

Battle of Champions

1 Samuel 17:1-58

Introduction

Everyone needs a hero. As soon as we are born we look for someone to look up to. Our first heroes are our parents. Children possess unalloyed love and admiration for their mother and father. Every little girl at some time decides she wants to grow up to be just like Mom, and every little boy wants to grow up to be just like Dad. But as we grow up, our hero-worship finds new objects. We admire firemen, soldiers, athletes, and movie stars. Even now as college students you look up to certain people – professors, musicians, athletes, and perhaps your parents still.

Everyone needs a hero, and every culture needs a hero. Ancient cultures worshiped various gods who performed great exploits. The Greeks had heroes such as Hercules, who accomplished amazing feats of strength, and Ulysses, who outwitted every challenge men and gods could throw at him. Alfred Lord Tennyson with the King Arthur stories and J. R. R. Tolkien with the stories of Middle Earth created a mythology for the English people. In America George Washington and Abraham Lincoln are larger-than-life figures. In the 20th century Winston Churchill was a hero, not only for the British, but for all those allied against Adolph Hitler.

What sets all these men apart is not only their enormous ability and their success. Certainly they had exceptional abilities – but so did many other people. Some heroes, like George Washington, were widely ridiculed as being noticeably less capable than their peers, and all had serious flaws. What truly sets them apart is their character. The difference between heroes and ordinary men is their willingness to go where others fear to tread. True heroes know their strengths and weaknesses; they know the danger they face; yet they have the courage to put their lives on the line for a cause greater than themselves. The Bible is full of such characters, and today we are going to look at David standing against Goliath.

Champion of Philistia

The first 11 verses describe the scene for us. The armies of Israel and Philistia were drawn up at Socoh in Judah. But instead of engaging both armies, the Philistines sent out a champion. This was a well-known method of war in which each side would present a champion to do the fighting. He would represent all his people, and if he won the fight, his side would take possession of the other side. If he lost, his people would become enslaved to the other nation. This was not a surprising move on the part of the Philistines. What was surprising, even dismaying, was the champion they sent out.

This passage describes Goliath as a terrifying creature. He was 10 feet tall. He wore a massive bronze helmet which would shine in the sun. His coat of mail weighed 150 pounds. His spear was the size of a fencepost and the spearhead weighed almost 20 pounds. This guy was a human tank! No one had any chance against him. No one would be able to penetrate his armor, and he would squash any opponent. Fighting Goliath was like attacking a tank with a pistol. You would be demolished! Just the sight of this 10-foot monster struck terror into the hearts of the Israelite army. This was the Philistine version of shock and awe tactics – completely demoralize your opponent with overwhelming force, and then sweep in and destroy him. We must be careful not to be too critical of the Israelites. It is easy for us to sit here in the safety and comfort of Doubling Gap Center and condemn them for being afraid of Goliath. I think the reaction of the Israelites is entirely understandable – and I think it is how most of us would respond.

Champion of Israel

Verse 12 introduces David, a shepherd boy. David's three older brothers were big strong men who were out fighting in the Israelite army. David, meanwhile, was watching his father's sheep. Some of you may have grown up with Sunday school pictures of David as a ten-year-old shepherd boy. I think this is a misrepresentation. It is more likely that David was a late teenager. Israelites were not eligible for military

service until they were 20 years old, so David could have been about 18 – like many of you. But you see the contrast between massive Goliath, grown up brothers, and David. And as we read, we see that David is nothing more than an errand boy. When he was not watching the sheep, he was taking food and other provisions to his older brothers. David is obviously an extrovert, because he engages everyone in sight in conversation. It's understandable – Goliath was causing a big commotion, and anyone would wonder about it. Verses 28 and 29 reveal an astonishingly typical exchange between brothers, Eliab being very annoyed with David for getting under foot, and David protesting that he is innocent of any wrong.

But now we see another contrast in the way the Israelites responded to Goliath. Verse 24 says that “all the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were dreadfully afraid” – an understandable response. But look at how David reacted. “Then David spoke to the men who stood by him, saying, ‘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?’” (v. 26) David was not intimidated by Goliath, but recognized that for all his size and strength, Goliath made one critical error – a mistake so big it would cost him his life.

David's response reveals that he was motivated by three intolerable facts. First, Israel was under reproach. The NIV uses the more common word, disgrace. It was a shameful thing for the whole army of Israel to stand there and allow Goliath to taunt them. No decent soldier should tolerate such a humiliation. Israel had become a laughingstock to the nations, and David could not bear it. David would rather have died at Goliath's hand than live in a nation that was thus humiliated. Second, Goliath was uncircumcised. He had no covenant with God. God would not come to his aid. On the contrary, Goliath was opposed to God. His covenant was with Dagon, the god of the Philistines. Although in the flesh Goliath was invincible, he was a spiritual weakling. No one else could see this, but David could.

