David and Goliath

1 Samuel 17

Key Verse: 17:47

“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.”

The story of David and Goliath is one of the most popular stories in the Bible, which happened about 3,000 years ago when Saul was the king of Israel. It took place in an area called Sokoh in Judah what is now the West Bank in Israel. The name David means “beloved” and Goliath means “**great**.” Goliath was a famous giant from the Philistine city of [Gath](https://www.bing.com/search?q=Gath&filters=sid%3af8831346-8eab-c72e-764f-051ca05a5453&form=ENTLNK). For 40 days, he openly defied the armies of Israel, challenging them to send a man out to fight him. He was killed by the shepherd boy, David, with a single shot of a stone from his sling. (17:4) Let’s think about the meaning of the story and learn lessons from it.

Ancient Palestine had a long Eastern border, and there was a mountain range. Still the same is true of Israel today. The mountain ranges are all of the ancient cities of the region: Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron. There was a costal plain along the Mediterranean, where Tel Aviv is now. And connecting the mountain range with the costal plain is an area called the Shephelah, which is a series of valleys and ridges that run east to west. The Shephelah, which means low plain land, was important because it was between the coast plain to the west and the Judea Mountains to the east. The place was known to be the most beautiful part of Israel. It was gorgeous, with forests of oak and wheat fields and vineyards. In the history of the region, it had a real strategic function. It was a place of contact in peace or in conflict, and the means by which hostile armies on the coastal plain find their way, got up into the mountains and threaten those living in the mountains. Whoever controlled the Shephelah dominated the relationship between the two peoples.

The Philistines, who were the biggest of enemies of Israel were living in the coastal plain. They were originally from Crete, an island in the Mediterranean Sea. They were people traveling by sea. They started to make their way to Shephelah up into the mountains. What they wanted to do was to occupy the highland area right by Bethlehem and split the Kingdom of Israel two. The King, Saul, knowing their intention, brought his army down from the mountains. He confronted the Philistines in the Valley of Elah, one of the most beautiful of the valleys of the Shephelah. The Israelites dug in along the northern ridge and the Philistines dug in along the southern ridge and the two armies just sat there for weeks. They stared at each other, because they were deadlocked. Neither could attack the other. Because to attack the other side, they had to come down from the mountain or the ridge into the valley. Then, they would be completely exposed to their enemy.

Finally, to break the deadlock, the Philistines sent their mightiest warrior, Goliath, down into the valley floor. He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, “Choose a man and have him come down to me.” (8) He meant, “Send your mightiest warrior down and we will fight with each other, just the two of us.” This was a tradition in ancient warfare called single combat. It was a way of setting disputes without incurring the bloodshed of a major battle. But it demanded that the winner take all and the loser lose all, not just for the fighter, but for the nation as well. The winner's side was considered the winner of the battle, and the loser would become the slaves of the other. (17:9) It sounds like the voting system of the American Presidential election, “The winner takes all the votes of the state and the loser loses all.”

The Philistine who was sent down, their mighty warrior, was a giant whose height was six cubits and a span. That is about 9 feet 9 inches or about 3 meters. He was humongous. He was outfitted head to toe in this glittering bronze armor with a javelin slung on his back, and a spear and a sword. He was absolutely terrifying. He was so terrifying that none of the Israelite soldiers wanted to fight him. It was a death wish. There was no way they thought they could take him. For forty days the Philistine came forward every morning and evening and took his stand. (16) Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.

Goliath’s strategy is very similar to Satan’s strategy. Satan plants fear in our hearts and makes us give up doing what God is pleased with. It is known that human beings are born with fears: fear of the dark, fear of intimacy, fear of death, fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of losing health, and fear of commitment, etc. Fear is Satan’s potent weapon. Fear freezes our mind and body that we cannot even think properly. But our God is the God of love, peace, comfort, strength and power, and courage. In Psalm 23:4, David says, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.” To fight against Goliath, the Israelites should first fight against their fear in their hearts. They only saw the giant and his big and formidable appearance. They couldn’t see the God of Israel who promised to be with them. So, they were gripped with fear and were terrified.

