

1st Samuel, Samuel to King David Chapter 17 – David and Goliath

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

As 2023 opened, a major news outlet termed the battle for the Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, between Russian and Ukrainian forces, as a 'David and Goliath battle'.ⁱ The term has entered common parlance to describe a contest between two unequally matched opponents and finds its origin in the events recorded in the seventeenth chapter of I Samuel, where a Philistine army had crossed into Israel and positioned itself on the slopes of the Valley of Elah, facing off against the defending Israelite army under king Saul. This was not the first battle between the Israelites and their pagan and hostile neighbours from Philistia,ⁱⁱ but for the first time since the days of Joshua a giant appears in the historical record to spearhead the attack against Israel to the dismay of Saul and his army.

The historical events

You may already be well aware of the events recorded in I Samuel 17, but it is worth briefly summarising them at the outset of this talk to provide the context for when we consider what we can gain from this part of God's word. We do not have time to read the entire passage, but if at some point you do it is well worth the slight investment of time. The portions I do read will be from the New King James Version.

02:10 In summary then, as already mentioned the Philistines – a hostile people group living on the seaboard of the Mediterranean Sea adjacent to Israel – had again invaded Israel and set their battle line on one of the slopes of the valley of Elah. It has been suggested that the terrain of the valley prevented the Philistines using the chariots they had previously employed,ⁱⁱⁱ but if they had, they had a perhaps equally terrifying asset, a giant over nine feet tall,^{iv} equipped with bronze coat of mail weighing in at 57kg, an array of weaponry including a spear, the head of which weighed almost 7kg, besides additional bronze armour and, if we believe king Saul's assessment – and there is little reason not to – years of combat experience.

As the armies faced each other the giant, who we learn is called Goliath, shouts out across the valley to the Israelite army:

“Why have you come out to line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and you the servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us. [...] I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together.”^v

I Samuel 17:8-10 (NKJV)

Despite repeating this challenge for 40 days no Israelite stepped forward to take on the mighty Philistine giant. Saul, who appears equally unwilling to accept the duel proposed, offered riches, his daughter's hand in marriage, and freedom – potentially from taxation – for the victor's father's house, but to no avail, no Israelite dared step forward to battle the giant of Gath.

At this point the account turns to David the son of Jesse who, as we heard in the previous talk on the preceding chapter, had been anointed by Samuel as the next king of Israel.^{vi} David was at home in Bethlehem with his father Jesse while his three oldest brothers were with Saul in the Israelite army at the Valley of Elah. Conscious of the conflict, Jesse sent David with provisions to supply the army and requested that he bring back news of his brothers' welfare. Upon his arrival at the battlefield, David heard the defiant challenge of the giant and boldly declared to Saul:

“Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.”

I Samuel 17:32b (NKJV)

04:42 Saul initially seeks to dissuade David, comparing David's youth unfavourably to the giant's martial experience, but is persuaded by David, who recounts how God had on previous occasions given him victory over the lions and bears that in those times roamed the land of Israel and preyed on flocks of sheep they came across. **05:04** To help try and even the odds, as he saw them, ever so slightly, Saul offered David his armour but, unable to walk in them David chose instead his shepherd's staff, sling, and five smooth stones.

05:19 Upon seeing his opponent, Goliath cursed David and promised to leave his defeated body for the wild animals to scavenge. David, in great faith, declared in response that while Goliath came with his many weapons, he came in the name of the LORD of hosts, and it was the bodies of the Philistine camp that would be scavenged on by the local beasts. **05:41** David then ran towards Goliath and, with an expertly aimed slingstone, struck Goliath in the forehead, downing him, before beheading him with the giant's own sword. At the sight of their champion's defeat, the Philistine army fled, pursued back into Philistia by the Israelites, who then returned to plunder their defeated foes' abandoned tents.

Is it reasonable to believe in giants?

This is a wonderful story and, as we will see shortly, holds a number of practical and devotional lessons for the Christian. Before we consider these however, there is one matter that we should cover off – is it reasonable to believe in giants? The prevalence of giants in popular folklore such as Jack and the Beanstalk, and their absence in the lived experience of the majority, could lead to the mistaken view that giants do not exist and never have done. If giants do not exist then the story of David and Goliath is at best an exaggeration and at worst a complete fiction, undermining not just the historicity of the book of I Samuel but the reliability of the entire Bible.

