

# A MAN TO FIGHT

1 Samuel 17:1-30

Rev. Richard D. Phillips

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC, August 23, 2009

---

The Philistine said, "I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together" (1 Sam. 17:10).

**T**he Bible frequently teaches issues of faith and virtue by using contrasts. This is especially true in historical narratives like those in 1 Samuel. Unlike Paul's epistles in the New Testament, with their plain statements of propositional truth, historical narratives set different people before us, tell us their stories, and show how God interacted with them.

Of all these contrasts, none are more potent than that between Saul and David. Ever since the first hint of David in chapter 13, he has been presented as Saul's opposite. Chapter 17, made famous by the battle between David and Goliath, begins in earnest a contest between David and Saul that will take up the remainder of 1 Samuel. Here, in David's first public appearance, Saul and David are contrasted by their response to the Philistine giant's challenge: "Give me a man, that we may fight together" (1 Sam. 17:10).

The account of David slaying the giant Goliath is a classic tale, having "the ingredients of drama and excitement, anticipation and the satisfaction of the good guy defeating the bad guy against all odds."<sup>1</sup> "David and Goliath" has become a stock-phrase for any "little guy" who takes on and defeats a bigger, stronger foe, whether in war, sports, business, or politics. The prominence of this story is not accidental. This is the longest of all the accounts in Samuel, including more quotations than any other (twenty-two), and featuring

---

<sup>1</sup> John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 301.

the longest and most vivid speech from one of Israel's enemies. Careful attention is paid to small details such as the number of cheeses brought by David, the pieces and weight of Goliath's armor, the number of small stones picked up David, as so on. These details slow the reader down to ponder the narrative "and thus make the story more memorable and more likely to be studied further."<sup>2</sup>

As we approach this great chapter, we should realize that David's victory does not foretell triumphs that we will achieve by faith but rather the victory of Christ for our salvation. David as hero and king presents a foreshadowing portrait, what theologians refer to as a *type*, of his greater son, Jesus. Moreover, while we may recognize David's character, experience from shepherding, and application of biblical principles as having played a role in his success, David triumphed mainly because he was indwelt by the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit having "rushed" upon him at his anointing (1 Sam. 16:13). As such, David's actions remind us that faith, godliness, and courage should always result from a Spirit-led life and they will often be used by God against our spiritual foes today.

## ISRAEL'S GIANT REPROACH

**I**srael in the time of Saul and David sat in the midst of enemies on all sides. Their main foes were the Philistines to the west and the Ammonites to the east. Saul's earliest battles were against the Philistines, and after his son Jonathan's victory at Michmash (1 Sam. 14:1-23) the Philistines were driven out of Israel back to their coastal fortresses. These resourceful enemies, however, were not easily daunted, so in time they returned in force to wage war against Saul's kingdom. "The Philistines gathered their armies for battle. And they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Socoh and Azekah in Ephes-dammim" (1 Sam. 17:1). This places the battle line about thirteen miles west of Bethlehem. Saul mobilized his army to meet the invaders, encamping in "the Valley of Elah" (1 Sam. 17:2). This site has been identified by historians and archaeologists, and in its center is a deep ravine where winter rains

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 188.

flood. The Philistines moved forward to meet Israel and the two forces faced each other one either side of the ditch.

This battle would serve as a watershed event for Saul's reign, being the first battle he would face after being rejected by the Lord and abandoned by the Holy Spirit. In the past, Saul could rely on God's saving help, but now Saul and Israel would have to manage things on their own. It was a good thing, then, that Saul was such an impressive person: he was handsome and "from his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people" (1 Sam. 9:2). It was for these qualifications that Saul was so agreeable to Israel as their king. Israel had demanded of God a king "like all the nations," and one of the things they wanted him to do was "go out before us and fight our battles" (1 Sam. 8:20). Who better to do this than the man with the largest stature in all Israel?

These thoughts may have been in the mind of Saul and his army as the two forces drew together. The Philistines had superior armament and usually possessed superior numbers, but Saul would not have been daunted. Given his leadership, Israelite valor, and the strong defensive terrain, he should be able to hurl back any assault across the ravine. But then the din among the Philistine began to subside and their ranks parted. Out strutted the enemy's latest military innovation, a gladiator-champion of huge proportions.

The inspired author of Samuel takes the greatest pains to describe the Philistine champion. His name was "Goliath of Gath," and the first thing one noticed about him was his awesome size: his "height was six cubits and a span" (1 Sam. 17:4). Converting those ancient measurements yields a height of about nine feet six inches. Although the text never refers to Goliath as a giant, it doesn't need to: he was a mountain of a man, rising far above the head of any Israelite warrior.

