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THE LESSONS OF DAVID AND GOLIATH

1 SAMUEL 17:26

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE LORD JESUS, MORE Scripture is devoted to David than to any other individual. He is mentioned in 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 Chronicles, and 75 psalms (a total of 1,139 times). He is the first person named in the NT after Christ (first verse, Matt. 1:1), and he is the last person named in the NT except for Christ (last verse, Rev. 22:16). Next to Joseph, David is the most Christ-like man in the Bible. Nowhere does this fact shine more brightly than in the section of 1 Samuel that recounts the story of David and Goliath. Here is a 3,000 year-old tale everyone knows very well, even those who know nothing about the Bible (though some wrongly consider it a fable). It is most often read as a children's story or presented as a flannel-graph (or updated iPad) lesson. While everyone knows the story, however, what exactly is the lesson it teaches? I would lovingly ask you to consider three principles.

The Presumption in the Battle

Speaking of children, Art Linkletter once asked a little boy during that wonderful television show, *Kids Say the Darndest Things*, what the lesson of this story is. He received a one-word reply: "DUCK!"

Well, frankly, the most common interpretation is no better than that little fellow's advice. Many (if not most) preachers and Sunday School teachers say something like this:

David's defeat of Goliath teaches us that we can defeat all the giants in our lives, giants such as: fear, depression, rejection, loneliness, financial crisis, marital problems, occupational challenges—you name it. You might be small and weak like David, but if you use whatever insignificant pebbles you have, and trust God, you can defeat the giants in your life. God can do a miracle!

One nationally famous speaker and author begins this way: "Are you in a battle? A conflict? A hard place? Is something or someone threatening your peace, your security? Does a Goliath of sorts loom before you? Do you seem so small, so insignificant, so impotent in comparison?"¹ Another says, "We're going to keep our distance from our enemy and sling our stones until every Goliath falls down in our life," and even worse another pronounces, "You're going to defeat that giant.

Yes, that obstacle is big, but you have greatness in you."²

Well, if I may lovingly submit, that kind of teaching motivates people and sells books, but it is utterly unbiblical. In fact, it is *serious error*. What is overlooked (or even just ignored) is that such "interpretation" is nothing but *full-blown allegory*, as much OT preaching is nowadays. It has nothing whatsoever to do with what the text actually says and reads some deeper spiritual meaning into it. In other words, to put it as simply as possible: *in plain, normal language is that the meaning the people of that day would have thought of? Were those people thinking, "Oh, wow! This is the answer to all the giants in my life!"* The answer is obvious—of course not!

Now, in case you have doubts about what I'm saying, some interpreters take the allegory even further. One says: "David's Five Smooth Stones represent the five stones of the Gospel: Faith, Obedience, Service, Prayer, and Holy Spirit." Another says: "They represent the five Books of the Torah, because it's always the Torah (God's Word) that defeats a beast." Still another nationally famous author, speaker, and so-called "Bible teacher" waxes ridiculous in his whole book on this, *Facing Your Giants: God Still Does the Impossible*. Here's an excerpt:

Goliaths still roam our world. Debt. Disaster. Dialysis. Danger. Deceit. Disease. Depression. Super-size challenges still swagger and strut, still pilfer sleep and embezzle peace and liposuction joy. But they can't dominate you. You know how to deal with them. You face giants by facing God first. . . . Use your five fingers to remind you of the five stones you need to face down your Goliath . . . the stone of the past . . . the stone of prayer . . . the stone of priority . . . the stone of passion . . . the stone of persistence. Next time Goliath wakes you up, reach for a stone. Odds are, he'll be out of the room before you can load your sling.³

Did you happen to notice the constant emphasis on *you* and *your*?—ten times, in fact. This kind of popular, superficial, and unbiblical teaching is among the most serious and saddest problems in the Church today. That is why many Christians are so shallow. They are not hearing the Truth of the text.

