

1 Samuel 17:38–51 (CEB)

<sup>38</sup> Then Saul dressed David in his own gear, putting a coat of armor on him and a bronze helmet on his head. <sup>39</sup> David strapped his sword on over the armor, but he couldn't walk around well because he'd never tried it before. "I can't walk in this," David told Saul, "because I've never tried it before." So he took them off. <sup>40</sup> He then grabbed his staff and chose five smooth stones from the streambed. He put them in the pocket of his shepherd's bag and with sling in hand went out to the Philistine.

<sup>41</sup> The Philistine got closer and closer to David, and his shield-bearer was in front of him. <sup>42</sup> When the Philistine looked David over, he sneered at David because he was just a boy; reddish brown and good-looking.

<sup>43</sup> The Philistine asked David, "Am I some sort of dog that you come at me with sticks?" And he cursed David by his gods. <sup>44</sup> "Come here," he said to David, "and I'll feed your flesh to the wild birds and the wild animals!"

<sup>45</sup> But David told the Philistine, "You are coming against me with sword, spear, and scimitar, but I come against you in the name of the LORD of heavenly forces, the God of Israel's army, the one you've insulted. <sup>46</sup> Today the LORD will hand you over to me. I will strike you down and cut off your head! Today I will feed your dead body and the dead bodies of the entire Philistine camp to the wild birds and the wild animals. Then the whole world will know that there is a God on Israel's side. <sup>47</sup> And all those gathered here will know that the LORD doesn't save by means of sword and spear. The LORD owns this war, and he will hand all of you over to us."

<sup>48</sup> The Philistine got up and moved closer to attack David, and David ran quickly to the front line to face him. <sup>49</sup> David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone. He slung it, and it hit the Philistine on his forehead. The stone penetrated his forehead, and he fell face down on the ground. <sup>50</sup> And that's how David triumphed over the Philistine with just a sling and a stone, striking the Philistine down and killing him—and David didn't even have a sword! <sup>51</sup> Then David ran and stood over the Philistine. He grabbed the Philistine's sword, drew it from its sheath, and finished him off. Then David cut off the Philistine's head with the sword.

When the Philistines saw that their hero 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*

First, 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 (1 Samuel 16). 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.<sup>1</sup> As illustrated by this map, the armies were encamped on two hilltops, very near one another.

### *Goliath*

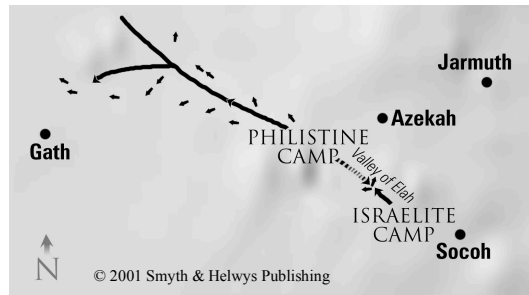
As the two armies face each other, out of the Philistine battle line emerges an enormous man, who seems as if he is ten feet tall. His armor weighs 126 pounds and yet, Goliath wears it with ease. He has a proposal which will save many lives.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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!

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



<sup>1</sup>Jerusalem 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.

<sup>2</sup>If 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.

Red Rider BB gun, “You’ll shoot your eye out!” The whole notion of David going out to fight Goliath just seems absurd.

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.”

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 grabbed a nearby 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. Tony Cartledge observes that:

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.<sup>3</sup>

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 the power of God. Goliath is defeated by a stone and Death is defeated by a cross. A strange world indeed.

### **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?

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<sup>3</sup> From Cartledge’s commentary on Samuel the *Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* series.

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 used 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

*This week: More on David and Saul*

**Monday, 1 Samuel 16** David is anointed by Samuel and finds a place in Saul’s royal court.

**Tuesday, 1 Samuel 17** David defeats Goliath, the Philistine champion.

**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.

**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.

**Friday, 1 Samuel 20** David and Jonathan forge a covenant with one another.

**Saturday, 1 Samuel 21** David escapes to a place named Nob. (You might just keep on reading – all the way through 1 Kings 3. The stories of David are among the best in all the Bible.)

## Scott Engle’s Bible Classes

### Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

*This class will not meet on July 16.*

### Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the story of Jonah.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### Scott’s 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.