The Story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17:1-58)

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The story of David and Goliath is a best seller as far as Old Testament stories go. It has all the adventure and suspense of a thriller and has kept Sunday School classes captivated for many years. Cartoons and animations have appealed to audiences of children across the world.

But what is the story of David and Goliath all about?

It is a story of the providence and protection of God over his people, the remarkable faith of a shepherd boy who rose from obscurity, to demonstrate that he was the one who should rule over Israel and bring honour again to the name of the God of Israel. This is the beginning of opposition to David's anointing, and this story shows that nothing would prevent David's ascent to the throne (Schreiner, 2013, p. 148).

As we approach this story, we need to remember that while the story itself is important, fascinating, and theologically weighty, we should remember also that the Holy Spirit inspired how the author has written the story—the structure, the language, the grammar, the repetition of words and the immediate context of Israel's search for a king (1 Samuel 8:19-22 and 1 Samuel 16). In this commentary, we will pause and learn from these important aspects of biblical storytelling.

The actual engagement between David and Goliath is only a small part of the story (Vss. 48-51). This fact alone tells us that there is more to this than a shepherd boy with a slingshot or the fall of an overconfident giant.

While there are many principles for the Christian life that we can glean from this story, ultimately this story calls us to put our trust in the King of kings, who, against all opposition, has defeated Satan, brought glory to the Lord, ascended the throne and who has delivered his people and enriched them. It's the story of the gospel.

The Encroaching Enemy (Vss. 1-3)
The hand-to-hand combat of David and Goliath overshadows another type of warfare in this story—the dangerous encroachment of the Philistine army—Israel's ancient enemy (1 Samuel 7:13, see also 1 Samuel 13-14). On this occasion, however, the threat was particularly unsettling. Not only had they camped at Sochoh which belonged to Judah, but they were in the Valley of Elah, the most natural point of entry from the Philistine territory into the kingdom of Judah. It seemed that victory was within sight for the Philistines, and Israel's future hung in the balance. But the kingdom was secure, for God had anointed a deliverer (Ch. 16:13).

Whatever criticisms may be leveled against the Israelites and their faithlessness at this point, we should not ignore the fact that, at the very least, they turned up for the fight and the enemy was held back.

An Intimidating Champion (Vss. 4-11)
Having said that, Israel was faithless, weak, and inactive in its opposition. The only movement (watch for the verbs) during this impasse came from the Philistines—*"a champion went out…"* (vs. 4). Three things about Goliath intimidated the Israelites and left them *"dismayed and greatly afraid"* (vs. 11). First, they saw the size of the enemy (vs. 4), and his resources (vss. 5-7), and they heard his words (vss. 8-10).

Goliath was an extremely big man—standing over 9 feet tall, with an equally impressive armoury. His protective gear included a helmet, a coat of mail, greaves on his leg (vss. 5-6), and a shield-bearer walking in front of him (vs. 7). He also had fierce weaponry; a javelin slung over his shoulders, a heavy spear (vss. 6-7), and a sword (vs. 51).

The verbs are important here and show Goliath's impressive and imposing figure as a strategy of war—he *"came out"* (vs. 4), he *"stood"* (defiant), and he *"shouted"* (vs. 8). The writer labours the description and shows that his appearance and his shouts of defiance, did indeed intimidate the Israelites. The verb *"defy"* is repeated throughout the passage (vss. 10, 25, 26, 36, 45), showing that this was not a simple action, but a continuous attitude (Tsumura, 2007, p. 445). Any attempt to defeat him would call for skill and precision. However, "Saul and all Israel" were paralysed with fear (vs. 11). They could have fled, and they could have surrendered, but they waited for weeks in inactive deadlock. The only man in Israel that came close to the size of Goliath was Saul, the king (1 Samuel 9:2), and perhaps the earlier reference to Saul's height and the mention here of his armour (vss. 38-39) shows us that he resembles more the enemy than a protector. It also shows that Israel's desire for a king (tall, manly, and as the other nations 1 Samuel 8-9), was in fact a god that needed to be destroyed.

We should not ignore the fact that Jonathan, who had previously defeated the Philistines and at times had proven himself more faithful than his father (Ch. 13:2-3, 14:1-14), was silent throughout the entire Goliath story. His silence here opens the way for the next king of Israel to rise up—and Jonathan will shine again as a man of deep integrity.

The Boy from Nowhere (Vss. 12-18)

The author interrupts the story of the battle to remind us of David's family (vss. 12-14) and to tell us that David's attendance at the battlefield was in the line of menial duty (vss. 15-18). David was at an awkward age, apparently too young to be in the army, but not too young to manage a flock of sheep or to travel alone. He was, on this occasion, a "little errand boy in a big man's world" (Reid, 2008, p. 98).