If you know anything about biblical scholarship, then you will not be surprised to learn that this measurement has been sharply challenged. Such criticism is apparently quite ancient, since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Greek translation of the Old Testament, the *Septuagint*, puts Goliath at four cubits and a span, for a more believable six feet nine inches. But unless we operate with the assumption that things have always been as they are now – for there is no record of any human this tall – there is no reason to doubt the Hebrew text. Moreover, Goliath's

height is not without any comparison. The *Guinness Book of World Records* reports that in 1940 an Illinois man named Robert Wadlow was verified to be eight feet eleven inches tall – a mere seven inches shorter than Goliath. The world’s tallest known man today is eight feet five inches.<sup>3</sup>

There are also good biblical reasons to take this measurement seriously. When Israel drew near to the Promised Land at the end of the exodus, Moses sent spies to investigate the land of Canaan. These spies reported seeing “descendants of Anak” (Num. 13:22), “a people great and tall” (Deut. 9:2) who terrified the Israelites, having “come from the Nephilim” (Num. 13:33). The only other reference in the Bible to the “Nephilim” comes from before Noah’s flood, which states that these “mighty men..., men of renown” were the spawn of fallen angels and their intercourse with human women (Gen. 6:4). How these giants would have survived Noah’s flood is a mystery (although great height would have helped!). In the time of Joshua’s conquest of Canaan, the Anakim were driven out of Israel (see Jos. 15:13-14). The only other reference we have is that statement of Joshua 11:22: “There was none of the Anakim left in the land of the people of Israel. Only in Gaza, in Gath, and in Ashdod did some remain.” This record links up with the account in Samuel, since the Philistines’ giant was identified as “Goliath of Gath” (1 Sam. 17:4).

As is often the case, debating scholarly criticism threatens to distract us from the point. Remember why Saul was so impressive to Israel, and why they wanted him as king to go before them into battle? Saul’s chief feature was his tall stature. Now Israel, and Saul, would learn the problem with relying on worldly sources of strength. If you are counting on money, there is always someone richer. If you are trusting to brains, there is someone smarter. And if you are relying on size, there is always someone bigger. Goliath was *alot* bigger than Saul or anyone else in Israel’s army! In situations like that, it certainly would be good to be able to call upon the Lord! But that was a privilege Saul no longer enjoyed or, apparently, even sought.

There is more to the description of Goliath. Not only was his height imposing, but his armor was most intimidating: “He had a helmet of

---

<sup>3</sup> This information was gathered from [www.guinnessworldrecords.com](http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com), accessed Aug. 22, 2009.

bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze, and he had bronze armor on his legs” (1 Sam. 17:5-6). Unless things had changed since a few years earlier, most Israelites would have gone into battle with little or no armor (see 1 Sam. 13:22). Goliath, in contrast, was armored from head to toe. And it was very heavy armor. His mail coat weighed five thousand shekels, that is, 126 pounds. His massive legs were covered by bronze greaves. Goliath was effectively impregnable, all the more so since a shield bearer went before him. The fact that one man was required just to lug Goliath’s shield suggests that it was appropriately huge.

Lastly, we are told of Goliath’s impressive weaponry. He had “a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver’s beam, and his spear’s head weighed six hundred shekels of iron” (1 Sam. 17:6-7). The hugeness of Goliath’s spear is indicated by its fifteen pound iron point. Robert Bergen summarizes the first impression Goliath made as “awesome and psychologically overpowering,”<sup>4</sup> the very picture of martial invincibility.

Goliath was more than a fearful spectacle; he was also a specialist in single-combat. Goliath was a “champion” (1 Sam. 17:4): the Hebrew expression is literally a “man between the two.” He was trained, equipped, and naturally endowed to step forth between competing armies and challenge an opponent to single combat. This had the virtue of sparing the vast bloodshed of armies locked in battle, and it reflected the commonly held idea that the battle was a contest between the gods of the two nations, since single combat could prove a god’s supremacy just as well as a full battle.

It was to challenge the Israelites that Goliath had come forth. He stood before the Israelite ranks and jeered: “Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me” (1 Sam. 17:8). Whoever won this personal combat, Goliath offered, the other side would surrender and be slaves of the other.