To demonstrate that my accusation is more than justified, just compare the above teaching with the very master of allegory himself, Origen (c. 185–254). As did others before him,

he mixed Greek philosophy with Christian theology. In his case, however, the results were positively staggering. As renowned historian Philip Schaff states, "His leaning to idealism, his predilection for Plato, and his noble effort to reconcile Christianity with reason, and to commend it even to educated heathens and Gnostics, led him into many grand and fascinating errors."⁴ F. W. Farrar, Anglican cleric and scholar, was also dead on target:

Allegory by no means sprang from spontaneous piety, but was the child of rationalism which owed its birth to the heathen theories of Plato. It deserved its name, for it made Scripture say something else than it really meant. . . . Origen borrows from heathen Platonists and from Jewish philosophers a method which converts the whole of Scripture, alike the New and the Old Testament, into a series of clumsy, varying, and incredible enigmas.⁵

Even the highly respected secular historian Will Durant observed: "As Origen proceeds it becomes apparent that he is a Stoic, a Neo-Phythagorean, a Platonist, and a Gnostic, who is nevertheless resolved to be a Christian."⁶

As Schaff and others go on to detail, just a few of those errors include: a denial of a physical resurrection, the pre-existence of the soul before birth, the final restoration of all spirits (i.e., Universalism), inequality of the Son to the Father (which leaves room for later Arian teaching), and extreme asceticism. So extreme was the latter, in fact, as Eusebius reports,⁷ that Origen's complete misunderstanding of Jesus' words, "there be eunuchs, which have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake" (Matt. 19:12), drove him to make himself one so as to remove all temptation concerning women converts he was preparing for baptism.

As if all that were not bad enough, it was Origen's attitude toward *the actual text of Scripture* that is the most troubling thing of all (which still plagues us today). Instead of adhering to the proper historical-grammatical understanding of Scripture, which is at the core of Truth, he believed it could be understood on three levels, based upon the analogy of man's body, soul, and spirit: (1) literally on the surface (which was the least important because it corresponded to the body); (2) morally (because it spoke to the soul); and (3) allegorically to uncover hidden mysteries (which was the most important because it could be understood only by advanced Christians). So unimportant was the first to Origen, in fact, that he clearly stated, "The Scriptures are of little use to those who understand them as they are written."⁸

As just one example of his astonishing allegorical approach is Origen's treatment of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. He severely damaged this magnificent story by viewing *every* element of the story as having a symbolic meaning: the victim as Adam; Jerusalem as paradise; Jericho as the world; the thieves as man's hostile influences; the victim's wounds as sins; the priest as the Law; the Levite as the Prophets; the Good Samaritan as Christ; the donkey as Christ's body carrying fallen man; the inn as the Church; the two denarii as the knowledge of the Father and the Son; and the return of the Good Samaritan as Christ's Second Coming.⁹ Such so-called interpretation is not only appalling in its hermeneutics, but also tragic in its application because it misses the simple point of the story. While allegory views the parable

as teaching *salvation*, it does no such thing; its emphases are self-denial, sacrifice, compassion, and benevolence.

The danger of the allegorical approach is obvious. Using this approach, Scripture no longer means what it says, and therefore, for all practical purposes, is no longer authoritative. Interpretation now depends upon the mind of the interpreter, not God. And which interpreter is interpreting correctly? And who is the final judge? Allegory is worse than worthless. If words don't mean what they say, then they can mean anything. But God does not want our *allegory*; He wants our *accuracy*. He doesn't want us to be *ingenious* in our own thinking; he wants us to be *informed* in His Truth. As noted earlier, our preaching should reflect how people of that day would have understood it.

We could go deeper, but that should suffice. I would, therefore, ask: How is the common view of David and Goliath we noted earlier any different from what we just observed? It is completely detached from the text, reading a so-called "lesson" into the text that is not there. Sadly again, much OT preaching, even by evangelicals, degenerates into allegory.

So, what *is* the lesson of David and Goliath? Let's just look at what the text says. Our other two points submit that there are two related lessons: a primary and a secondary.

The Purpose of the Battle

Before we note this specific *purpose*, let us first recall the scene in the valley of Elah. This nearly ten-foot giant dwarfed every man in Israel, even Saul, who was himself head and shoulders taller than anyone else. He wore a bronze helmet, armor that consisted of metal plates sewn on top of a leather jacket weighing about 125 pounds, leg armor, and a huge bronze spear with a 15-pound iron head. So, Goliath was not only huge, but his weapons were terrifying. He had presented himself to the army of Israel each morning and evening for 40 days (v. 16), and all the Israelites could do was stand there and shake in their sandals (v. 24). The fact that this went on for 40 days truly underscores that Saul refused to stand against this blasphemer of God. Fear, in fact, was a repeated theme in Saul's life (13:11; 15:24; 17:11; 18:12; 28:5), but a true leader is not one who is paralyzed by fear. As our Lord said, in effect, to his terrified disciples during a storm, *faith* and *fear* don't live in the same heart (Matt. 8:26). So, this certainly seemed like an insurmountable obstacle, but as we will see, David did not consider this a big challenge at all.