The plausibility of giants can be supported from a number of angles. To help reset the landscape from Jack and the Beanstalk fairy tales to reality, it is worth noting that the Guinness World Book of Records' entry for tallest man, as of the date of my preparing this talk, is held by Robert Wadlow, who reached 2.72m.^{vii} In terms of the tallest man living, Sultan Kösen has reached 2.51m – not quite Goliath's approximate 2.97m, but still closer in height to Goliath than to a six foot man.^{viii}

07:30 It should be noted that both these men – Wadlow and Kösen – are reported to suffer or have suffered from physical ailments making them imperfect precedents for the warrior Goliath. Less recent and so less well authenticated giants are known to have existed, among them John Middleton, better known as the Giant of Hale, whose statue I have seen, he was reported to have been 9 foot 3 inches, about 95% of Goliath's height. Unlike Wadlow and Kösen, John was em-

ployed as a bodyguard and famously defeated king James I's champion in wrestling.^{ix} In summary, a man over nine feet tall capable of combat is neither implausible nor unprecedented. 08:15

It is also notable that giants are referenced elsewhere in the Bible. In the book of Numbers, the spies sent by Moses to spy out Canaan reported giants, compared to whom they seemed like grasshoppers.^x 08:30 In the book of Deuteronomy, king Og, who was defeated by the Israelites under Moses, is said to have been of the remnant of the giants and have had a bed nine cubits long (by contrast, Goliath's height was six cubits and a span).^{xi} Finally, for the purposes of our brief summary, 08:47 the book of Joshua mentions that the Anakim, who we learn elsewhere were giants, were defeated by Joshua and remained only in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod.^{xii} It is notable that these are three of the five main Philistine cities and that Gath was also the hometown of Goliath. What is especially relevant here is that while the authors of these biblical books and of I Samuel and also I Chronicles clearly appreciated that giants were not the norm and consequently capable of terrifying their foes, they are not at pains to stress the veracity of their comments, as I am currently doing. These authors assumed their readership would not have a problem with accepting the existence of giants. 09:30 This was not due to the erroneous modern conception that the people of past millennia were ignorant, gullible, peasants compared to the rational educated men and women of today. This view displays a mixture of arrogance and, ironically, ignorance. The men and women of the past displayed a mix of gullibility and scepticism, just as men and women do today. 09:50 If no one had ever seen a giant it is implausible that a reader would willingly accept the account in I Samuel. We can therefore take the consistent approach to giants in the Old Testament as another support for their historical reality.

Various extra-biblical sources from the ancient world could also be referenced to support the existence of giants. 10:17 Papyrus Anastasi I, an Egyptian source from circa 13 BC refers to Bedouin in the land of Canaan, some of whom were reported to be four or five cubits from their nose to their feet, which could make them similar to Sultan Kösen in height.^{xiii} Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History*, noted that the tallest man seen in his time was a man named Gabbaras from Arabia, who was nine foot nine, and that the bodies of two people taller than Gabbaras had been preserved in a museum.^{xiv} 10:49

There is a danger, however, in relying too heavily on extra-biblical sources to validate the Bible's claims. This is not only due to the paucity of surviving ancient sources and the factual errors in those that do exist, but in the risk that we begin to subconsciously assume that the Bible is just another source when it comes to history, in need of external validation. In fact, the Bible is the inerrant word of God. There is neither the time nor scope to go into this important subject in this talk, but, to counter perhaps the most immediate challenge such a claim may encounter, it is not irrational to say because the Bible states such and such I believe it. We do the same constantly in many aspects of our lives, be it a dictionary, a textbook, or a map. We do not seek to prove out from first principles every claim and detail but instead, on finding it accurate in many cases, we have faith that it will be accurate again in instances we have not personally verified. So, as we find – as I unerringly have – that the Bible is accurate in matters of history, science, and its description of human nature, we can accept in faith its claims as to Goliath, not in blind faith, but given the proven reliability, accuracy, and wisdom of the ultimate divine Author.

Lessons for the Christian today – Trusting God

12:10 Returning to the account in I Samuel 17, there is some debate over the meaning of Goliath's challenge:

“Am I not a Philistine, and you the servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us.”

I had, until recently, assumed that Goliath was essentially saying that the outcome of the duel would be accepted by either side as deciding the battle and each side would accept the result – if Goliath triumphed Israel would surrender to Philistia and vice versa. Recently I have come across an alternative view that suggests that duels such as that offered by Goliath were not meant to avoid a subsequent full scale clash of the two armies but rather, since it was assumed that the respective deities of either side would support their champion in the duel, the outcome of the duel demonstrated which god was stronger and, as the side with the stronger god was sure to triumph, the outcome of the duel foretold the ultimate outcome of the battle.^{xv}

This concept of the respective power of national deities determining the outcome of a battle can be clearly seen many years later when the king of Assyria sent an emissary to Jerusalem to demand its surrender. Seeking to persuade the inhabitants of Jerusalem to surrender the Assyrian blasphemously declared:

“Do not listen to Hezekiah, lest he persuade you, saying, “The LORD will deliver us.” Has any of the gods of the nations at all delivered its land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim and Hena and Ivah? Indeed, have they delivered Samaria from my hand? Who among all the gods of the lands have delivered their countries from my hand, that the LORD should deliver Jerusalem from my hand?”

