

1 Samuel 17:1-58

Introduction

A lowly non-league football team drawn against a Premier League rival in the F.A. Cup.

A human rights campaigner trying to stop the actions of a big, multinational corporation.

A sub-postmaster seeking justice from the Post Office.

It's in situations like those that we often hear the names of David and Goliath.

When the small and weak are taking on the big and strong.

It's a story that gives us hope. The underdog can overcome the favourite. They can win!

Or so we're told.

It's a lovely sentiment.

But is that really what this story's all about?

Not really.

This story isn't here to encourage us to go out and face our own personal giants.

It's here to teach us about God. And, ultimately, it's here to teach us about Jesus.

As we look at it together now, I hope we'll see how it does that.

The first three verses of the chapter set the scene.

Two sides gather for battle. The Philistines on one hill. The Israelites on another. With a valley between them.

And then we're introduced to the Philistine champion.

I've put for our first heading: Goliath the warrior.

Goliath the warrior

He's introduced in verse 4.

A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span.

Six cubits and a span is well over nine foot tall. It's something like nine foot nine. About three meters.

The person who holds the record for the world's tallest man is someone called Robert Wadlow, who was born in 1918. Here he is with his father. He was just under 9 foot tall. 8 foot 11. He also holds the record for the world's largest hands and the world's largest feet.

But even Robert Wadlow would have been dwarfed by Goliath. He is, quite literally, a giant of a man.

And he's no wimp. He's a warrior.

He comes out covered in bronze armour. It's unusual that we get a description of armour in the Bible. But it's called scale armour. It would have been made of hundreds of small bronze plates that resembled scales. And we're told it weighed five thousand shekels, which is just under nine stone or about 58 kilograms. David himself might not have weighed much more than that. And that's just his armour!

He also had a bronze helmet on his head. Bronze greaves on his legs. And a bronze javelin on his back. We're told later that he also had a sword. But his weapon of choice seems to have been a spear. And the spearhead alone weighed another 7 kilograms.

There's no messing with this guy. He's a heavyweight. He's a seriously impressive and intimidating sight.

And he issues a challenge to the Israelites.

'Send someone out to face me!' he bellows.

And here's the deal.

'If I win,' he says, 'then you will be our subjects. But if your man wins, then we will be subject to you.'

It sounds like the kind of challenge he's issued many times over. And won many times over.

No doubt, the Philistines behind him are feeling supremely confident.

Saul and the Israelites, on the other hand, are dismayed and terrified.

But then, in verse 12, we're introduced to David.

And I've called our next heading: David the shepherd boy.

David the shepherd boy

Verse 12.

Now David was the son of an Ephrathite named Jesse, who was from Bethlehem in Judah. Jesse had eight sons, and in Saul's time he was very old.

We're told that his three eldest sons are in the Israelite army with Saul. We were told in chapter 16 that David too has entered Saul's service, as an armour-bearer, but that is apparently not a permanent arrangement. We're told in verse 15 that he goes back and forth from serving Saul to looking after his father's sheep at home. And when we meet him now, he's at home tending his father's sheep.

By now, 40 days have passed. Morning and evening, Goliath has issued his challenge. But no one has come forward from the Israelite side. Not even Saul. There's a stand-off.

We can easily imagine that this young boy, David, is itching to hear news about the battle. And apparently his father, Jesse, is beginning to feel a bit restless too.

So, he sends David to the Israelite camp with some provisions for the men and tells him to find out what's going on. 'Go and find out how your brothers are doing,' he says. So, David goes. He delivers the supplies. And then he rushes to the battle line, where he searches for his brothers.

While he's there, Goliath steps forward and once again issues his challenge.

'Send someone out to face me!' he bellows. No doubt, with various choice insults and mockery.

And David is indignant.

Up to this point, God hasn't been mentioned. This is just a military standoff. But David sees things differently. This Philistine giant has the audacity to mock God and show contempt for his people.

And to his brother's great annoyance, he starts asking around to find out what will be done for the man who accepts Goliath's challenge and kills him.

Verse 26.

David asked the men standing near him, 'What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?' he says.