Notice another dramatic contrast. Since Israel had come to a crisis in this confrontation, Saul made a generous offer to the man who would silence Goliath (v. 25): that man would marry one of the king's daughters, receive great riches from the king, and take his father's house off the tax rolls. What is significant here is that that kind of incentive motivated *Saul*, but as we will see, that was not what motivated *David*.

Apparently David arrived on the final day of Goliath's 40 days of challenges (v. 16). By God's sovereign providence, Jesse chose just the right day to send David to the battlefield to carry food supplies to his three brothers and their commanding officer (vv. 17-18). David's immediate reaction to this situation reflects his heart, his motivation, and his disgust and is really *the key to the whole incident*. These are, in fact, his first recorded words in Scripture (v. 26), words that reflected his lifelong attitude: **who is this uncircumcised Phil-**

istine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?

Now, keep in mind that David was too young to serve in the army, *but he was acting as though anyone in the camp who had faith in Jehovah could challenge and defeat Goliath!* Do you see? He was saying, in effect: “Who is this guy? Why hasn’t someone silenced this blasphemer? Why has this been allowed to continue for 40 days?” He was deeply disturbed that a Philistine, who was **uncircumcised** and therefore outside of a covenant relationship with the Lord, would be allowed to so boldly **defy the armies of the living God**. Goliath’s words were not just an insult directed against the Israelite army; they were also an attack on **the living God**. And David was not going to stand for it. When his elder brother criticized him (v. 28), David simply replied (v. 29), **Is there not a cause?** In other words, “Is there not sufficient cause for my passion? Do I not have good reason to be outraged with one who stands here and blasphemes our God?” Does this not, indeed, challenge us to stand against such things? **Is there not a cause?**

This is further underscored by David’s later conversation with Saul, during which he tried to convince the king to allow him to fight Goliath. After recounting how he had killed a lion and a bear, he said, “this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he hath defied the armies of the living God” (vv. 34, 36). So, as far as David was concerned, Goliath had reduced himself to the level of a brutish beast, so fighting him would be just another fight with a wild animal. As we would say today, “Been there, done that! No problem.” The Lord had delivered David “from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear,” and He would deliver him “from the hand of this Philistine” (v. 37). So, David’s trust was in God alone, not in his own ability. As we will see, this was the *Lord’s* battle, and David was simply the tool.

We should also note the armor fitting, when Saul put his armor on David (vv. 38–39). What a sight that was! David could barely stand, much less walk. But ponder a moment: why are we given this detail? *Because divine enablement is greater than human devices*. His weapons were not carnal, but “mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds” (2 Cor. 10:4). So David took off Saul’s armor and “took his staff in his hand, and he chose five smooth stones out of the brook, and put them in a shepherd’s bag and his sling was in his hand: and he drew near to the Philistine” (v. 40).

Sadly, I read more than one Bible teacher who said, “David must have been fearful about what was coming?” But where is that in the text? As Goliath came bellowing, boasting, and blaspheming God and then berating David, the text implies not even the tiniest tinge of fear in David’s heart. After Goliath boasted that he would feed David’s corpse to the birds and the beasts, David answered with absolute confidence. He had already committed the whole contest to God. Why? Because the battle was the *Lord’s*, not his (vv. 45–47, emphasis added):

Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee *in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied*. This day will the LORD deliver thee into mine hand; and I will smite thee, and take thine head from thee; and I will give the carcasses of the host of the Philistines this day unto the fowls of the air, and to the wild beasts of the earth; *that*

all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. And all this assembly shall know that the LORD saveth not with sword and spear: *for the battle is the LORD’S*, and he will give you into our hands.

The battle that came a moment later was hardly a battle at all. A tennis ball size rock left David’s sling with such force that it crushed the frontal bone of Goliath’s cranium and “sunk into his forehead” (v. 45). It was all over, just like that! We can imagine the sound of clanging brass and iron and the thunderous thud of that huge body hitting the ground. As was typical in ancient warfare, David rushed to Goliath in a heartbeat (v. 51) and “took his sword, and drew it out of the sheath thereof, and slew him, and cut off his head.” Do you remember the “shock and awe” of the 2003 invasion of Iraq? Well, as David stood there with Goliath’s sword in one hand and his gory head in the other, *that* was “shock and awe”— “when the Philistines saw their champion was dead, they fled.”