Finally, the only person who would come forward was a young shepherd boy. He went up to Saul and he said, “Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him.” (32) And Saul says, “You can’t fight him. That’s ridiculous. You are only a boy. This guy is a mighty warrior.” (33) But the shepherd boy refused to change his mind. He says, “No, no. You don’t understand. I have been defending my flock against lions and wolves for years. I think I can do it.” (34) Saul had no choice. He had gotton no one else who would come forward. So, he said, “All right. Go, and the Lord be with you.” Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them. He said to Saul, “I cannot go in these because I am not used to them.” So, he took them off. (39) Instead, he took his staff in his hand, and reached down on the ground and picked up 5 stones and put them in his shepherd’s bag. And he started to walk down the mountainside to fight the Philistine. When the giant saw this young shepherd approaching. He called out, “Come here and I will give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals.” (44) He issued this kind of taunt and aggravating remarks toward the shepherd coming to fight him. And the shepherd drew closer and closer. The giant saw that he was carrying a staff. That was all he was carrying, just this shepherd’s staff and a small bag instead of weapon. And he felt insulted and said, “Am I a dog that you come to me with sticks?” (43) The shepherd boy took one of his stones out of his pocket. He put it in his sling and rolled it around and let it fly. It hit the giant between the eyes – the most vulnerable spot. He fell facedown either dead or unconscious. The shepherd boy ran up and took his sword and cut off his head. The Philistines saw this and they turned and they just ran. The shepherd boy was David, and the giant was Goliath.

There is an expression, underdog and top dog. Both underdog and top dog originated from dog fighting which went on in the 19th century. The losing dog ended up on the bottom, or under the winner, who was on top. So, David, in this story, was supposed to be the underdog, someone who was thought to have a very little chance of winning. Goliath was known as the top dog, who had every reason to win. In fact, that term, “David and Goliath,” has entered our language as a metaphor for improbable victories by some weak party over someone far stronger, not likely to happen. Have you ever thought of yourself as an underdog for any reason that you would never win? If your answer is yes, can you think of why? Now, why do we call David an underdog? There were many reasons. We call him an underdog because he was a boy, or just a little more than a boy. (42) Goliath was a huge, strong giant. We also call David an underdog because Goliath was an experienced warrior, champion, and he was just a shepherd. Most importantly, we call him an underdog because all he had was just a sling. Goliath was out fitted with all of the modern weaponry, the glittering coat of armor and a sword and a javelin and a spear.

Let’s start from there. “All David had was a sling.” In ancient warfare, there were three kinds of warriors. There was cavalry, men on horseback and with chariots. There was infantry, which were foot soldiers, armed foot soldiers with swords and shields and some kind of armor. And there was artillery, and artillery were archers, more importantly, slingers. A slinger was someone who has a leather pouch with two long cords attached to it. They put a projectile, either a rock or a lead ball inside the pouch, and they whirled it around. Then, they let one of the cords go, and the effect was to send the projectile forward toward its target. That was what David had. It is important to understand that that was not a sling shot. It was not a child toy with a Y shape and an elastic string. The sling was in fact a weapon. When David rolled it around, he was turning the sling around probably at 6 or 7 revolutions per second. That means that when the rock was released, it was going forward really fast probably 35 meters per second. That’s substantially faster than a baseball thrown by even the finest of baseball pitchers, like Clayton Kershaw of the Dodgers. More than that, the stones in the Valley of Elah were not normal rocks. They were barium sulphate, which were rocks twice the density of normal stones. If you do the calculations on the ballistics, on the stopping power of the rock fired from David’s sling, it’s roughly equal to the stopping power of a handgun. This is an incredibly devastating weapon. In terms of accuracy, experienced slingers could hit and maim or even kill a target at distance of up to 200 yards. Singers were capable of hitting birds in flight. They were incredibly accurate. When David lined up, he was not 200 yards away from Goliath. He was quite close to Goliath when he fired a stone at Goliath.

David had every intention and every expectation of being able to hit Goliath at his most vulnerable spot between his eyes. The history of ancient warfare tells us that slingers were the decisive factor against infantry in one kind of battle and another. Then, what was Goliath’s weapon? He had a heavy infantry. His expectation when he challenged the Israelites to a duel was that he was going to be fighting another heavy infantryman.

When he said to David, “Come here and I will give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals.” (44) The key phrase is “Come here.” “Come up to me because we’re going to fight hand to hand.” King Saul had the same expectation. When David said, “I want to fight Goliath.” Saul tried to give him his armor, because Saul was thinking, “Oh, when you say ‘fight Goliath,’ you mean ‘fight him hand-to-hand combat, infantry on infantry.’” But David had no expectation to fight him that way, hand to hand. Why would he? He was a shepherd. He had spent his entire career using a sling to defend his flock against lions and wolves. That’s where his strength lied. So, here he was, this shepherd, experienced in the use of devastating weapon up against this lumbering giant weighed down by a hundred pounds of armor and these incredibly heavy weapons that are useful only in short-range combat. Goliath was a sitting duck. He didn’t have a chance. So, why do we keep calling David an underdog, and why do we keep referring to his victory as improbable, not likely to happen?

