Gettysburg*, *Braveheart*, *Gladiator* and *Saving Private Ryan* combined. It was a killing field.

There was also another way of fighting. Each army could put forward a champion. The two champions would then fight to the death. The victor's army was considered the winner of the battle and the dead champion's army was expected to surrender—often to become enslaved. It was a more humane approach with far fewer casualties.

Like all battlefield strategies, there were many subtleties to this “winner-take-all” approach. The challenge was considered a matter of honor. To reject the challenge was humiliating and embarrassing. It was considered to be a sign of weakness and fear.

Sometimes when I watch professional football games it becomes painful when one team has a huge lead. Imagine two NFL teams playing in a Super Bowl game with one team losing 70-0 going into the fourth quarter. You wonder why the losing team doesn't just quit and go home; they have no reasonable chance of winning. Why keep playing? I suppose it's a matter of honor. Professional teams always finish their game no matter what—rain, snow, ice, fog, injuries and huge differences in scores. The team just doesn't quit.

And so for ancient armies it was a matter of honor. When challenged you had to put out a cham-

pion and that champion had to fight the champion who had issued the challenge.

Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Socoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Socoh and Azekah. Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them.

A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet tall. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels; on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels. His shield bearer went ahead of him.

Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, “Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us.” Then the Philistine said, “This day I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other.” On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.

That's perfectly understandable to me! Think about it. Would you want to fight a 9-foot tall giant who is dressed in armor and trained to kill? It is not merely a matter of courage. You might be courageous enough to fight but if you lose you will take your fellow soldiers, family, friends and nation down with you. You'll be dead and everyone will blame you for a generation or more.

My sympathy here is with the cowards. I identify with them. Probably most of us remember childhood experiences with schoolyard bullies. We've all faced giants against whom we were no match. Our giants aren't called Goliath; they're called Cancer, Court of Law, Big Business, Debt, Bankruptcy, Divorce and Assault. Yes, we know what it's like to be threatened by a formidable enemy.

We know what it's like to be afraid to fight a battle we are convinced we are going to lose.

For 40 days Goliath came out and issued this challenge, day after day. Saul and the army of Israel just stalled. They didn't want to lose. They didn't want to die. But, you know what happened? Morale kept sinking. They were convinced they could not win. Even if there was no "winner-take-all" face-off, they had little chance in a conventional conflict because they saw themselves as losers. They were disheartened.

Then the boy from Bethlehem came to the battlefield that was dominated by this giant from Gath. He'd been sent by his father, Jesse, to bring supplies for his three older brothers who were in the Hebrew army. David arrived in time to see the daily ritual take place. Both armies lined up facing each other for battle. Goliath shouted out his defiant threat. The army of Israel was scared and retreated.

David didn't understand why someone didn't take the challenge. He was told that whoever would go and fight Goliath would be given wealth, tax exemption for his family for the rest of their lives and the king's daughter in marriage. But that didn't seem like much if you ended up dead. (Wealth doesn't mean much if you are killed; dead people aren't taxed; and you can't marry the princess if you're crushed to death by a giant.) It really wasn't much of an offer!

His older brothers were irritated and embarrassed by David's presence. In most families younger brothers can be irritating and older brothers can be overbearing. As the youngest of four sons, I tend to side with David.

David saw what was happening from a different perspective from everyone else. It was not a matter of size or strength or money or marriage. The honor of God was at stake. Goliath defied the armies of the living God. Ancient peoples believed that wars tested the comparative power of the deities of each of the nations and armies. Goliath was saying he could challenge the Lord God and win. David believed that God would win any contest against him.

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David was invited into the presence of the king. The boy from Bethlehem was either a fool or a hero. The king would have to decide for himself.

David said to King Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him."

Saul replied, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a fighting man since his youth."

But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. Your servant has killed both the lion and bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God.

The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

Saul said to David, "Go, and the Lord be with you."

The king lent David his royal armor to wear into the

fight. David put it on but couldn't even walk with it. Instead he went with the clothes and weapons of a shepherd—a staff, a slingshot and five smooth stones he picked out of the nearby stream.

Then came one of the most memorable and dramatic moments in all of history as young David stepped from the line of Israel's army to confront the giant. It was shocking and stunning. For Goliath, David was somewhere between an insult and a joke. Goliath looked him over and despised him. The giant spoke first, cursing David in the names of his heathen Philistine gods. Goliath said:

"Come here, and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!"

David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies

of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

I think if I had been there I would have winced at what David said. Couldn't he lighten up just a little bit? He sounds like a pro wrestler!

As they came toward each other, I think I would have closed my eyes or covered my face. I would not have watched. This was not going to be a pretty sight. Giants are enough of a problem to start out with without making them mad.

David reached for a stone, swung his sling, released the rock and hit the giant right in the middle of his forehead. The giant was stunned for an instant and then fell forward with a huge thud. David ran to Goliath, pulled out the giant's large sword, stabbed the enemy to death and cut off his head.

Suddenly everything changed. Everything was just the opposite of what everyone had expected. Thousands of soldiers on both sides were completely stunned. The Israelites wished they had watched! The Philistines wished they hadn't watched! It was the all-time upset. The little guy defeated the big guy. The Philistines were filled with fear and retreated. The army of Israel was suddenly full of confidence and courage. They pursued and finished the enemy.

Is this a story promising that the weak will always win? Is it a story that says we should always take on every enemy no matter how formidable? Probably not! The point is plain, simple and powerful. Be on God's side!

The apostle Paul wrote in Romans 8:31, "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" And in Romans 8:37 he wrote, "*. . . we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.*"

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