That brings us now to the primary (*and obvious*) lesson of the story: the *purpose* of this battle. David was not fighting his “giant” *personal* enemies; he was fighting *God’s* enemy. Goliath was not standing in the way of David reaching his full potential, or his living an abundant life, or his reaching his personal goals, or any such nonsense. *Goliath was challenging the God of Israel*. David said it himself in our text, did he not? **Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?** How can anyone possibly miss that? David wasn’t there for David. He was there for God. In fact, David wasn’t even supposed to be in the battle. He was just delivering supplies. Goliath was *defaming* God’s honor so David stepped forward to *defend* God’s honor. Once again, as noted earlier in verses 45–47, the battle was the *Lord’s*, not David’s. He had unwavering faith that God would bless his years of preparation and give him the victory because he was fighting for God not for his own benefit.

Now we can make the application. Is it about the “giants that challenge us”? No, it’s about those who challenge *God*. Like David, we each should stand against those who blaspheme God and His Word. And also like David, by the way, we should have extra ammunition for those who might follow. He had four more stones, and we should have increasingly more knowledge.

The Preparation for the Battle

Secondarily, however, there was the *preparation* for the battle. Something else we constantly hear about this story is that it should be viewed as something miraculous, which then means we can also expect God to do a miracle to defeat our personal giants. After all, here’s puny little David with his limited resources (5 stones) and inferior weapon (sling) going up against Goliath’s super-human strength and weapons of mass destruction. “What a miracle!” it is insisted. But that too couldn’t be further from the truth and reflects a total ignorance not only of the text but also history.

First, what makes us think David was puny and powerless in the first place? Remember what he told Saul. He killed a lion and bear (vv. 34–36). Here was a very brave and strong young man who was equipped by years of preparation and then empowered by God.

Second, was that ancient sling a weak and inferior

weapon? Hardly! This personal weapon has a small cradle or pouch in the middle of two long strands of cord. Armies at that time had three kinds of warriors: the *cavalry* on horseback, the *infantry* with swords and spears, and what we would call *artillery*—archers and a group called slingers. A slinger would put a rock or lead ball into the pouch, swing it around in increasingly wider and faster circles, and then release one end of the rope, hurtling the rock forward.

This simple weapon was really a stroke of genius. How effective was it? It was devastating! Medieval paintings picture slingers hitting birds in mid-flight. Judges 20:16 records that “Among all this people there were seven hundred chosen men lefthanded; every one could sling stones at an hair breadth, and not miss.” An experienced slinger could kill or seriously injure a man at a distance of up to 200 yards with a projectile moving 300 feet per second or more. It was also extremely difficult to defend against because at such high velocity a projectile was almost invisible. In today’s parallel, while Goliath used a rifle, David used a missile. No contest!

But was this skill easy? Indeed, not. Without the proper amount of training, it’s almost impossible to even launch a projectile in the right direction. Cultures that used the sling would therefore begin training as early as possible. Children were often given a sling as their first toy. David would have practiced day after day during the long, boring routine of tending the sheep, totally committed to his preparation. He was thoroughly prepared long before he ever faced Goliath. No miracle was needed. While many today are looking for miracles, what they really need is Truth.

Third, consider David’s tactics. Goliath had to fight in close quarters with sword and shield and his spear could only be thrown once and had a very limited range. But David could launch his virtually invisible artillery from a great distance. Now, think about that. While most teachers say that David didn’t stand a chance against Goliath and needed a miracle, it was actually the exact opposite—it was Goliath who didn’t stand a chance against **the living God**.

So, let’s again be clear. In stark contrast to the way this story is usually taught, David’s weapons and tactics were actually the far superior ones. Why? Well, not only for historical reasons but also a theological one: *because God doesn’t outfit His people with inferior tools to serve Him*. The application of putting on the armor of God in Ephesians 6:10–18 immedi-

ately comes to mind: *Truth* is the foundation garment; *righteousness* is our breastplate; the *gospel* is our sandals; *faith* is our shield; *salvation* is our helmet; the *Word of God* is our sword; and *prayer* is our empowering. Yes, we put on this armor to protect ourselves against the wiles of the devil, but ultimately it is still about God’s glory, “that utterance may be given unto [us], that [we] may open [our] mouth boldly, to make known the mystery of the gospel,” that “[we] may speak boldly, as [we] ought to speak” (vv. 19–20).