We know the answer. Saul has promised such a man great riches, the hand of his daughter in marriage, and exemption from taxes for his father's household. And when David's conversation is overheard, Saul sends for him.

And David offers to meet Goliath's challenge.

Verse 32.

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

It sounds as crazy as it does brave.

Saul points out that he’s only a young man, whereas this Philistine is a seasoned warrior. This isn’t his fight. It’s not a fair match.

But David isn’t put off.

‘I’m a shepherd,’ he says. ‘I’m used to taking on much more dangerous opponents than him. I’ve had to chase off bears and lions who have threatened the sheep. And on every occasion God has delivered me. This Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied God. The Lord will rescue me from his hand.’

Notice where David puts his confidence. It’s not in himself but in God.

‘Okay. Go!’ says Saul, ‘And may the Lord be with you.’

And then we get a slightly comical moment in the story. Saul dresses David in his own tunic and armour and fastens a sword at his side. Now, bearing in mind that Saul is a head taller than anyone else in Israel, and that David is still a just a boy, we can imagine how this worked out. Unsurprisingly, David starts staggering around, unable to walk properly.

If you’ve ever seen a child dressing up in its parent’s clothes, you might be able to picture the scene.

‘This isn’t going to work,’ David says. ‘I’m not used to all this clobber. I’m not a soldier. I’m a shepherd boy.’ And he takes it all off. He picks up five smooth stones from a stream, puts them in his pouch and then heads out to the battlefield, with no armour, and just a staff in one hand and a sling in the other.

We might fear that it’s going to be a non-contest. And it is. Although not, perhaps, how we might have expected. So that’s what I’ve called our next heading: a non-contest.

A non-contest

The Philistine approaches David and can’t believe his eyes. Standing in front of him is a small, young man, little more than a boy, who’s glowing with health and handsome. In other words, he’s clearly not spent any time on a battlefield. And all he has in his hands is a staff and a sling!

Verse 43.

He said to David, ‘Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks?’ And the Philistine cursed David by his gods.

Well, if we've read 1 Samuel up to this point, we know who the Philistine god is. It's Dagon. And we might remember what happened to the carved statue of Dagon back in chapter 5. It ended up falling on its face.

Goliath is unperturbed.

'Come here, you little upstart,' he says. 'I'll rip you to bits and feed you to the birds!'

Then it's David's turn.

Verse 45.

'David said to the Philistine, '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. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. 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.'

And the battle begins.

Imagine you're an Israelite, watching on as David and Goliath approach each other. David is your representative. What happens to him will happen to you. Goliath is so big and impressive. David seems so small and weak. Defeat seems inevitable. But then, in the blink of an eye, it's over. David rushes to the battle line, reaches for one of his stones, puts it in his sling, and sends it flying towards this Philistine giant. It finds its mark and hits the Philistine on his forehead. Goliath falls facedown to the ground. David runs to him and cuts off his head with Goliath's own sword. Just like that, the fight is over.

David has just given you an amazing victory. His victory is your victory. Imagine how it would feel to watch England win the World Cup. Given their performance in recent years, you would probably be stunned. And if you're a football fan, you would be delighted. Their victory would be your victory. That would be something like the feeling you would have if you were an Israelite. Then, you see the Philistines turning on their heels and running for home. And you join your fellow Israelites to chase them and utterly defeat them.

In the final verses, Saul makes good on his promise. As David returns to camp, Saul asks him who his father is. Why? Because he has promised to exempt his father from paying taxes. He's also got the small matter of a wedding to organise. He needs to know, or be reminded, who this young boy's father is.

It's a great story.

But at the end, there, the action is so fast that we may be left asking ourselves, ‘What just happened?’.

We might also be wondering what relevance it has for us today.

So, I’ve put as our final heading: What just happened?

What just happened?

We need to understand what’s going on here.

There are plenty of clues in the text that this isn’t merely a military battle.

We’re told many times in the story that Goliath is defying God’s people, and therefore defying God himself.

In verse 45, David says that he comes against Goliath **‘in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.’**

And in verse 47 he says, **‘the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.’**

This is a battle for the Lord’s honour and for the salvation of his people.

