

GOLIATH GETS HIS MAIL STAMPED

1 Samuel 17:20-51

I'm sure you're all familiar with the story of David and Goliath that made up our reading today, but there's lots to be learned from this apparently simple account and as we study it together you can find the main text on page [***] of the church bibles and all the scripture I'm going to refer to will be displayed on the screen.

Let's begin by looking at the background to the story. The Philistine army had evidently invaded Judah, they were deep in Israelite territory. Verse 1 of chapter 17 tells us that they were encamped at Ephes Dammin which is only some 16 miles South West of Jerusalem. At the beginning of our reading the Philistine army had already been there for 40 days (verse 16) with the Israelite army under the leadership of King Saul (verse 2) opposing them. Such a long stand-off would have strained the resources of the impoverished Israelite monarchy and made it difficult for families to carry on normal agricultural work. The two armies were camped on hills facing each other (verse 3) and apparently no actual fighting had yet taken place. The Philistines just sent out their champion, Goliath, (verses 4-8) to challenge and terrify Saul and his army (verse 11). The Israelites were separated from the Philistines geographically by a wadi or dry river bed between their encampments and they were separated psychologically by a chasm of fear.

Individual combat between representative champions rather than a battle between opposing armies wasn't a usual Israelite practice, but it may well have been common amongst the Philistines. Goliath was certainly an apparently fearsome champion for the Philistines. Apart from his huge physical size (verse 4), in contrast to the usually small Israelites, he had an iron spear point weighing more than 10 lbs, he was sheathed in metal armour weighing more than 120 pounds (verses 5 and 6) and this at a time when ordinary Israelite soldiers wore only ordinary clothing in battle.

Goliath's physical stature, armour, weaponry, and shield bearer must have made him appear invincible. But when Giles preached last week on the choosing of David as the next king of Israel we were warned about relying on outward appearances (1 Samuel 16:7) and our story today is an object lesson illustrating that principle.

David was not part of Saul's army, probably because he was too young (verses 33), as men had to be over 20 years of age to serve in the Israelite military. But he was sent to bring supplies to his brothers who were serving in the army, families of soldiers usually supplied rations for their relatives and others in the ranks. When David set out from home (verse 20) I'm sure he had no thought of confronting Goliath, the Philistine champion, and becoming a national hero – and indeed a hero to this very day – but God had His hand on David's life. God's already called David to be king privately, now he's going to start to make his calling public. He's already equipped David by anointing him with His Holy Spirit (1 Samuel 16:13) as we saw last week now that anointing is going to begin to manifest itself in David's life.

On arrival at the Israelite camp, David first of all handed over his supplies to a supply officer and then went to check on his brothers condition (verse 22). This enabled David to hear Goliath challenging the Israelites and ridiculing their God. The apparently fearsome Goliath struck fear into the hearts of most of the Israelites (verse 24) and David heard them speaking of the rewards that would be given to any Israelite who could successfully take up Goliath's challenge.

David was deeply disturbed that a Philistine, who was uncircumcised and therefore outside of a covenant relationship with the Lord, would so boldly heap shame on "the armies of the living God." Goliath's words were not just an insult directed against the Israelite army; they were also an assault on "the living God," since the army was composed of members of the Lord's covenant community. Having missed out on the details of the king's response to Goliath because of his duties in Bethlehem, David asked for and received further

information from “the men standing near him” (verse 26). This irritated his brothers, perhaps because of their fear of Goliath.

But, David’s interest in the matter was reported to Saul who sent for David (verse 31). David proposed an astounding solution to the problem of Goliath, he offered to fight him. Saul immediately rejected David’s offer, reminding David of the obvious problems “you are only a boy and he has been a fighting man from his youth” (verse 33). This rejection should have ended the matter, but David’s idealism was exceeded only by his determination and his faith in God and so he continued his efforts to convince Saul by explaining that he had overcome both the lion and the bear – both ferocious and fearsome animals – (verses 34-36) and telling Saul that the God who had enabled him to overcome these ferocious animals would also deliver him from Goliath (verse 37). David obviously felt that this uncircumcised Philistine Goliath was no more than a wild beast because he was not only defying the army of Israel, the army of the living God, but also mocking that same living God. Saul saw things from a human perspective, our muscle and weapons against Goliath’s muscle and weapons – and we’re going to lose. David saw things from a spiritual perspective, he saw it as fight between good and evil, between the power and glory of God and the pride of man – and God’s going to win. We need to think not of what we cannot do but of what we can do with God’s help.

David’s faith and courage were as extraordinary as his logic was simple. Saul was disarmed by David’s courage and faith and agreed to allow David to confront Goliath, commissioning him with a prayer of blessing “Go and the Lord be with you” (verse 37).

In addition to his prayerful blessing, Saul also offered David the use of Israel’s finest military equipment, his own armour, helmet and sword and dressed him in it (verse 38). But David would have none of it saying that he wasn’t used to it and couldn’t fight like that (verse 39). I think this both emphasises the importance of divine assistance over human devices and also shows David’s rejection of Saul’s approach to kingship. David would not wear royal clothing, but

would instead identify himself with the great shepherd leaders of the OT – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and especially Moses.