Finally, David saw that the army of Israel – for all its flaws and weaknesses, was really the instrument of God. This can be hard for us to accept, but it is right here in the text. Now I am not saying that Israel's army was always right, or that every soldier was righteous. But scripture teaches that God who rules over men and nations uses armies to do His will. Later, when Israel had turned against God, the army of God was the Babylonians. This was shocking to Israel, and the prophet Habakkuk was alarmed and dismayed when he saw this. Habakkuk had been crying out to God because of the wickedness of Israel, so God told him that He would send the Babylonians to punish the evildoers and put an end to injustice in Israel. Isaiah prophesied that Cyrus would be God's anointed. This Persian king was used by God to accomplish his will when the Israelites had abandoned God. But here, at this time, the Israelite army was God's instrument of righteousness. That does not mean that they won every battle, but it does mean that God is with them and they will win in the end.

Soon someone reported to King Saul what David was saying, and Saul called him in for a job interview. I'm sure Saul was hopeful when he heard that someone was willing to challenge Goliath, but I'm equally sure his heart sank when he saw an untrained youth walk in. Listen to David's opening words. “Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.” (v. 32) Isn't that a magnificent speech? Isn't David inspiring? But Saul was a practical man. He could see immediately that David was an untrained boy. He was no match for Goliath, or for any soldier who has been training for war for years. It would be like sending Mike here against Jon on the soccer field. Mike is in good shape, but Jon has been training all year. But David would not be dissuaded. He told how he had courageously defended his father's sheep from a lion and a bear. Now that is impressive, but such stories are rather quaint in the face of the terrible power of Goliath. Then David concludes with this ringing conclusion, “Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God.’ Moreover David said, ‘The LORD, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.’” (v.36-37) Saul was impressed.

Saul was convinced. So Saul gave permission for David to face Goliath. But of course, what did Saul have to lose? Nothing but an insignificant shepherd boy from a small country town.

Have you noticed something disturbing about this interview? Saul's main objection was that David was no match for a trained soldier. David was untrained. Well if that is the essential problem, the obvious solution is to send a trained soldier out against Goliath. And who is the most impressive soldier in the Israelite army? Saul himself. In 9:2 we find that Saul was a head taller than any other Israelite. Saul was a big guy! Not as big as Goliath, but he was huge. Saul was the biggest soldier in Israel, and he was the obvious choice to fight Goliath. So why didn't he? Why was David so sure of himself and Saul so fearful? David saw that God's honor was at stake, but Saul could only see an invincible giant.

Saul offered David his armor, but David could not use it because he was not used to wearing armor. So he simply took his staff and slingshot and went out against Goliath.

On the surface this appears to be a contest between two men – or rather a soldier and a teenager. But that is only the surface. In reality this was a spiritual battle – like the battle for Adam, the battle over Job, and the spiritual war Daniel saw between the angels and demons of Persia, Greece, and Israel. Goliath came in the strength and power of his gods. He called upon them as he cursed David in their name. David likewise came in the power and strength of his God. He declared, “Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's, and He will give you into our hands.” This is the war cry of the faithful – the battle is the Lord's, and He will give you into our hands. David was confident in God's power, and David was energized by God's power. Goliath was angry that the Israelites had insulted him by sending a boy out to fight. He was enraged that David taunted him in the name of his God. Goliath charged across the field to destroy the insulting boy. But David was unafraid. He did not run away. He did not even stand his ground. David ran to Goliath. He was eager to attack this enemy of God. He put the stone in his sling, swung, and struck Goliath in the forehead where the helmet left him vulnerable. The shot was perfect, and Goliath fell. David then used Goliath's own sword and cut off his head, just as he said he would do.

David's astonishing victory energized the fearful Israelites. When they saw Goliath fall from a single small stone, courage raced through their veins and they rushed out after the Philistine army. The victory of David turned into a victory for the whole nation as they won the battle that day. One important lesson here is the huge effect of one man's courage. Before David faced Goliath, the Israelites were timid. After he faced Goliath, they were courageous. This is not merely a change in perception, it is a change in reality. David's action created courage where none existed previously. This is the nature of leadership. Leaders enter a situation, and by their action, they change reality. The British people were reluctant to fight Hitler until Winston Churchill's resolve changed them. The Czech hope of freedom was sustained through the long dark years of Soviet oppression by the leadership of Vaclav Havel. The Solidarity movement in Poland became an invincible force after their own priest returned to Poland as pope and declared that Polish people were made to live free. Russians began to desire freedom when they saw their own Boris Yeltsin face the tanks of the red army alone and unarmed. In each case others refrained from acting because there was not hope of success – and they were correct. The status quo offered no possibility of change. But by taking a stand for the right, these leaders changed reality – and everyone followed.

The Faith of David

But the most significant lesson here is not David's leadership. It is his faith. This story would be nothing more than another heroic myth if it were not for David's unquenchable faith in God. Let's look at several aspects of David's faith. First, David saw a reality that others did not. There were no signs pointing to the Israelite forces saying, “God's Army”. We know from the Psalms that David knew God's word. He trusted God's word. He knew that the rescue from Egypt had been a miracle of God's power. He knew that

God was present in the armies of Joshua. David knew that Israel's army was entirely different than every other army in the world. But there was no evidence of this fact. They looked the same as the Philistine army. The only way David knew the Israelites were different was by faith.