Secondly, we profoundly misunderstood Goliath. Goliath was not what he seemed to be. There were all kinds of hints of this in this passage. Goliath was led onto the valley floor by an attendant. He walked out toward David with his shield bearer ahead of him. (41) Now, that is weird. The mighty warrior was challenging the Israelites to one-on-one combat. Why was he being led by an attendant to the point of combat? Then, there is this whole weird thing about how long it took for Goliath to react to the sight of David. So, David was coming down the mountain and he was clearly not preparing for hand-to-hand combat. He was not even carrying a sword.

Then there was that strange comment Goliath made to David. “Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?” (43) He said “sticks.” David had only one stick. There was something fundamentally wrong with Goliath, an attempt to make sense of all of those apparent anomalies. Goliath was a head and shoulder above all of his peers. Usually when someone is that far out of the norm, there is an explanation for it. So, the most common form of giantism is a condition called acromegaly caused by an over production of human growth hormone. And throughout history, many of the most famous giants have all had acromegaly. The tallest person of all time, was a guy named Robert Wadlow who was still growing when he died at the age of 24 and he was 8 feet 11 inches. There is even speculation that Abraham Lincoln had acromegaly. And acromegaly has a very distinct set of side effects associated with it principally having to do with vision. People with acromegaly have either double vision or they are profoundly nearsighted. So, what might have been wrong with Goliath? He had acromegaly which explains so much of that was strange about his behavior. Why does he move so slowly and have to be escorted down into the valley floor by an attendant? Of Course he was very heavy with his armor and he could not make his way on his own. Why was he so strangely oblivious to David that he didn’t understand that David was not going to fight him until the very last moment? Because he couldn’t see him. When he said, “Come here that I might feed your flesh to the birds and the wild animals,” the phrase “come here” is a hint also of his vulnerability: “Come here because I can’t see you.” And then there is, “Am I a dog that you should come at me with sticks?” (43) He saw two sticks when David had only one. The Israelites up on the mountain ridge looking down on Goliath thought he was the extraordinarily powerful giant.

What they didn’t understand was that the very thing that was the source of his apparent strength was also the source of his greatest weakness. And there is, a very important lesson for all of us. Giants are not as strong and powerful as they seem. And sometimes the shepherd boy has a sling in his pocket.

This is an extra ordinary and unique story in the Bible: “A shepherd boy David defeated giant Goliath with one sling shot and saved the nation.” This kind of victory was very rare in Israel’s history. Often Israel was invaded by powerful surrounding nations and suffered endlessly. They lost their country by the superpower nations many times, by Assyria, Babylon, and Roman Empire. And they were scattered all over the world for about 2 millenniums. That was the reality and that was what was going on in Israel’s history.

What is the true meaning behind the story of “David and Goliath?” Verse 47 gives us a hint: “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.” In ancient history, the Philistines were always more powerful than the Israelites. Out of common sense, the battle depends on military power. That’s how it works in this the world. So, they crave for power and money. They say that education, relationship, and money are key factors to happiness and success. More realistically, money is the key to a happy life and they make every effort to have more.

In view of the Bible, the Christian life is a life of constant spiritual battles. The phrase, “It is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves for the battle is the Lord’s” teaches us how to win the spiritual battle. The Lord saves mean that the salvation comes from God. In Mark 4:35-41, there is a story that the disciples met a fierce storm when they were crossing over to the other side of the lake. The boat was almost swamped. Jesus was sleeping at the back of the boat with his head on a cushion. The disciples woke Jesus up, shouting, “Teacher, don’t you care that we are going to drown?” When Jesus woke up, Jesus rebuked the wind and said to the waves, “Quiet! be still!” Suddenly the wind stopped, and it was completely calm. The disciples were terrified and asked each other. “Who is this man even the wind and waves obey him?” He is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who gives us true peace and salvation.

Sometimes we feel like that we face Goliath, other times we are in the middle of a fierce storm. We are often discouraged and depressed. We should remember that we cannot fight the battle with our own strength. We should trust and believe in God that the Lord saves, for the battle is the Lord’s. Then we will be surprised to see the victory that God brings us. Christian’s ultimate victory over all fear and the power of death is the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Do you believe this? If you do, you are truly blessed.

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