In this way, Goliath represents for us the spiritual opposition to God and his people, especially as manifested by Satan and his demonic

---

<sup>4</sup> Bergen, *I, 2 Samuel*, 189.

forces. A. W. Pink writes: “Goliath pictures to us the great enemy of God and man, the devil, seeking to terrify, and bring into captivity those who bear the name of the Lord.”<sup>5</sup> Not only did his prodigious size reflected the great power of Satan, but God’s mocking jeers depicted Satan’s hostility and hatred against the Lord and his people. “Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul?... I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together” (1 Sam. 17:8-10).

The natural candidate to fight Goliath was king Saul, since going before Israel into battle was his job (1 Sam. 8:20). But Saul “was dismayed and greatly afraid” (1 Sam. 17:11). What about Saul’s many valiant captains, Abner, his son Jonathan, or one of the other “valiant” men Saul had been collecting (see 1 Sam. 14:52)? As a rule, the men below will reflect the spirit of their leader. Herein lay the problem, for God’s Spirit had departed from Saul and he was left to his own resources. As Saul gazed slack-jawed and glassy-eyed at Goliath, the army fed off his giant-sized panic. Thus not one of them had the heart to answer Goliath’s challenge. Proverbs 28:1 says that “the righteous are bold as a lion.” Saul proved the opposite, showing that once we are severed from God and his saving help, the world and its threats become terrifying, so that we are easily dismayed.

## SAUL’S ROYAL FAILURE

With the vision of a terrified and dispirited Saul and his army fresh in our mind, another figure enters the scene. His introduction is carefully crafted. Scholars have been puzzled as to why David is introduced all over again, having his family connections already stated in the previous chapter, but a point is being made. While the giant’s physical features are highlighted to impress us, it is David’s covenant lineage that sets him apart: “Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse” (1 Sam. 17:2). These are the opposing powers in the contest between David and Goliath: raw worldly (and perhaps demonic) strength versus a covenant bond with the living and true God.

---

<sup>5</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *The Life of David*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:31.

Ordinarily, David would not have been even present on this battlefield, since he did not meet Israel's age requirement for military service of twenty years (Num. 1:3, 19). But God's providence ordained otherwise. The three oldest sons of Jesse were in the army, and in those days families had to provide support to the soldiers and to a certain extent to the king and his officers. Thus it was that David was summoned from his fields. While he was the youngest, his position as lyre-player in Saul's court made him the obvious choice to take provisions to his brothers and return with news. Jesse summoned David and directed him to take to his brothers "an ephah of this parched grain, and these ten loaves," along with "these ten cheeses to the commander of their thousand," and report back about his brothers (1 Sam. 17:17-18).

David's experience reminds us that we do not know what challenges await us on any day. Little did David realize, as he "rose early in the morning and left the sheep with a keeper and took the provisions and went" (1 Sam. 17:20), that the defining challenge of his life was a mere few hours ahead. William Blaikie comments on how greatly we may be sifted and tried on any day, asking, "Should we not pray more really, more earnestly if we did realize these possibilities?... Is it not a good habit, as you kneel each morning, to think, 'For aught I know, this may be the most important day of my life. The opportunity may be given me of doing a great service in the cause of truth and righteousness; or the temptation may assail me to deny my Lord and ruin my soul. O God, be not far from me this day; prepare me for all that Thou preparest for me!'"<sup>6</sup>

David arrived at the battlefield right as the respective forces were assuming their positions across the defile, each shouting their war cry. No teenage boy could stay back and miss seeing such a scene. Therefore David dropped his goods at the baggage and "ran to the ranks and went and greeted his brothers" (1 Sam. 17:22). At just that moment, "the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines and spoke the same words as before" (1 Sam. 17:23).

---

<sup>6</sup> William G. Blaikie, *Expository Lectures on the Book of First Samuel* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground, 1887, reprint 2005), 281.

A couple of points are worth noting. The first is that we are told that this scene had repeated itself for forty days, each resulting in the same humiliation of Israel as no one took up Goliath's challenge. Forty is a number used in the Bible for a definite period of testing – we think of Israel's forty years and Jesus' forty days in the desert – so that David's arrival occurs at the point when Israel's army had failed the challenge set to them by Goliath. They had almost six weeks for one Israelite soldier to muster enough courage to take on the giant, and if none had stepped forth by now none was ever going to do so. David therefore arrived at the moment when the Spirit-less Saul and his dispirited army had suffered a moral defeat.

