

The battle belongs to the LORD \* 1 Samuel 17

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That's a well-known story, eh? One of the most famous in all the Bible I suspect. Everyone knows what you mean when you talk about a David and Goliath situation – it's the little guy overcoming the big guy. Upstart politicians, plucky sports teams, even 'Survivor' had a season of David vs Goliath – people get it when you talk about David and Goliath. You're talking about the little guy beating the big guy.

But here's the thing. That's not what David and Goliath is about, not in the Bible. I mean, sure, the little guy DOES overcome the big guy here, but David and Goliath is more about David's faith in YHWH than it is about David's victory over Goliath. In fact, David's victory over Goliath was only possible because he trusted God implicitly. And his story invites us to ask – who are we trusting in? I mean – on a fundamental, existential, boil it all down and here's what you're left with level – who are you leaning on for life and health and strength? God? Or yourself? Whose resources are you trusting in? His or your own? Are you ultimately trusting in the LORD with all your heart? Or are you just following your heart?

Turn with me to 1 Samuel 17 and I'll show you what I mean. 1 Samuel 17 in your Bibles.

Now as we get started here, I have to let you in on a little secret. {There's a new king in Israel}.

Last week, we saw Saul turn his back on God and in the process, lose the kingship. Saul wasn't helping Israel to trust in YHWH – which is what they really needed - and so God took the crown and gave it to someone who would. In chapter 16, God told Samuel to anoint a David as king, and so David is set up to rule – but no one knows it yet. And David will not rule until Saul is gone and so it was business as usual while David bided his time. So as chapter 17 opens, Saul is still king and King Saul's got a big problem on his hands.

Vs 1 – the Philistines have invaded Israel and they've set up shop on Israelite territory so Saul needs to mount a defense force and kick them out. He draws his army up on a mountain across the Philistines, with a wide open valley called Elah between them. So far so good.

But then, verse 4, out from the Philistine camp comes a giant of a man. Goliath of Gath.

Here's a picture of Andre the Giant – remember him? The wrestler – the giant in the Princess Bride – Andre the Giant was about 7 feet tall. Goliath was two feet taller than him. He's titanic. (Wink).

And not only is he huge, he's tricked out with all the latest military technology, from head to toe. He's got a bronze helmet, he's got armour of overlapping scales (good protection and movement) and he's got bronze greaves (protective plates) on his legs. We're talking like 125 lbs worth of armour that covers just about all of his body. He had a massive spear with a tip made of 15lbs of iron and evidently, he's got a sword too, but the narrator doesn't mention that. And not only that, he's got a shield bearer, who comes out in front of him, holding his shield, to offer MORE protection. This guy's a tank.

And he yells out to the Israelite army:

~~8 Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel,~~ "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me.

9 If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us."

10 Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other."

So Goliath here is proposing a kind of representative combat – let's not all fight – you pick a guy and we'll pick a guy and whoever wins gets to take the other army as slaves. Sounds good to Goliath, but let's be honest, this is kind of like a lion picking a fight with a housecat – the odds are clearly in Goliath's favour.

And so, 11 On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified. (1Sa 17:8-11 NIV). And none of them dared accept Goliath's challenge. According to verse 16, he kept doing this for forty days, morning and evening, coming out and taunting the Israelites.

Now, I can't say that I blame them – Goliath is not the kind of guy I'd want to face on a battlefield. But I do need to point out that Saul was made king for this very situation. The people wanted a king who would lead them in battle, just like all the other nations, and that's what Saul should be doing right now. And to honest, Saul is a big man himself. Chapter 10:23 says that he was a head taller than everyone else (10:23) and he's seen God give him victory against the Ammonites and the Amalekites. He has every reason to believe that he just might win and yet he just stays there in his tent, shaking in his boots.

Now let's stop and ask our question from the beginning.

Who is Saul trusting in? In God? Or in himself? He's trusting in himself, isn't he? He and the Israelite army are looking at the giant in front of them, weighing their size, their armour, their strength against his and they're freaking out! They are humanly no match for Goliath and they're paralyzed by fear. The battle between Israel and the giant has ground to a halt because Israel's trusting in their own strength, and their own strength is severely lacking.

Meanwhile, back on the farm, the future king David is tending to sheep and helping his father. His three oldest brothers are off in the army 'fighting' with Saul and so his father sends David off to bring them some supplies and see how they are making out.

And so off he went with some cheese and some bread and he got to the camp at about the time when the men lined up for battle every day. He dumped the supplies and went out to find his brothers, when, wouldn't you know it, out came Goliath. And a hush fell over the Israelite army and David heard what Saul and his brothers had heard for the last forty days. And according to verse 24, all of the army broke and ran.

David though is curious and he says to some of the soldiers – verse 26 - Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" Who does this guy think he is, defying the living God?