II Kings 18:32b-35 (NKJV)

The Assyrian's argument was that Assyria's victory over Hamath, Arpad and elsewhere demonstrated that Assyria was more powerful than the gods the inhabitants of those territories had worshipped, otherwise would not those gods have saved their servants from Assyria. This pagan logic was flawed, failing to recognise that God alone is all powerful and ultimately determines the course of history – the powers of evil that exist are not God's equal, only God is eternal and only God is all powerful. However, it had a distinct kernel of truth in it, namely that the outcome of a battle lay in the hands of God and not man. 14:54

Returning to the Valley of Elah and Goliath's challenge, David declared his belief in divine overruling in his declaration to Goliath, “The battle is the Lord's, and He will give you into our hands.”^{xvi} This was an act of immense faith. It was one thing for Saul to say, “Go, and the Lord be with you!”^{xvii} when he himself remained on the slopes of the Valley of Elah where it was substantially easier to subscribe to the Lord's power and control, it was an entirely different matter to let this belief lead you alone into the valley to face a man nearly ten foot tall, covered in armour and intent on killing you.

In this David provides us with a very practical, challenging, and inspiring example as applicable today as it was millennia ago in the Valley of Elah – that God is in control and no force or circumstance that opposes us is His equal or beyond His control. Speaking personally, I find it incredibly easy to allow my flesh to ignore the reality of God's control. I know the Lord Jesus would want me to do this or say that, but can I take that risk? It can be so easy to practically forget the fact that my Father is in complete control. Like David, let us remember that the battle – whatever that might be for us at any given point – is in the Lord's hands and we can trust Him entirely. To be clear, that does not mean the most desirable outcome will always occur, but we can be absolutely certain that nothing will ever happen that God has not permitted and, coupled with the infinite love of God revealed to us supremely at Calvary, there is great encouragement in this for us.

Lessons for the Christian today – Valuing the honour of God

In I Samuel 17 God does not comment on the Philistine's comments directly, but His view can be implied from His response to the Assyrian's claim that God could not deliver Jerusalem and His people from the Assyrian war machine:

“Whom have you reproached and blasphemed?
Against whom have you raised your voice,
And lifted up your eyes on high?
Against the Holy One of Israel.”

I Kings 19:22 (NKJV)

God does not always speak audibly when people speak or act blasphemously, but this by no means implies that such words and actions are not deeply offensive to Him. David keenly felt the offense of Goliath's defiant challenge as can be seen in the rationale he presented for fighting Goliath:

“For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?”

I Samuel 17:26b (NKJV)

“Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God.”

I Samuel 17:36 (NKJV)

“I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.”

I Samuel 17:45b (NKJV)

The honour of God was important to David as it should be to us today. We, as Christians, live in the day of grace and so it is certainly not our place to be setting up duels with those who speak against God, but we should value the honour of God. Practically – and it almost goes without saying – that we should never misuse the name of God. As Christians we are not bound by the law as Israel was in a previous dispensation, but misuse of God's name is no less offensive to God as it was when He prohibited it at Sinai. We should seek, entirely in the strength provided by God, to live in a righteous way that honours God rather than bringing His name into disrepute. This is, certainly to me, a great challenge, but it is also a great opportunity. We are not called, as Christians, to face down bronze-clad giants, but we can honour our Lord and Saviour and our God and Father in our words and actions in a world that is constantly and egregiously defying Him.

David as a type of Christ

David is therefore a model for us as Christians today in how he trusted God and valued God's honour. But in the account of his victory over Goliath David also provides a type or picture of the Lord Jesus' much greater victory over our enemy.

For the remainder of our talk we will consider how this historical account in I Samuel 17 parallels, in some aspects, the Lord's great work at Calvary. It is always worth turning our minds to the greatness of the Saviour and ultimately it is meditation on His work and His person that underpin our trust in His control over our circumstances and cause us to seek His honour in this world that has rejected Him.

Near the start of the chapter we find David sent by his father to see how his brethren fared and David rising early and setting out to the Valley of Elah in obedience to His Father. For David this was a journey of perhaps 15 miles or so, for the Lord Jesus it was from Heaven to an Earth that hated and rejected both Him and His Father and yet in complete obedience to His Father He went.

Turning to Goliath, we note that he is presented as an enemy of Israel, God's earthly people, standing in their land and paralysing them with fear as being altogether too mighty for them to defeat. Goliath defies the armies of the living God and calls for them to become the Philistines' servants. Does this remind us of anyone? The Devil opposes mankind to our ruin, perhaps most clearly seen in his actions in Genesis 3 where he instigated the Fall, is active in this world as Peter tells us in his first epistle, is very strong, being alluded to by the Lord under the figure of 'the strong man' and displaying his destructive abilities in the book of Job, and wields a power that man is incapable of overcoming – death.^{xviii}

So we have Goliath typifying the Devil, terrifying the Israelites who picture fallen man and are utterly incapable of defeating their terrible foe, and then David, the type of the Lord Jesus, appears, seeking the welfare of his brethren, outraged by the insult to the honour of God that the enemy's words hold, and filled with a boldness arising from an unwavering confidence in God.