Secondly, this failure proved Israel to be devoid of faith in their God. Goliath's challenge of verse 8 was really a test of their confidence in the Lord. Roger Ellsworth paraphrases Goliath's taunt: "Am I not a pagan, God-hating Philistine? Then why won't any of your men of 'the living God' fight me? You must not really believe in him at all! In fact, you must believe that a nine-foot warrior is actually stronger than your 'living God' when it comes to a real battle."<sup>7</sup> This is the kind of test the world still delights to pose for Christians, often with Goliath-like mocking: "We know what you teach in Sunday School, but let's see how you do when faced with a real-life sensual temptation, or an opportunity to gain riches by cheating. Let's see the look on your God-praising face when you receive a terrifying medical diagnosis or your stock portfolio crashes!" Behind Goliath was the same Devil who wages spiritual warfare today. The issue is always the same: "Do you *really* trust in a loving God of power and grace?"

Perceiving this helps us to understand David's horrified reaction to the sight before him. This may well have been the first time David had ever heard anyone blaspheming the name of the Lord. How mortified he was to witness as "all the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were much afraid" (1 Sam. 17:24). Perhaps smarting from the look on David's face, the soldiers were eager to explain their cowardice: "Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel" (1 Sam. 17:25).

---

<sup>7</sup> Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King: Learning from the Life of David* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1998), 30.

The obvious question was what Saul was doing, so the king's response was reported to David. While the king would not risk his own neck against the formidable Philistine, he was willing to richly reward anyone who would do so on his behalf. The soldiers told David, "And the king will enrich the man who kills him with great riches and will give him his daughter and make his father's house free in Israel" (1 Sam. 17:25). This was a princely reward: great riches, membership in royalty via the hand of Saul's daughter, and life-long family exemption from taxes and other civic duties. Surely men would be lining up for a chance at a bonanza like this!

Only not a single Israelite had signed up to be Saul's champion. This offer shows that Saul accepted Goliath's challenge in principle. But Saul lacked the resources to accept the challenge, having not one soldier sufficiently inspired to face the Philistine giant. Saul's royal failure is now complete: not only has he failed in his calling to be Israel's champion, but his leadership has not inspired a single soldier to defend the cause of his king, his nation, and, implicitly, his God.

The real problem was that Saul, and after him the army, had indeed lost their faith in God. Not that they formally denied the Lord. We read nothing here of a Philistine theological society forming in the Israelite army or offerings made to idols. So far as we know, Saul and the army still made an orthodox profession of faith. But the test of faith is not ultimately one of words, but of action in the face of earthly trials and spiritual warfare. Do we act as if we know and serve a God who is greater than every other power, a Savior who is willing and able to save us from all dangers? This question was answered by Saul and his army by their failure to face Goliath, just as it is answered by every Christian today by his or her day-to-day actions and response to threats and temptations. Which do we believe is greater and stronger: the sin that mocks us and the fear that shoots into our heart, or the God whose faith we profess? If we believe in God we will at the least step onto the battlefield and make a trial of his power to preserve us from sin and to deliver us from fear.

#### DAVID'S FAITHFUL REPLY

**D**avid seems to have been stupefied that Israel's king could think of no higher incentive for his soldiers than the material riches he

offered. A dead man could never spend the money Saul offered, after all, nor enjoy the pleasures of marriage to the royal princess. David's response serves as a sort of double-take on his part: "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" (1 Sam. 17:26).

These words offered the first theological perspective on the battle at Elah. By theological, I mean biblical and relating to God. David's question centers on key ideas lacking in everyone else's thinking: Goliath was a "reproach" to Israel; the giant was only an "uncircumcised Philistine"; and the God Israel served was not some mere idol, but "the living God." Ralph Davis comments:

David brings a whole new world view. To this point the narrative has been 'godless'..., but now David injects the godly question into the episode. Doesn't having a living God make a difference in all this? This fellow has mocked 'the ranks of the living God.' If God is so identified with Israel, do you think he is indifferent toward such slurs on his reputation? Do you expect a living God to allow an uncircumcised Philistine to trample his name in military and theological mud?<sup>8</sup>

As David understood things, the army of Israel not only had no *need* to cower before a God-denying pagan warrior but as the people of the living God they had no *right* to flee in terror before Goliath. "Rather," writes Gordon Keddie, "they should have claimed the promise of the presence and power of the Lord and taken the field in holy boldness in dependence on the Lord."<sup>9</sup>

Whether it was the tone of David's question or his interjection of biblical truth among these despondent and pride-injured soldiers, it was more than his older brother could take. This opening portion of the chapter concludes with Eliab's unjust accusation against David: "Eliab's anger was kindled against David," so he mocked David's motives in coming: "I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle" (1 Sam. 17:28). Just as faith is challenged by open enemies such as Goliath, faith is often assailed by world-be family and friends who cast dispersion on anyone who seeks to honor God and follow the faith that he has

---

<sup>8</sup> Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 149.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon J. Keddie, *Dawn of a Kingdom: The Message of I Samuel* (Hertfordshire, UK: Evangelical Press, 1988), 169.

espoused. It was easier for Eliab to criticize his brother than to repent, his heart hardening with perceived reproach in David's words.