Accordingly David armed himself as a shepherd would have, with a stick and a sling (verse 40) and took up five stones for his sling, no doubt from the wadi. The missile which would destroy Goliath was not shaped by human hands but by God. These stones would have been quite large, probably about the size of tennis balls, judging by the examples of Near Eastern slinging stones on display in the British Museum.

We're told that Goliath despised David (verse 42), probably because victory over this ill-armed young boy would not be a prestigious victory for the Philistine. In order to make the most of the contest, Goliath launched a psychological assault. He insulted David's staff and cursed him by his own pagan gods. This is significant, because Genesis tells us that in doing so he was bringing down God's curse on himself:

"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."
(Genesis 12:3 NIV)

Undaunted by Goliath's words, David launched a verbal counterattack (verses 45-47). He began by demonstrating that he was not going into the battle ignorantly: he was fully aware of Goliath's arsenal – "sword, spear, and javelin". David also proved he was aware of the greatest of his own military resources, "the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel" (cf. Psalm 18:10-12). David knew something we often need to learn the battle wasn't his, it was God's.

Furthermore, David expressed an awareness that Goliath had committed a capital crime by insulting, and thus blaspheming, the God of Israel. According to the Torah, any individual guilty of blasphemy – even a non-Israelite – must be stoned to death (Leviticus 24:16). How appropriate that David was about to carry out this sentence by killing Goliath with a stone from his sling.

As David saw it, Goliath was outnumbered and would soon be overpowered, for the Lord would fight with David against the giant. In the battle that would occur “this day” (verse 46), the Lord would “hand [Goliath] over” to David; then for his part the young shepherd would “strike [Goliath] down and cut off [his] head.” David’s efforts would not be limited to slaying Goliath; he also would slaughter and humiliate the Philistine army. Yet the Philistines would not die in vain. In fact, their destruction would serve an important theological purpose; it would be a revelatory event by which “the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel” (cf. Joshua 2:10-11). With remarkable insight for a person of his young age David saw that the events of this day would give rise to accounts that would reveal the Lord’s power and reality to all who might hear them. Eyewitnesses to the ensuing battle would learn an additional truth from the Lord, “that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves, for the battle is the LORD’S” (verse 47; Jeremiah 9:23-24; Zechariah 4:6).

Goliath’s weapons were only really useful in close combat, but David struck him from a distance. Taking a single stone, David felled the Philistine with facility and deadly accuracy. The rock was hurled with such great force that it crushed the frontal bone of Goliath’s cranium and “sank into his forehead.” – which was easily possible for a tennis ball sized stone hurled at more than 100 miles an hour by a slingshot. Immediately after killing Goliath David followed the battlefield customs of those days by stripping the dead man of his weapon and decapitating the corpse. In shock and confusion at the death of their champion the Philistine army fled.

So, David was the victorious champion of the Israelites. He won this battle as the unique anointed one of God. A thousand years later one born in the line of David – Jesus Christ – who was again uniquely sent by God and anointed by God, would become the victorious champion of all mankind defeating the giants of sin, death and Satan. Just as David served as champion for all the Israelites, so his greater successor Christ would serve as champion for all mankind. David won a temporary victory over the Philistines, but, on the cross, Christ

won a permanent victory over sin and death for us all. He secured our justification, our salvation and our reconciliation to God. What a worthy champion Jesus was and is, let's all turn to him in faith acknowledging him as our Lord and Master.

In the power of his faith grounded in his anointing with the Spirit, aided and guided by God's hand, David was enabled to decisively overcome a fearsome giant that was facing him in his life. What about the giants that face us in our lives? Health issues (sickness, disease, pain); Financial Issues (no job, not enough money); Emotions (worries, fears, grief, doubts, discouragements); Addictions; Temptations – there many giants out there waiting to confront us. Sometimes we hear those giants shouting You're not good enough; You can't stop your habits; you can't save your marriage; you can't get over your past mistakes; you can't pay your bills.

With God's help we can overcome these giants. What can we learn about how to do that from our account of David and Goliath. Firstly practice relying on God in the little battles of life. David knew God had helped him overcome the bear and the lion and the faith he gained from those experiences enabled him to confront Goliath. Secondly, focus on the size of God and not on the size of your problems. The Israelites were afraid because they were comparing Goliath's size to their size, but David was comparing Goliath's size to God's size. Focus on God and your giants are cut down to size. Thirdly confront your giant, don't run away from it. Instead be confident that with God's help you can defeat it. Fourthly remember that victory has nothing to do with experience but everything to do with God. It didn't matter that David was young and Goliath was experienced, the key was that God's favour brought victory. Finally, remember that there will be victory from God's perspective although not always from our perspective. God is intent on spiritually preparing us for eternity with him and sometimes that may mean that we don't immediately find the victories and successes we need in this life.

So, like David, have faith in God trust in God's promises and overcome the giants in your life. But, even more importantly, turn in

faith to our champion Christ in your life accepting him as your Lord and master and secure your victory over sin and death and your entry into the kingdom of heaven. Your entry into eternal life with our Father.