The reminder, however, that David had been already anointed as King (Ch. 16) increases our expectation that something great is about to happen. The path to the throne will be difficult, and it will be through combat. Our expectation is further heightened as Goliath persists to defy the God of Israel, for forty-plus days (vss. 16)—reminding us that extraordinary things happen after long waits (Long, 2020, p. 179).

The Challenge (Vss. 19-27)

Verse 19 begins a new paragraph with a *waw initial* (translated in English as *"Now"* (see also vss. 1, 12, 28, and vs. 41, where it is translated "*and*"). The author is still setting the scene and tells how David made his way to the Valley of Elah (vss. 19-22), faithfully fulfilling his father's request. He details David's diligence in carrying out his duties—his rising early, the safekeeping of his flock (vs. 20), and the careful attention to the baggage (vs. 22).

Meanwhile, the giant of Gath continued his defiance. From verse fifteen it seems that David had been on the battlefield before, but on this occasion, in the providence of God, he arrived just when the armies were about to march out and just at the time when Goliath repeated his war cry (vs. 20). This is the first time we encounter David as an individual (Evans, 2004, p. 110), and indeed the first time David talks in the Bible (Davis, 2019, p. 183). The entire story hinges on the short sentence at the end of verse 23—*"And David heard him."* What began as an ordinary day, a simple errand in the line of duty, became one of the most epoch battles in the Old Testament—when "David heard him."

Saul and the armies of Israel had forgotten God. They were characterised by fear. David, however, was not afraid but was filled with righteous anger. For David, Goliath was not simply the enemy, a nuisance, or the subject of common conversation (vs. 25), but a reproach to Israel and an affront to the living God. David introduced a theological perspective—it was a whole new worldview. He was concerned not so much for Israel's safety, or his own reputation, but for God's glory, and in this context, he found an opportunity for service. First, in the mundane and casual observance of his duties (vss. 20 and 22), second, in his sensitivity for the glory of God (vs. 23), and third, in his care and persistence to do the right thing in the face of opposition. Persistence in a good cause and with a clear conscience, brought David before the king (vs. 31 *cf.* Proverbs 18:16).

Israel's Champion (Vss. 28-40)

As the story develops, David is brought more and more to the foreground. His voice becomes the most prominent, the only voice of faith in Israel (Davis, 2019, p. 183), and lays the theological foundation for the entire story. David has already spoken to the Israelites (vs. 26), and he will speak to Goliath (vss. 45-47). But in this section, the author records four occurrences of the voice of David: once to Eliab, his elder brother (vs. 29), and three times in conversation with Saul (vss. 32, 34-37 and 39).

If we follow the voice of David through this section, it will give us a clear picture of what is going on and an insight into the underlying theology of the story. Eliab, had a sharp and mocking tone (vss. 28-40) and tried to discredit his younger brother. His accusation of David's negligence and his misjudgement of David's motives were unfounded and unfair (Long, 2020, p. 180). David had indeed acted responsibly in the details; he had left the sheep in good hands (vs. 20), and the baggage also (vs. 22). He was without reproach and his commitment cannot be contradicted.

David's response then, was the voice of commitment; *"Is there not a cause?"* (vss. 28-30), or "Is it not a matter of importance?" (Tsumura, 2007, p. 455). The force of the passage seems to be a call to rise and meet the demand of the hour; a call to commitment, for a leader, for someone to defend the honour of the God of Israel. The army of Israel is only minimally committed (they have shown up for the battle), but David is the only one in Israel willing to act on his commitment—to fight where the battle is raging.

Second, David was the voice of comfort (vss. 31-32) to the nation. The story moves quickly from David *hearing* Goliath (vs. 23) to the people who *heard* David and *reported* to Saul (vs. 31) and then Saul *took* David (vs. 31). The fact that Saul "took" David, does not point to an act of faith on Saul's part, but a social and political action within his right as king (Ch. 8:11). The point is that Saul is still faithless and fearful, but as king, he must do something. David's first words to Saul were important then, they were words of comfort, not only to Saul but to the whole nation—*"let no man's heart fail…"* David had the answer to the threat of Goliath. It was not a direct rebuke against Israel's faithlessness and inactivity—it was first of all a word of comfort to the Lord's people.

Third, David was the voice of courage (vss. 33-37). Two words are repeated in his section; David *"struck"* (vss. 35-36 three times) and the Lord *"delivered"* (vs. 37 twice). David's approach to the nation is as a protecting shepherd, and Goliath was just like the lion and the bear. In Saul's mind, however, David faced two disadvantages—he was a youth, and he had no military experience (vs. 33). But David had considered the situation and had committed to it, not with a bullish bravado, or youthful daring but with quiet courage grounded in previous experiences of the LORD'S deliverance (vs. 37). Saul could have brought this argument (e.g. 1 Samuel 11:6-7), and Jonathan also (1 Samuel 14:8-15 13). But David had not forgotten. He saw the past through the lens of his theology and was the first one to appeal to the name of the Lord (vs. 37).

