

You'll Shoot Your Eye Out!

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

July 19, 2009

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1 Samuel 17:38-51 (NRSV)

³⁸Saul clothed David with his armor; he put a bronze helmet on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail. ³⁹David strapped Saul's sword over the armor, and he tried in vain to walk, for he was not used to them. Then David said to Saul, "I cannot walk with these; for I am not used to them." So David removed them. ⁴⁰Then he took his staff in his hand, and chose five smooth stones from the wadi, and put them in his shepherd's bag, in the pouch; his sling was in his hand, and he drew near to the Philistine.

⁴¹The Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him.

⁴²When the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was only a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. ⁴³The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the field." ⁴⁵But David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.

⁴⁶This very day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, ⁴⁷and that all this assembly may know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's and he will give you into our hand."

⁴⁸When the Philistine drew nearer to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. ⁴⁹David put his hand in his bag, took out a stone, slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground.

⁵⁰So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, striking down the Philistine and killing him; there was no sword in David's hand. ⁵¹Then David ran and stood over the Philistine; he grasped his sword, drew it out of its sheath, and killed him; then he cut off his head with it.

When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled.

David and Goliath! What a story. The freckle-faced David slays the giant Philistine. But how could it be? This isn't really how the world works, is it? What does it mean?

Everyone knows at least one story of David and this is it. David, the giant slayer, felling the mighty Goliath with only a smooth stone and a sling. We learn it as children and then, as adults, we too often dismiss it as a child's story, assuming that we know the story and can move on. But ask yourself: Why did the ancient Hebrew writers spend so much time and care with this single story? They devoted a lengthy chapter to its telling, embroidering it with detail and nuance, places where our imagination can take a foothold. Granted, they tell a good story that ought to be enjoyed for its own sake, but is there more? Is there meaning here that challenges the understanding of even adults?

Setting the stage

Last week, we met David. This young man, still a teenager, the baby brother relegated to looking after some sheep, is chosen by God to be the successor to King Saul and is anointed by the prophet Samuel. Now, no one other than Samuel, seems to really grasp what has happened, what surely lies in store for David, for the Spirit of the Lord came upon David "from that day forward."

Likewise, we're told, the Spirit of the Lord departed from King Saul, who begins a slow descent into madness. In his palace, Saul sinks into periods of deep depression and his servants look for someone who can play music for the king that will ease his torment. The person they find is none other than David, who comes to play his lyre for the king. David's

music does the trick and we're told that Saul "loved him" and made David his right-hand man.

Trouble with the Philistines

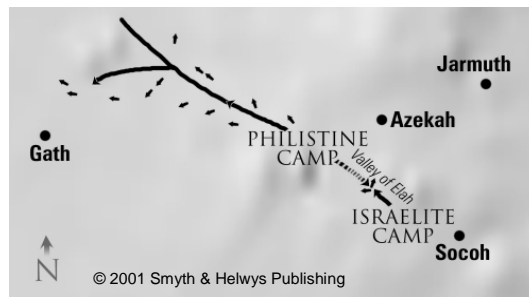
The Philistines were a sea-faring people from the Aegean basin who settled in the coastal areas of southern Palestine (roughly the area between Gaza and modern-day Tel Aviv) in the early twelfth-century BC and quickly became one of Israel's principal rivals. To illustrate their significance in the region, the name "Palestine" is derived from the Greek and Latin names given to the descendants of the Philistines. Five Philistine city-states formed themselves into a league and would play a key role in David's life: Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron.

When young David goes to be part of Saul's royal court, the Philistines were continuing an expansive push into Israelite territory that had lasted, on and off, for more than century. And from the time that the boy Samuel was called to God's service (1 Samuel 3), the two peoples waged all-out war.

Now, the army of the Philistines and Saul's are separated only by a small, flat valley, the Valley of Elah, southwest of Jerusalem.¹ As illustrated by this map, the armies were encamped on two hilltops, very near one another.

Goliath

So the two armies face each other and out of the Philistine battle line emerges an enormous man, who seems as if he has to be ten feet tall. His armor weighs 126 pounds and yet, Goliath wears it with ease. He has a proposal which will save many lives. Let the Israelites pick their best warrior to face Goliath in a one-on-one battle. Whoever wins will be deemed to have won the entire battle for his king.² The losers, says Goliath, will become the slaves of the winners.



