

“The Living God! . . . Remember?”

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Continuing a series *A King for God's People*

1st Samuel 17

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“David verses Goliath” is Sunday-School Extraordinary! So here’s a quiz.

How tall was Goliath?

Some manuscripts say he was “6 cubits and a span.”¹ That would be 9½ feet!² Others say he was “4 cubits and a span,” about 6½ feet which, in the ancient world, was still very tall. I bet he was ripped too.

Where was Goliath from?

Gath, a Philistine city.³ Philistia was a sophisticated civilization along the coast of Canaan (where Gaza is today). They likely originated in the Greek islands. Like Israel, Philistia had relatively recently settled in the land, and they’d become enemies.

What was Goliath doing?

Instead of risking the whole army in battle, the sides would choose “champions.” They would meet in one-on-one combat, each representing their whole nation. Goliath was the Philistine’s champion.⁴ He was “talking trash” at the Israelites, goading one of them to come him and fight. He kept at it for 40 days!⁵

What were Israel’s soldiers doing?

Nothing. No one dared face Goliath. They were terrified.⁶

What about Davey, where was he from?

Bethlehem. Remember that!

How old was Davey?

He was too young to go into battle, so probably a preteen. He had brothers in the army, and brought them food. He saw Goliath’s trash-talking and Israel’s terror. So he vowed to fight the Philistine champion himself.

¹ A cubit is the distance between your fingertips and your elbow. A span is that between the tips of your small finger and thumb when your hand is spread. Obviously this will vary from person to person, so converting it is always approximate. However, a cubit is roughly 18 inches / 45 cm, and a span is about 9 inches / 23 cm (i.e., half of a cubit).

² The Hebrew textual tradition favours the “6 spans and a cubit reading.” The Codex Vaticanus version of the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) and some other manuscripts have the “4 spans and a cubit reading.” V. Philips Long, “1 Samuel” in John H. Walton (ed), *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 347.

³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gath_\(city\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gath_(city))

⁴ Long, 346.

⁵ 17:16.

⁶ For the rewards, see 17:25. For their reaction, see 17:11,24.

What did Davey wear to fight Goliath?

Just his regular clothes. He tried on armour—the king’s own suit! But Davey wasn’t used to it. Same with the king’s sword. So he left them behind.

What was Davey’s weapon?

A sling. It was a leather pocket, attached to two ropes. You’d put a stone in the pocket, spin it around, then release one rope. The stone would fly to its target. With training, it was deadly.

Did Davey have training?

As a shepherd, he’d fought off lions and bears, and sometimes killed them.

Where did Davey’s stone hit Goliath?

The Hebrew word isn’t entirely clear.⁷ It probably hit his forehead. Wherever it hit, it hurt the big guy and knocked him down.

Did the stone kill Goliath?

It says the stone hit Goliath and killed him.⁸ It then says he took Goliath’s sword, cut off his head, and killed him. Let’s just say Davey killed Goliath, really well!

Through all this, who was Israel’s king?

Saul. Saul’s most vital foreign policy challenge was ending the Philistine threat. He failed. He was frightened, powerless, and he would not take on Goliath. Little Davey came along, and did the king’s job. Which should not surprise us. Unlike everyone in the story, including Saul and maybe Davey himself, we know God had chosen Davey to be Israel’s next king. Facing Goliath, he began acting like the king God’s People needed.

II

If Hollywood wrote this script, half the movie would be about the battle itself. But in the Bible, that comes almost at the end, and is over quickly. What matters more are the conversations, which tell us what it all means. And Davey does most of the talking.

First, let’s hear his conversation with Saul.

⁷ Long, 352.

⁸ 17:51.

David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth."

But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, delivering the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has exposed the armies of the living God." David said, "The Lord, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

So Saul said to David, "Go, and may the Lord be with you!"

1st Samuel 17.32-37

New Revised Standard Version (adapted)

And now, what Davey says to Goliath, after the warrior mocked him and told the boy what he was going to do to his corpse.

David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of the troops, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have exposed. This very day the Lord will surrender you into my hand, and I will strike you down and I will cut off your head, and I will give the dead bodies of the Philistine army this very day to the birds of the air and to the wild animals of the earth, so that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not by sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand."

1st Samuel 17.45-47

New Revised Standard Version (adapted)

III

Before Davey shows up, the Israelites are only fear. Goliath repeatedly defies them . . . the word here means "*pull off*" and can have the violent sense of "*rip away, expose, strip*."⁹

⁹ The Hebrew word, *châraph*, is translated in the NRSV as "defy" or "reproach" (*cherâh*, a derivate word). See <http://biblehub.com/hebrew/2778.htm>

Goliath shows them to be uncovered, naked. Each day, morning and evening, his words strip them bare.

Little Davey arrives, and things start turning. Davey brings God into the conversation.

Up to now, the talk has been entirely secular. Even in the army of God's People, it seems God has been forgotten. Even by God's king Saul, it seems God is an afterthought.

Of course, I figure that when the cabinet met, they started with prayer because it was on the agenda, right between the call to order and approving the minutes. I imagine the clergy were asked to lead special services. I am sure that when darkness fell and the wine flowed, or when someone stubbed his sandal on a shield, God-language exploded from their lips. Each morning, did they snap to attention to sing something like, "God, keep our land, glorious and free?"

But then, they'd get down to business, the stuff that really matters:

- fretting over your hydro bill
- evaluating an employee
- taking your child's temperature
- arguing about politics
- having sharp words with your beloved
- getting through this first week back
- news comes of towers crashing, bombs exploding, shots shattering

You are facing that Big Thing that is trashing and terrifying you, and stripping you bare, and goading you to a fight from which you cannot escape and for which you are in no way prepared.

God becomes an afterthought.

IV

But then, a small voice shows up, asking: *What about the Living God?*

The Living God! Remember? Who delivers me from lions and bears? (At his age, we had paper routes!) The Living God! Remember? Who saves, but not with sword or spear? (Or whatever tools of power dazzle you.) The Living God! Remember? Who is with us in every battle? Remember?

We're embarrassed. *Living God?* Maybe we've grown too cynical to hope? *Living God?* Maybe we've cast ourselves as too sophisticated to imagine? *Living God?* Maybe we've had so much success with our own shiny armour, and maybe we've been walking tall on our own two feet, and maybe our swords, spears and javelins have carried the battle before. . . . But now it's Goliath! Our armour is tinfoil. Our stature is tiny. Our weapons are snapped twigs. . . . *Hey, kid from Bethlehem, what were you saying about this "Living God?"*

He's gone. He has not waited around for us to get our act together, our theology right, our faith strong enough. He left. For the front line. The Battle. To face Goliath for us.

What's he wearing, this one from Bethlehem?

Nothing. He's let himself be stripped. Exposed. Humiliated.

What's he carrying?

Just a . . . just a cross.

There is little Davey, and then there is this One greater than David. This One, also from Bethlehem. This Jesus.

Our Champion.

Our Stone, the Rock of Ages.

Jesus, who did not strike the blow, but was himself struck. Jesus, who did not pick up the sword, but was himself cut off.

Jesus, who gave himself for David and all God's People, and *Goliath* and all Philistines.

Jesus, our King.

Jesus, the Living God. . . . Who says, "Follow me."