We need to see it in the context of the great story of salvation that runs all the way through the Bible.

It begins in the Garden of Eden, where the snake defies God and provokes Adam and Eve to sin. He brings Adam and Eve under the sentence of death. From that point on, sin and death weigh down heavily on all humanity.

God promises a snake-crusher to destroy the snake, who is Satan, and to save his people. And from that point on his glory is bound up with that promise.

The story of the Bible is the story of how God fulfils his promise.

Earlier in this book of 1 Samuel, immediately after Saul had been anointed king, we were told of his victory over Nahash the Ammonite, which confirmed his kingship. And we noted the interesting detail that the name ‘Nahash’ literally means ‘snake’.

This battle with Goliath comes immediately after David is anointed king. It too confirms his kingship. And I wonder whether it’s no coincidence that we’re told about his armour in unusual detail. It is scale armour. Or just scale. Literally, we are told that he is clothed with scale. Not unlike a snake... perhaps.

I don’t want to push that point too hard. Nothing depends on it. It’s merely an interesting detail. Whether he’s dressed like a snake or not, Goliath represents all God’s enemies who side with Satan in defying God and God’s people.

This is just one outworking in history of that ancient conflict.

The battle is the Lord's.

And this story tells us how the battle will be won.

Look again at the first half of verse 47. Do you see what it says?

'All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves...'

The Lord wins salvation for his people, not through military might, or through what's strong and impressive. He wins salvation for his people through what appears weak and unimpressive.

Like a shepherd boy with a stick and a sling.

Or like the son of a carpenter, dying naked on a cross.

This victory over Goliath isn't the main event.

This was just a preliminary skirmish.

The big fight was yet to come, through one of David's descendants: Jesus Christ.

So, imagine you're looking on, now, as Jesus carries his cross to Golgotha. Like David, he is your representative. Like David, what happens to him will happen to you. The combined forces of the Roman Empire and the Jewish leadership seem so powerful. Satan, who stands behind them, looks more powerful still. And, like David, Jesus looks so small and weak. He has no weapon. Not even a staff or a sling. As he hangs on the cross, defeat seems inevitable. As he's buried in the tomb, defeat seems certain. But then, a few days later, in the blink of an eye, defeat is turned into a stunning victory as Jesus rises victorious from the grave.

Sin and death are defeated. Jesus has faced them, in the place of his people, as their Champion, and he has won! Forgiveness and life have been secured.

It is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves but by the cross of his Son, Jesus Christ.

And one day he will return to destroy forever Satan and all who align themselves with him in defiance of God. He will liberate his people from the hold of sin and death forever in a new heaven and a new earth. And that is all to the glory of God.

So, the choice we all face is how we will respond to Christ's victory at the cross.

By nature, we all live in defiance of God. We ignore him and refuse his right to rule over us as our Creator. We live as his enemies. And if we continue to do that then, ultimately, we condemn ourselves to the same fate as Goliath – if not in this life, then in eternity.

But if we turn away from our rebellion and come in faith to Jesus, as our true King and Saviour, then he gladly shares with us the spoils of his victory.

To follow Jesus is to live in daily enjoyment of all that he has won.

It's to enjoy knowing that our sins are forgiven through faith in his cross.

It's to enjoy knowing that God's anger has been turned away and that we are welcomed by him as members of his people.

It's to enjoy a real relationship with God through reading his word the Bible and speaking to him in prayer.

It's to enjoy having God's love towards us and his presence with us by his Spirit.

And, ultimately, it's to enjoy knowing that the way through death has been opened by Jesus and that a glorious future awaits all who trust in him.

In short, it's to enjoy life – both now and in eternity.

If you're a Christian, rejoice in him!

But if all this doesn't mean anything to you... if you don't know what I'm talking about... then please do speak with me after the service. A great way to find out more would be to come to that course I mentioned earlier, called Christianity Explored. I would love to see you there.

Please do sign up and come along.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you for the victory that Jesus won at the cross. Thank you that sin and death are defeated and that the way to eternal life stands open. Please help each one of us here to understand what Jesus has accomplished and to rejoice in his great victory each day, through faith in him. In his name we pray. Amen.