To a man, the response of the Israelite fighters is "Easy for him to say! He's unbeatable!" So day after day, Goliath comes out to make his challenge and each day the Israelites turn a deaf ear. Each day, the Israelites' humiliation grows. For forty days this goes on.

Meanwhile, Jesse, David's father, has his three oldest sons in Saul's army and so tells David to take them some fresh food. When David arrives with baskets of bread and cheese, he sees what is happening on the battlefield and is stunned. Who is Goliath to taunt the army of the LORD God? David also wants to know what reward is promised to the man who defeats Goliath. Why, only the king's daughter in marriage, he's told, and riches to boot!

So, despite enduring ridicule from his older brothers, David decides that he is going to take on Goliath and heads for King Saul to tell him. You can imagine Saul's reaction. David is hardly more than a boy with no experience as a warrior . . . and *he* is going to take on Goliath when the best of Israel's army refuse? I imagine that Saul felt a bit like the mom in *A Christmas Story* who tells young Ralphie that if he gets his much-coveted Red Rider BB gun, "You'll shoot your eye out!" The whole notion of David going out to fight Goliath just seems absurd.

¹Jerusalem is controlled by the Jebusites at this time. David, when king, would conquer the city and make it the capital city of the united Israel.

²If you happened to catch Brad Pitt as Achilles in the movie *Troy* a few years ago, you'll recall that this is exactly how the movie begins. Rather than two armies facing off, each chooses a hero to represent them. There is a useful analogy here to Jesus, who suffered death on a cross as our representative Messiah, one man standing in for us all.

David persists however, confident that just as God enabled him to kill wild animals that threatened the sheep, so God will enable him to kill Goliath. This is the point on which the story turns. David is confident that God will see to the victory of his people over the Philistines, even if that means that one Israelite must defeat Goliath. This isn't about the skills of a particular warrior, but of God's faithfulness.

David's faith in God is unyielding and I guess Saul figures that he has nothing to lose. So Saul outfits David in his own armor – and the kid looks ridiculous. He can hardly carry the weight, much less move and fight in it. So David heads out dressed just as he came in, as a shepherd. No sword, no shield, just a trusty sling.

David heads down the valley and stops alongside a stream to pick out a few suitable stones. What must have been going through his mind!?

When David steps out to meet Goliath, the giant and his shield-bearer step forward and laugh in disdain. They send a boy?!! Goliath, wise in the ways of battle, promises to feed the boy to the birds. David's reply is equally confident. "You come to me with sword and

shield, but I come with the LORD God who will deliver you to me."

David and Saul

During the time that the Israelites settled in Canaan, they had no earthly king. The LORD God was their king. But as time wore on, the people, wanting to be like their neighbors, pushed harder and harder for a human king. In the end, God gave them what they wanted. God's prophet Samuel anointed Saul as the first king of the united tribes of Israel. Saul quickly proved to be a disappointment. He was disobedient to God and given to making rash decisions. Once, Saul was even ready to kill his own son, Jonathan, for breaking one of Saul's battle orders. Only the intervention of the people saved Jonathan's life. After Saul disobeyed God a second time, we are told that "The LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:35).

God then tells his prophet Samuel to anoint a young shepherd named David as the next king of Israel. Not knowing that God had chosen David to be his successor, Saul welcomed David into the royal court as a musician. But after David defeated Goliath, the mentally and spiritually deteriorating Saul began to suspect that David might be the one to whom God had given Saul's kingdom. And his heart turned against David. For the rest of his life, Saul would seek to hunt down and kill David. The struggle ended only when Saul and his son, Jonathan, die in battle against the Philistines.

So David ran to meet the Philistine, loaded a stone in his sling, and slung it, striking Goliath right in the middle of the forehead. The behemoth fell dead to the ground. David drew the dead man's sword and used it to cut off Goliath's head.

The "deal" was that the Philistines were supposed to hand themselves over to the Israelites, but to no surprise, they ran instead, with the Israelite army giving chase. David headed back to Saul to deliver the head of the Philistine.

You can imagine the uproar at home over David's victory. He is hailed a hero from town to town. The women danced and sang, even writing songs to celebrate David at Saul's expense. So Saul's jealousy of David was born. The truth is that the king was even afraid of David. He knew that there was no rational explanation for David's victory, surely God was with the young man. Sadly, one day, as Saul slipped into one of his foul moods, he actually grabbed a spear and through it at David as the shepherd played his music for his king.