Fourth, David was the voice of confidence (vss. 38-40) amid confusion and fear. Saul accepted David's offer to act as a champion for Israel. What convinced him, we do not know. Perhaps he remembered his own experience of God (Evans, 2004, p. 110). Whatever the reason, Saul still lacked the confidence to send David out without sufficient armour. Saul's armour was not evil, and it was not a sin for Saul to own his armour, nor for kings to wear armour (see 1 Samuel 18:4).

The point is, that David was already outmatched, and no human equipment could make David equal in the fight. David was made weak in the story, everything about him was minimised—his heritage, his lowly occupation, his lack of military experience, his youthfulness, his primitive sling, and stone. If David will enjoy a victory, it will be entirely dependent on the Lord—David is confident of that.

So, while David put on Saul's armour, perhaps out of deference to Saul (v. 38) or perhaps harbouring some insecurity, he soon put it off again. But there is something else very important here. It shows us that David was still undecided about which weapons to use at this point. He was committed to going and fighting the giant,

but this experiment with Saul's armour shows us that when David had no confidence in his own abilities, or in his own well-proven weaponry. His confidence was in his God, and in the end, he decided to go with his own slingshot. He had not tested Saul's armour, but he had tested and proven the promises of God.

A Single Stone (Vss. 41-51)

Now the fight is on. David proved himself a match for Goliath, both in argument (vss. 43-47) and in combat (vss. 48-51). Goliath boasted of his ability and David in the living God. This story is essentially a battle of the gods—The Lord against the gods of the Philistines. This is important to point out here, for David it is not the instrument of warfare that matters, it is God. David came out as a man of action while Goliath's actions were slow and sluggish ("*arose*," "*came,*" and "*drew near,*" vs. 48 and "*fell,*" vs. 49) in comparison to David's ("*hurried and ran,*" vs. 48; and "*put*," "*took,*" "*slung,*" "*struck,*" vs. 49; "*prevailed,*" "*struck,*" vs. 50; "*ran,*" "*stood over,*" "*took his sword,*" "*drew it,*" "*killed,*" and "*cut off his head*" vs. 51).

Just a single shot and the giant's head was crushed, and like his lifeless god, Dagon, Goliath fell on his face (1 Samuel 5:3) and licked the dust (vs. 49).

Short simple sentences in the Bible are often loaded with meaning. We saw this in vs. 23, "*And David heard him.*" Here also, in vs. 50, "*there was no sword in the hand of David.*" The author is emphasising the fact that Goliath's defeat was outside the normal act of warfare—it was an act of God, and He did not need armour or armament to defend his cause (Evans, 2004, p. 111). Now there is some confusion about how Goliath died, was it the stone (vss. 49-50), or was it the sword (vs. 51). In typical Hebrew style, the writer gives a general statement about the defeat of Goliath (vs. 50) and then a more specific one (vs. 51). The giant was defeated with the sling and stone, but he was "put to death" with his own sword. It is worth noting also that the emphasis in vs. 51 is on what the Philistines saw—their champion's head roll. It was then that they fled (vs. 51).

There are a couple of important lessons here. First, while God uses human means, the battle is the "Lord's" (vs. 47). Second, that Goliath was defeated by his own weapon, shows his weakness—just as Satan was defeated by his own weapon, death (Hebrews 2:14).

Victory for the People of God (Vss. 52-54)

Victory for Israel was more than the defeat of Goliath; it is the routing of the entire Philistine army that was trespassing on Judah's land. According to Goliath's challenge, the Philistines should have surrendered and served the Israelites (vs. 9), but they fled. All their hopes were on Goliath, and with their hope gone, they ran, The Israelites pursued them all the way to Gath and Ekron—the threat to the kingdom was averted and the enemy put in his place (vs. 52).

Whose Son is This? (Vss. 55-58)

The Story switches quickly back to Saul. He was impressed with David, even before the conquest, and had sent Abner to enquire about his family background with the intention of keeping David at the palace permanently.

David had been designated king (Ch. 16), and his victory over Goliath had demonstrated his ability to lead the people of God. All that was needed was his coronation (2 Samuel 2:4). In the meantime, however, the reign of Saul continued and the remaining chapters of 1 Samuel (18-31), reflect the conflict between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15). Through much persecution, David will ascend to the throne and will rule his people (Schreiner, 2013, pp. 148-149). This is the story of victory through Jesus Christ.