

THE SHEPHERD KING: FIGHT LIKE A KING

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1 Samuel 17 selected

Before we jump into today's reading, I believe it would be helpful if I provided a little background information on the story. I think you will find this interesting.

I would like to begin with a date. For me, one of the most helpful dates of biblical history to keep memorized is the year 1000 BC. That is the time of the rule of King David over Israel—1000 years before Jesus Christ. Before the time of David, there was no recognizable Kingdom of Israel. Yes, there was King Saul, but he was more of a military leader. Before David, Israel was just the people known as the Hebrews who had come from Egypt. Politically, they are best described as “a loose confederation of tribes.”¹ With David as king, however, Israel begins to develop a unique identity.

About 200 years before the time of David, another group arrived in this part of the world. We know them as the Philistines. Despite their strong presence in the Bible, very little is known about these people. They left no written records. Recent DNA research indicates that the Philistines originated in Greece or southern Europe and migrated east.

The Philistines were a seafaring people who settled in the region that today includes Israel, Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. The Egyptians called them the Peleset. The Hebrews called them the Peleshet, and it is from this term that the region gets the name Palestine.

According to the Biblical text, the Philistines moved from the coast into Israel's hill country fighting the Israelites for control. Along the way, they captured the Ark of the Covenant and destroyed the great shrine at Shiloh.

Technologically, the Philistines were far superior to the Israelites especially when it came to weapons of war. The Philistines had mastered the production of iron. This made them a formidable foe. The Philistine threat is probably why the Israelites called Saul to be their king—to be a military leader who would consolidate Israel's defense against the Philistine incursion. At that time, defeat at the hands of the Philistines may have erased infant Israel from existence all together. The stakes were high.

Our reading for today is the entirety of chapter 17 in the book of 1 Samuel. (I did not read all of it to you. I certainly hope you will take the time today to read and reread this wonderful story.) Here, in this chapter, we find the Philistines and the

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saul-king-of-Israel>

Israelites facing off for battle. The Philistines occupy the mountain on one side of a valley and the Israelites, led by Saul, occupy the opposite side of the valley.

It was the practice of armies at that time to mostly sit and wait just hoping that the other side would give in or show weakness or simply leave. That appears to be the case here with each army firmly entrenched on their side of the valley.

But in addition to the waiting, each day there was another event. Each day, a man named Goliath would emerge from the Philistine camp and challenge an Israelite to come out and fight him—champion against champion, mano a mano, fight to the death, winner take all. The fate of Israel would rest on this champion.

Goliath was a huge, imposing man. He is described as being either 6 foot 9 inches or 9 foot 9 inches. (Probably 6' 9'.) And he was heavily armored with a helmet, a coat of mail, and leg guards made of bronze. He carried a massive bronze spear as well as a sword. His armor is estimated to have weighed 125 pounds. He was a human tank. And each day for 40 days he would emerge and loudly challenge an Israelite to fight him. And in his challenge, he would taunt the Israelites which increasingly was detrimental to their morale.

The story then shifts from Goliath to David. We are reminded that David is one of the eight sons of Jesse of Bethlehem. Jesse's three oldest sons are encamped with Saul's army. It is David's job to watch the sheep at home but also to carry provisions to his brothers at the front.

David is at the camp one day as Goliath makes his daily challenge. David also hears the rumors that if anyone does defeat the giant, that King Saul will shower that person with wealth, offer his daughter in marriage, and free his family from paying taxes. David starts asking if all of this is true. He then states, *For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?*

Word of David's comments reaches King Saul who then sends for this brave and opinionated person. Once before the king, David volunteers to fight the Philistine. He says, *Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.* Saul points out that David is just a boy with no experience in battle, while Goliath has been training his entire life. But then David pulls up his resume on LinkedIn and shows the king where he has been working as a shepherd for the past several years. And as a shepherd his responsibilities include defending his flock from lions and bears. He also rates himself highly at Problem Solving, Creative Thinking, and Conflict Resolution, as well as noting his expertise at Microsoft Excel.

And then, speaking to the king, David reveals his motive for going up against Goliath. The Philistine is not just defying the army of King Saul; he is defying *the armies of the living God*. David proclaims that God will protect him just as God

protected him from the wild animals as a shepherd. So, Saul gives David his blessing as well as his armor. But the king's armor is far too large and unwieldy for the shepherd boy, so David removes it and sets it aside.

Then, the unarmored David picks up his shepherds staff and his sling and he collects five smooth stones from the riverbed and places these in his satchel, and he goes out to meet the Philistine. The two approach the battle line and when Goliath gets close enough to see how young David is, he mocks him saying, *Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?* And then Goliath *curses David by his gods* and says to the boy, *Bring it on. You will be bird food when I'm done with you.*

But remember, David is the youngest of eight boys. He's been taunted all his life. He can take these words of Goliath. He says to the Philistine, *You come at me with weapons, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I will make bird food of you so that all will know that there is a God in Israel.*

The two combatants then draw closer, and David reaches into his bag and pulls out a stone. He places the stone into his sling and launches it at the Philistine striking him in his forehead—which happens to be the only part of his body not covered in armor. The giant falls to the ground dead.

And then (and this is the part that we leave out of Vacation Bible school), David picks up the dead Philistine's sword and cuts off Goliath's head. And seeing their champion dead, the Philistine army flees as the Israelites give chase.

The common interpretation of this story is that of the underdog—the shepherd boy against the fierce warrior. On paper, David doesn't stand a chance. But from a perspective of faith, nothing could be further from the truth. David did not go out and face the giant unprotected. He went out dressed in the armor of God. He knew that God would be with him and would protect him. He was fighting for the soul of his people. Their future hung in the balance.

First and foremost, David was a shepherd, anointed by God to one day be king—a king of God's choosing. David went before the Philistine armed not with the advanced weaponry of swords and spears, but with the tools of an Israelite shepherd—tools he knew and understood.

Last week, in the first installment of this sermon series, we looked at the story of David's anointing by the prophet Samuel. In that moment, God poured out God's spirit upon the young David. 1000 years later, we would see this repeated in the pouring out of God's spirit when the spirit came upon the followers of Christ at Pentecost. We are the recipients of that very spirit; we too have been anointed. As ones anointed, we are sent into the world to share the good news of salvation that we find in Jesus Christ. If that sounds like a daunting task, it doesn't have to be.

Just as David knew he was protected by God, when we are sent out, we can go with the assurance that God is not only with us but has also equipped us for the task at hand.

There's the old saying that God won't give you more than you can handle. I tend to disagree. I like to think that God routinely gives us more than we can handle, but that God has prepared us and anointed us for the tasks we can't accomplish alone. David would never claim that he stood on that battlefield alone. He knew that God was with him. It's through these challenges, it's through facing these giants that as people of faith that we grow in faith.

David the shepherd boy would become king. He will be God's king and shepherd over God's people. We may not be kings ourselves, but we can certainly be God's shepherds anointed by God to slay the giants in our world. Go out and find your giant.