A children's story

So is it a children's story? Or is it a story of faith, a story that teaches us yet again that the world is really not as it seems. We imagine we know who are the mighty and the strong. But do we? The world is turned upside down in the Valley of Elah when a giant comes crashing down to the ground, defeated by faith in the power of God. Goliath is defeated by a stone and Death is defeated by a cross. A strange world indeed.

“In the Face of Giants”

I found the following reflections from Tony W. Cartledge to be very helpful. I've edited it a bit. This is from his excellent commentary on Samuel in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series.

“In the modern era, Goliath has been metaphorically morphed into the shape of illness and rejection, the fear of failure and the threat of persecution. Athletic teams (particularly poor ones) have taken courage from David's amazing victory against all odds. Hopeful small business owners have adopted David's “can do” attitude in going up against giant competitors in the hope of carving out a niche for themselves. Some of those who visualize themselves in David's sandals have succeeded. Others have failed. But is this what the story is all about?

Using David's unlikely victory as an inspirational lesson may be helpful, but that is not the intended purpose of the story, which insists that it was not David who defeated the giant opponent, but Yahweh. David may have been both courageous and skillful, but he succeeded because he was *faithful*. He was a man after God's own heart, empowered by God's own spirit.

The author finds several opportunities to contrast David's behavior with Saul's action—and non-action. . . .

While Saul and his army were paralyzed by inaction before the Philistine threat, David never wavered. Why? Not just because he was fearless, but because he was so devoted to Yahweh that he could not bear to hear the giant's taunts against Israel and its God. He could not endure seeing God's people shamed or God's honor besmirched.

Saul's attempt to clothe David in his own armor suggests that the king, like other men, put his trust in armaments and numbers and physical ability. In contrast, David put his trust in God alone. Yahweh had given David the ability to defeat fearsome lions and dangerous bears—why should it be any different with a heathen soldier?

Perhaps it is significant that David was the only person to mention Yahweh's name until Saul finally picked up on David's faith and sent him into battle with the blessing “May the LORD be with you” (17:37). What is more significant is that David seems to be the only person who regarded Yahweh as a *living* God (17:26, 36). Israel's army, stymied and scared, seems to have regarded their god as irrelevant. There is no suggestion that Saul had called for a priest to offer sacrifice or pray for the people, no indication that Yahweh's favor or aid had been invoked. Goliath proclaimed *his* god's power, but Israel did not answer. Perhaps David's greatest accomplishment is that he reintroduced the presence, the power, and the *life* of Yahweh to the equation.

When modern believers fall prey to the discouraging obstacles of life, they often do so with little hope that there really is a living God who loves them and cares for them. The difference between growing people of faith and non-practicing religionists may come down to the issue of whether they think of God as a cultural icon or a living presence. . . . When modern readers come to 1 Samuel 17 in search of inspiration or guidance, their central challenge is not to take courage in their own smallness, but to find hope in their God's reality and relevance. Faith communities cannot stand firm amidst the gods of modern culture unless they are willing to trust the same faithful God who empowered David's victory over the giant.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. The story of David and Goliath is one of the most used biblical stories, showing up across the cultural landscape. The story is usually cast as an underdog victory akin to the U.S. hockey team's miracle on ice in 1980. But is it really an underdog story? Yes, young David goes out to meet and kill a giant, but in what ways is it not a story of the weak defeating the mighty?
2. At one point, David says to Goliath: “All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves . . .” What do you think is meant here? What are we to learn? David doesn't use a sword or spear but he still launches a projectile that fatally strikes Goliath in the head, so it is not as if Goliath is defeated without resorting to violence. For God's people and in the light of Christ, what is the proper use of violence?
3. Finally, whose faith is indicted by this story? What really sets David apart from Saul and all of Saul's army?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In this week's readings, we'll begin reading through the books of 1 and 2 Samuel and even into 1 Kings as we go through the entire David narrative.

<p>Monday, 1 Samuel 16 David anointed by Samuel and finds a place in Saul's royal court.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Samuel 17 David defeats Goliath, the Philistine champion.</p>
<p>Wednesday, 1 Samuel 18 Saul becomes jealous of David, who has formed a deep and life long bond with Jonathan, Saul's son. David marries Saul's daughter, Michal.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Samuel 19 Saul sets out to kill David and the long, deadly game of hunter and hunted begins. David has to go on the run, aided by both Jonathan and Michal.</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Samuel 20 David and Jonathan forge a covenant with one another.</p>	<p>Saturday, 1 Samuel 21 David escapes to a place named Nob.</p>