So, like David, it is our responsibility to practice and be prepared. Oh, let us stop thinking so much about ourselves and concentrate on God’s glory! Let’s stop being people-centered instead of God-centered. Let’s stop looking for miracles when things get tough and just master the only offensive weapon God has given us (“the sword of the Spirit”) and then practice the tactics He outlines.

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NOTES

- ¹ Kay Arthur, “What Is Your Goliath?” *Precepts for Life* blog post at <https://www.lightsource.com/ministry/precepts/articles/what-is-your-goliath-15876.html>.
- ² Steven Furtick and Joel Osteen respectively; video *American Gospel: Christ Alone* (Transition Studios), 31:27ff.
- ³ Max Lucado, *Facing Your Giants: God Still Does the Impossible* (Thomas Nelson, 2006), 153–59.
- ⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Eerdmans, 1910), Vol. II, 791.
- ⁵ F. W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (London: MacMillan, 1886), 193–94, 196.
- ⁶ Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization III: Caesar and Christ* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1944), 614.
- ⁷ *Ecclesiastic History*, Book VI, Chapter 8, “Origen’s Daring Deed.”
- ⁸ Cited in Johann Lorenz Mosheim, *An Ecclesiastical History, Ancient And Modern, From The Birth Of Christ To The Beginning Of The Present Century*, 4 Vol. (New York: Evert Duylinck, 1824, from the 1764 edition translated by Archibald Maclaine), Vol. 1, 218, note h.
- ⁹ Origen, *Homily 34.3*, Joseph T. Lienhard, trans., *Origen: Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke* (1996), 138.

An Excerpt from Pastor’s Watson’s Book, *Seek Him Early*:

NOVEMBER 4

David: The Proclamation of Faith

. . . *for the time would fail me to tell of . . . David . . . (Heb. 11:32e)*

AS Mathew Henry observed of David, “Few ever met with greater trials, and few ever discovered a more lively faith.” How true! The most striking description of David, though, was that he was a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). What does that mean? We would submit two features. In his *doctrine*, David desired God’s will in all things.

Unlike Saul, he paid scrupulous attention to God’s Word and never tried to alter it to suit himself or the situation. In his *duty*, David mimicked God as a shepherd (Pss. 23; cf. 78:72), again unlike Saul, who was never anything but a selfish king.

First, then, we see the *requirement*. David was actually anointed three times: the first, performed by Samuel, symbolized God’s choosing and ordaining him (1 Sam. 16:3); the second recognized David as king of Judah (2 Sam. 2:4–7); and the third

recognized him as king over all Israel, thereby uniting all 12 tribes (5:3). As with all His other “champions,” God simply required that David believe and obey.

Second, the response. As one reads David’s story, it becomes apparent that the idea of doubting God or lacking faith never once even occurred to him. Pivotal, of course, was his encounter with Goliath. Sadly, David’s victory here is often allegorized into meaning that we can “defeat all the giants” that come into our lives, which misses the point entirely. The key truth was David’s motive of God’s glory. In one of the greatest statements in Scripture, he bravely (and with incredulous disgust!) said: “who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (1 Sam. 17:26). While the Israelites preferred *fear*, David proclaimed *faith*. Both are a willful choice. Oh, that we would live by this motive!

David went on, in fact, to proclaim his faith repeatedly. By faith, he endured Saul’s relentless attacks, and instead of raising his hand against “the Lord’s anointed” (1 Sam. 24:6), he waited on God to place him on the throne. By faith, he subdued God’s enemies and expanded the kingdom in every direction (2 Sam. 8). By faith, he believed God’s covenant with him (2 Sam. 7; cf. 23:5), so much so that he drew up blueprints for the temple and began stockpiling materials for it (1 Chron. 28:11–19; 29:1–5) even though he would never actually see it built.

Third, the result. No less than four times we read that the Lord was “with” David (1 Sam. 16:18; 18:12, 14, 28). The Hebrew here (*im*, 5973H) indicates “something done together or in common with,” including the concepts of “fellowship, companionship, and common experiences.” David did, indeed, have something in common with God and a companionship that was truly unique. Why? Because he believed God. Was David perfect? Certainly not. His failures with Bathsheba and Uriah are notorious, but those make him even more of an example for us. We will also fail in various ways, but true faith will endure and be blessed.

Scriptures for Study: Read the full story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. What observations can you make, and what strikes you the most profoundly?

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