Second, David understood that God will honor His name. David instantly saw that when Goliath taunted God, he had signed his death warrant. The third command reflects God's jealousy regarding His name. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes His name in vain." Israel was God's people. When Goliath said, "I defy the armies of Israel this day," he was challenging God and God's reputation. Goliath attacked God's name, and David attacked Goliath *with* God's name. He said, "I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied." (v. 45) David knew without a doubt that God would honor His name.

Third, David knew that he had protection Goliath did not have. David was circumcised. He bore the mark of the covenant with God. Goliath was uncircumcised, and thus spiritually defenseless. Goliath would have mocked David's circumcision, and perhaps many Israelites failed to recognize the importance of God's mark upon them. Circumcision is a very small mark in a very private place. Only faith can see its significance.

Fourth, David's faith was real. David's faith was not some mental construct or some heightened feeling state. His faith was not some rush of excitement or commitment to a plan. His faith was simply obedience to God. David's faith included offering himself for the battle. His faith involved taking up the sling, racing across the field, and striking the enemy dead. David's faith was an active, energetic, even dangerous faith. His faith took him out of the range of comfort and placed him in the center of the battle. His faith was the real thing.

Finally, David's faith was total. By knowing the end of the story we can miss the reality that David could have died. David did not have some magical knowledge into the future. He did not have a divine force field which he could deploy to deflect Goliath's 20 pound spear. He did not have a laser-guided stone which would home in on the one spot in Goliath's armor which did not protect him. David had no guarantees. But David valued God's honor above his own life. David trusted God in death as well as in life, and he was willing to die that day on the battlefield. David's faith trusted God so totally that death with God was worth more than life without Him.

Champion of the Church

The immediate application of this passage is to emulate the faith of David. Some people misunderstand this and think that the lesson of this chapter is to live courageously. That is what the world would see here, and this is the lesson an unbeliever would receive. But no one can please God in his own strength. None of us are capable of winning spiritual battles on our own, and neither was David. David was an ordinary shepherd boy. He was no match for Goliath. David's courage is amazing, and possibly awe inspiring. Some of us, particularly the NFs, will be inspired to go out and face insurmountable odds like David. But such people are foolish, and such efforts are fools' errands. David would have died and his courage would have died with him if he had faced Goliath on his own. He might have been heroic figure, but he would have been a heroic failure.

David's true virtue was his faith. By trusting in God, he succeeded. The victory was not won by David, but by God. David said, "the battle is the LORD's, and He will give you into our hands." (v. 47) David knew he was weak, but He also knew that God was strong. And he knew that God would come to the aid of those who trust in Him. So the proper application for us is to trust God. We might expand this and say that the application of this passage is to trust God in the face of great problems. Most of us have a lot of trouble with this. Our trouble begins with our view of reality. We see like unbelievers. We do not see the

spiritual reality, but only see the material world in front of us. Like the Israelites we clearly recognize the impossible challenges before us, and we do nothing. We delay, we make excuses, we blame others – we practice an endless array of strategies to cover the fact that we do not see the spiritual reality. We do not know that God’s divine power will fight for those who serve Him. So we never step out. We cower in fear – like the Israelites.

Not seeing what is real, we fail to exercise faith in God. We go though life on the strength and wisdom that we can see – our own strength and wisdom of the flesh. We excuse our unbelief by claiming to be responsible and realistic and reasonable. In reality we are irresponsible because we do not trust in God’s infallible word. We are unrealistic because we do not understand reality. And we are unreasonable because we think God will not help us. The message of this passage is that God is real, He is fighting unbelief, and He will grant success to those who trust in Him.

This affects us directly as we approach the summer and prepare for ministry next year. We are faced with a campus full of unbelief. Lehigh is controlled by people who are opposed to God and His people. Thousands do not know God and do not believe the gospel. In the face of this challenge some people retreat into their own safe Christian ghetto. They surround themselves with their Christian friends and try their best to survive the hostile environment of a secular campus. On the surface this can look like faithfulness to God, but it is the opposite. This behavior is faithless. It is rank unbelief. It is refusing to trust in God’s power to overcome evil.

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Conclusion

But there is a root problem here. What if, honestly, you don’t have this great, heroic faith?

The most important application is not to look to David, but to the greater David - the Lord of David who came to regain the throne David’s descendants lost. Jesus came as the Savior of His people. He fought Satan in hand-to-hand combat in the wilderness and defeated every attempts to tempt Him to sin. He raided Satan’s army, casting out demons left and right. In Matthew 12:29 He claimed to be the one who binds the strong man and plunders his goods - Jesus is the great David who defeated Satan’s Goliath at every turn, and then in his death, utterly and completely destroyed the power of sin and Satan. Then, Jesus rose victorious from the grave and ascended to his throne.

The meaning of David and Goliath is not so much to have faith like David and win God battles, but belief in his God, who has already won the decisive battle for us. Our strength is not in ourselves. It is not even in our faith. It is in Jesus. Jesus is our champion. When we cling to Him, we reap the benefit of His victories, and we find ourselves victorious, too.

Jesus is your champion. Trust him. Love him, worship him, read His word. Talk to him. Then, boldly go when no mortals have dared to go.

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