Now this is interesting, because this far in the story, NO ONE has mentioned God. The battle's been presented in very human terms. Goliath keeps calling the army 'the ranks of Israel' (verse 19). They're Saul's men, and he's a Philistine. They're thinking of this fight as a battle between human actors. Mano y mano. And Israel has weighed their resources against Goliath and lost hope - because that mano is way bigger than their mano

But along comes a man who is willing to lift his eyes just a little higher and realize that they are not alone in this battle. This is not Israel vs Goliath. This is God vs the enemy of His people. David sees the situation from God's perspective and he is willing to trust that God and act against this boastful Philistine.

And so word gets to Saul that there's this upstart in the camp and Saul calls him in and then verse 32.

32 David said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him."

And Saul, thinking solely from a human perspective, says:

33 Saul replied, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a fighting man from his youth."

34 But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock,

35 I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it.

36 Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God.

37 The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

Who's he trusting in? The LORD. The LORD who has rescued him time and again.

David is doing something really important here – he's thinking back to all the ways that God has helped Him in the past and that experience gives him confidence that God will help him now. David remembers what God has already done and that gives him courage to fight Goliath, all the while leaning entirely on God.

Saul said to David, "Go, and the LORD be with you."

38 Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. (Interesting again, because Saul's got his own armour to go fight Goliath, but instead he's cowering in his tent) – tries to put it on David – and it doesn't fit right.

Just a quick aside – all the pictures of little David like a ten year old in a grown man's armour – that's just silly – David at this point is a strapping young lad, somewhere between 17 and 20. He's fought lions, chapter 16 says 'he is a brave man and a warrior' and Saul actually takes him on as one of his occasional armour bearers. David is a fighter and everyone knows it – he just doesn't wear this bronze armour because he's not used to it – he's never worn it before. All he's needed was a tunic and the LORD and He's never failed him yet.

~~18 One of the servants answered, "I have seen a son of Jesse of Bethlehem who knows how to play the harp. He is a brave man and a warrior. He speaks well and is a fine looking man. And the LORD is with him." (1Sa 16:18 NIV).~~

~~21 David came to Saul and entered his service. Saul liked him very much, and David became one of his armor bearers. (1Sa 16:21 NIV).~~

~~39 David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them. "I cannot go in these," he said to Saul, "because I am not used to them." So he took them off.~~

And so, David went out with his staff in his hand and picked up five smooth stones from a stream and put them in his pouch, along with his sling. Now just to be clear, we're not talking about Dennis the Menace with a sling shot here – this sling that David has is a legit ancient weapon. It can throw stones at a speed of about 100-150 mph – definitely enough to break some bones and cause some damage if you hit the right place.

~~40 Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.~~

41 Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David.

Now this says something really interesting about the political realities of the time. Here's Goliath, representative of the Philistines, and he's got his armour bearer out front. On the Israelite side, it should be Saul, the king of the Israelites, with his armour bearer, David, out front. But Saul's nowhere to be seen and here's David, alone, against the giant. I think this moment just screams that this armour bearer should really be the king.

Well, when Goliath saw this handsome young man coming out against, he laughed at him.

43 He said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" [He taunted Israel – 'forty days I've challenged you and best you can come up with is this pretty boy?'] And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. Gods like Dagon, who we last saw in the Philistine temple.

44 "Come here," he said, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!"

Goliath has a real way with words.

But David does too – and we get here the theological underpinnings of this whole account -

45 David said to the Philistine, [he doesn't even address him by name – he says 'to this guy' - "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.

46 This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.

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."

David is making it clear that this is not David vs Goliath – this is Goliath vs YHWH – and Goliath doesn't stand a chance. The LORD doesn't save by sword or spear and David is trusting entirely in Him.

48 As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him.

49 Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground. – I didn't call him titanic earlier by accident.

51 David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine's [own] sword and drew it from the scabbard. After he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword. When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they turned and ran (1Sa 17:43-51 NIV).

52 Then the men of Israel and Judah surged forward with a shout and chased the Philistines out of their land and all the way back to their own territory (1Sa 17:52 NIV).

~~52 Then the men of Israel and Judah surged forward with a shout and pursued the Philistines to the entrance of Gath and to the gates of Ekron. (1Sa 17:52 NIV).~~

God gave them a great victory that day all because David was willing to believe. David knew that this was not HIS fight. The battle belonged to the LORD. And David triumphed by trusting in Him.

I think that that's really the key to this passage – the battle between David and Goliath here ultimately belonged to the LORD. The Israelites were right – they didn't stand a chance against this giant Goliath and if it were only them, they would have been in trouble. And let's be honest – if not for God, David should not have won that fight. A raw recruit with a sling versus a hardened veteran encased in armour? Humanly speaking, David should have been dead on that field.

But this was not his fight – this was God's fight – and it was God who gave the victory. David triumphed not by trusting in his own strength, but by trusting in God's. And his trust was well-placed.

I like what Charles Stanley says on this:

David didn't see Goliath as merely the enemy of Israel. He saw him as God's enemy—and David knew that God could take Goliath out of the picture with no problem. So he acted on his faith.

Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of Israelite soldiers had greater training to do battle with Goliath than David. But they responded to the giant's threats with paralyzing fear, stress, and anxious frustration. David, on the other hand, didn't seem upset at all. Why not? Because he knew it was God's battle, not his. Apart from the Lord, he knew he didn't stand a chance. But with the help of the Lord, he knew that everything would turn out all right.

Neither David nor the soldiers of Israel had the natural ability to defeat the giant. But while one party [Israel] focused on its inability—and therefore panicked—the other party [David] focused on God's provision—and therefore remained confident. The only difference was focus.

David fixed his eyes on God and trusted in him and God gave him the victory. The battle belonged to the LORD and David triumphed by trusting in Him.

That's a message that we need to hear too – Our battles belong to the LORD and we triumph by trusting in Him. It's true – we don't face we don't face literal giants – but absolutely, we face things that are well beyond our own ability to overcome – cancer, unemployment, relational brokenness, sin.

We are all vulnerable to those giants and when we focus on our own ability to overcome, one of two things is bound to happen. 1. We lose hope, because we know we're not strong enough, or 2. We miss

out on the total victory that God has for us that He is capable of. These battles belong to the LORD. The battle with illness – that belongs to the LORD. The battle with unemployment – that belongs to the LORD. The battle with broken relationships – that belongs to the LORD. He is with you in that hospital room; He's with you in that awkward conversation; he's with you in the lawyer's office and we overcome by trusting in Him.

What exactly does that look like? Well, let me give you two thoughts – 1. Take action wisely. 2. Trust God entirely. The battle belongs to the LORD – so take action wisely and trust God entirely.

Look at how David approached this battle with Goliath. He trusted God entirely and yet he wasn't sitting at home eating cheesies. He took action wisely.

Right off the bat, he chose to see the battle from God's perspective. He included God's faithfulness in his evaluation of the situation. He drew courage from the ways that God had helped him in the past. He tried on Saul's armour, but when it was clear it wouldn't fit, he shrugged it off, without a thought. He chose five smooth stones and used a weapon he was well acquainted with. (And incidentally – you know why he took five stones? – I suspect that it was that if he missed, then he'd have four more shots). He prepared himself responsibly and took action wisely.

Again, Charles Stanley writes:

“David did exactly what he knew how to do, while trusting God to do the rest. That is what living by faith boils down to: living in the confidence that God is supremely faithful’ (Stanley, 1 Sam. 17:23–37).

So by all means – go to your doctor's appointments; explore all the options that are open to you; seek reconciliation with people who have hurt you or go to a counsellor who will help you to heal. Put out a resume, invest in your future – taking God into account, make wise decisions and act on them.

But do it all, relying on the LORD and not on yourself, trusting God to make things right. Trust the LORD entirely.

In a sense, it's what St Ignatius Loyola is reported to have said – “Act as if everything depended on you; trust as if everything depended on God.”

You face a challenge – absolutely – make wise decisions and do all the things that you can to prepare yourself to deal with it, but in your heart of hearts, don't trust in your own strength, but God's. “Trust as if everything depended on God.” And I would tweak that a little to say “Trust *because* everything depends on God.” The battle is His. He has the power. And He is faithful enough to exercise it, in His wisdom, in His time, on our behalf.

And I think that we can learn a lot from David as we train our hearts to rely on the LORD. Remember his talk with Saul – he kept going back to – ‘this is how God helped me before. And that gives me confidence because He'll do it again.’

I would really encourage you, when you come up against a giant challenge - spend more time thinking about what God has done before, than what you'll do next. I don't know about you but when I run into a difficult challenge, my mind automatically goes to what I should do or what else could happen, and it's

so easy to lose track of God in it all. But that's when we need God more than ever. When we remind ourselves of God's faithfulness in the past, that will give us courage to face the future.

The battle belongs to the LORD, so take action wisely and trust Him entirely.

Now that's 100% true in light of 1 Samuel but let me nuance it a little. The battle belongs to the Lord and we triumph by trusting in Him, but that doesn't necessarily mean that we'll win all of our battles. Our life will not be perfect in every way, if only we had enough faith. Frankly, I'm sure that David got more than a few scratches from those fights with lions. But listen, in Christ, we triumph no matter what happens. Even in death, we triumph, when we trust in the Lord.

Here's why. David vs Goliath is actually a picture of Jesus vs death – one man, representing all the rest, standing up to our greatest enemy, looking for all the world as if He would lose, but relying on God and winning a great victory.

That's Jesus, all the way. Jesus defeated death with its own sword – He himself died – and then rose to life to break the power of death over us. And when we trust in Him entirely, He shares the spoils of that battle with us graciously – peace with God and everlasting life.

A lot of pastors will actually say – when we read David and Goliath, we should resist the tendency to immediately think of ourselves as David. We naturally put ourselves into David's place as we read. But to be honest, we're not so much like David; we're more like the Israelites, unnerved by giant problems, in desperate need of a mighty Saviour. Just like the Israelites though, we have a David – a descendant of David actually – Jesus – who has triumphed even over death itself.

When we make wise decisions and lean entirely on Him, we will overcome, for the battle belongs to the LORD.