David's response to the situation at Elah teaches us that the great affairs of life are all essentially theological. What we do with our lives, how we decide who to marry, or not, what priorities we pursue, or whether we witness the gospel to friends and neighbors all receive their meaning in light of what we really believe about God.

Regardless of our formal profession of faith, if we seldom think in terms of God we reveal that the world holds greater sway over our minds and hearts. If we shrink from doing difficult things for God we show that we think him weak, distant, or indifferent.

Moreover, David shows how important it is for Christians to know the truth about our God. This points to a great tragedy in the church today, for at the very moment when a host of cultural and spiritual Goliaths are assailing the church, Christians are being told – often from the pulpit – that theology lacks relevance for life! At the very moment when believers most need to use their minds and most require the strength that comes from biblical truth, Christians increasingly do not know their Bibles and churches do not care to teach God's Word. Just as David was assailed by his brother for his God-centered perspective on the Philistine champion, those who call the church to renew a God-centered theology are routinely castigated by fellow Christians for arrogance and meddling.

Yet how are young people today to stand up to the giant temptations facing them and the assaults on our faith unless they are solidly established in biblical truth? How many Christians suffer from doubt and fear, thinking of God as unfeeling, uncaring, or unapproving because of their poor spiritual performance, despite the Bible's clear testimony to God's abounding grace and delight for his people in Christ? How few believers are thus able to stand firm in the sure knowledge of God's promised power against sin?

This emphasis on faith and truth is seen in the apostle Paul's teaching about spiritual warfare. Having reminded believers that we face hostile powers in the spiritual realm, Paul urged us to "take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm" (Eph. 6:13). Without dwelling in detail on the pieces of Paul's "armor of God" we can

observe that they center on faith in God's Word: "the belt of truth..., the breastplate of righteous..., shoes [of] the gospel of peace..., the shield of faith..., the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph. 6:14-17). Armed in truth and strengthened by faith, David was able to stand before the Philistine giant. Goliath had challenged Israel for a man to fight, and David alone was willing to answer those taunts because he knew his Bible and he knew his God.

## FIGHTING IN FAITH

**D**o we remember the message of chapter 16? "The LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). In this light, we might look on the saga of Goliath as an extended illustration of this principle. The author's description of the Philistine champion is the single most detailed description of any warrior in all of the Bible. The point was how fearful he appeared and the question was whether or not God's people would look on him through faith in God.

Realizing this, we should apply this passage by asking, "What appearances have the tendency to daunt us and undo our faith?" Are we dominated by the appearance of how others think about us? Are we overcome by circumstances and their apparent effects? Do we shrink from obeying God, refusing sin, and witnessing about Christ, for fear of the giant hostility of the world? Trusting the God we know from the Bible, David challenges us not to cower before the Goliaths we may face, but to stand firm and step forward in the name of the living God and in the power of the Spirit he has sent.

We can approach our challenges with faith, not merely because we have the example of young David, but because we have the saving work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. If David was disturbed by the taunts of Goliath, how distressed was the Son of God over the reign of sin, the discomfort of God's people, and the insult to God's honor through the power of Satan and of sin. Armed with the power of the name of the Lord even more potently than David would be in his battle over Goliath, Jesus struck down our enemies. Speaking of Christ's triumph through the cross and open tomb, Paul threw the taunts back into our enemies' teeth: "Death is swallowed up in

victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:54-57). David looked on the giant as an unclean foe who surely *would be* vanquished if only someone would step forward trusting in the Lord. But we look on Satan, sin, and death as enemies that *have been* defeated by the conquering triumph of Jesus in his death and resurrection. Paul thus charges us to remember Jesus, triumphant over all that we fear and the dark powers we must face:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:31-39).

**If we believe this, then the Goliaths of our time will have men and women to fight, and God will not fail us.**