In verse 48 we find that David ran towards the enemy. In a later period of his life David would typify the Lord Jesus in His rejection, but here in the Valley of Elah the type presented by the Holy Spirit, the ultimate author of I Samuel, is not of the Lord's sufferings primarily in view but His mighty victory. David goes forth boldly and willingly into the valley and there strikes down the giant and cuts off his head, showing to all the complete defeat of the foe and thereby destroying the enemy's hold over the Israelites. Millenia later the Lord Jesus, not many miles from that valley, went forth willingly to Calvary and there utterly defeated the Devil and laid the righteous foundation for the full and eternal salvation of all who trust in Him.

We read in verse 51 of our chapter that David cut off Goliath's head with the giant's own sword. The recording of this detail serves to prove David's point – that the LORD does not save by sword or spear – but it also brings to mind the verses in Hebrews which read:

“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood,
He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might
destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release
those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bond-
age.”

Hebrews 2:14-15 (NKJV)

The Devil, these verses tell us, had the power of death and through fear of death kept men subject to bondage, as Goliath had terrified the Israelites. The Lord Jesus, however, destroyed the Devil through death, through dying on the cross, and so in picture David takes that which was the weapon of the enemy and with it destroys the enemy.

Finally, we read in verse 53 that the Israelites plundered the abandoned tents of the Philistines. What part had the Israelites played in the victory over the Philistines? Had any of the regular army volunteered to face Goliath? Had they, by strength or arms, drove back the Philistine army? Not at all, the victory rested solely with David, but the Israelites nevertheless received the spoil. How much more true is this for those of us who are Christians today. What part did we play in our salvation? Nothing! All the work, all the cost, all the initiative was God's. It was the Lord Jesus who suffered, bled, and died but how infinitely vast is the spoil of that victory which He, in utter grace, shares with us! To the one who turns to Him for salvation myriad blessings are bestowed – salvation from Hell, eternal life and that in Heaven in His presence, adoption as sons of God, the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit, new bodies in a coming day, the Lord Jesus' personal return for us at the Rapture, and yet still more besides.

So in summary, let us remember that firstly, we can trust the historical reality of the story of David and Goliath. Secondly, we can gain a good example from David in trusting God and valuing His honour. And lastly, we can see prefigured in this account the infinitely greater victory of the Lord Jesus and praise and thank Him for what He has done for us.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today message on 'David and Goliath', talk number T1343.

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.

i Sky News, accessed 20 July 2022, <https://news.sky.com/story/the-rumbling-percussion-of-artillery-echoes-as-a-david-and-goliath-battle-takes-place-in-the-city-of-bakhmut-12792917>

ii Refer to Paul Callicott's previous Truth for Today talk in this series, T1280, on I Samuel 4.

iii Samuel 13:5.

iv As noted by the NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (2016, Zondervan, accessed via Bible Gateway+), while there was considerable variation in the length of a cubit in the ancient world – the measure used by the author of I Samuel – by any measure Goliath would have exceeded nine feet in height. For completeness I note that some Greek manuscripts reduce Goliath's height to four cubits and a span, or approximately 205cm, which was still tall by ancient standards. This transcript does not permit a detailed response, but there is good reason to follow the standard English translations preference for the greater height.

v Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

vi Refer to Yannick Ford's previous Truth for Today talk in this series, T1342, on I Samuel 16.

vii Guinness World Records, accessed 20 July 2023, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/tallest-man-ever>

viii Guinness World Records, accessed 20 July 2023, <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/tallest-man-living>

ix Brasenose College Oxford, accessed 20 July 2023, <https://www.bnc.ox.ac.uk/about-brasenose/history/215-brasenose-traditions-and-legends/417-the-child-of-hale>

x Numbers 13:33.

xi Deuteronomy 3:11.

xii Joshua 11:21-22.

xiii Papyrus Anastasi I (British Museum Papyrus EA10247), see 'Goliath and the Exodus Giants: How Tall Were They?', Clyde E. Billington, JETS 50/3, September 2007, p.505.

xiv Pliny, Natural History, l. 7. c. 16, accessed 20 July 2023, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/60230/pg60230-images.html>

xv As noted by the NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (2019), accessed via Bible Gateway+.

xvi Samuel 17:47b.

xvii Samuel 17:37b.

xviii Peter 5:8; Matthew 12:29; Hebrews 2:14; Romans 3:23; Romans 6:23.