

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Men who met David: Goliath

This is the first of a series of four talks dealing with men who met David, one of the great heroes of the Bible and the greatest king of Israel. There were obviously very many people who met David, and the Bible only mentions relatively few, which is not surprising. Perhaps the most significant man David met, and certainly the one we all remember, is Goliath. Everybody has heard of a "David and Goliath" situation even if they have never read the Bible's account of the incident.

The encounter with Goliath is significant because it set the tone for the rest of David's life, but first we need to look at some of the background. David probably lived from about 1040 to 970 BC. His father was called Jesse and the family lived in Bethlehem, a little south east of Jerusalem. He was the youngest of 8 brothers and he looked after the family's flock of sheep. He seems not to have been highly regarded by the rest of the family, probably because he was the youngest.

Saul, Israel's first king, was on the throne at the time but God had told Samuel the prophet that Saul was unsuitable because he had disobeyed God, and He had found someone else to be king. Samuel said to Saul, "But now your kingdom shall not continue. The LORD has sought for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has commanded him to be commander over His people because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you."

This was very sad. The effect on Samuel was that he cried to the LORD all that night. Saul had got off to a good start as king. He was popular with the people and energetic in defeating Israel's enemies but it had all gone wrong. He had made some unwise decisions and had disobeyed God at least twice. After a public rupture between Samuel and Saul and while Samuel still mourned over Saul, God told Samuel that He had provided Himself a king from among Jesse's sons and that Samuel was to anoint the one God would tell him. So Samuel took a heifer for a sacrifice and went to visit Jesse. He did not know exactly what was going to happen; only that God had said that He would show him what to do. This shows Samuel's faith in God in that he had to go one stage at a time in obedience to God without knowing what the next step would be. Do we show such trust in God? You may say, "But Samuel was a prophet. You would expect God to communicate with a man like that but not with people like us." But Samuel was only a man and it's his relationship and trust in God that we need to imitate, not his position as a prophet or his special role in history.

Anyway, Samuel invited Jesse and his sons to the sacrifice. He first saw Eliab, the oldest and was very impressed, so much so that he said to God, "Surely the LORD's anointed is before Him." But God's reply was those memorable and significant words, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance but the LORD looks at the heart." We'll see later on how important that was, not only then but for us now. It is the heart that matters, not appearance, manner, attractiveness, wealth, social position or education or any of the things that matter so much to us and on which we form our judgment of a person. Only God truly knows what is in us. Of course, we automatically form an impression of a person immediately we see them - it's unavoidable and we're not always wrong in our assessment for our purposes but God sees what really matters. Incidentally, this is an excellent example of someone being in such close communion with God that they could carry on what seems like an ordinary conversation with God while doing something else. Would that all believers had this happy relationship with God!

None of Jesse's sons who were there was God's choice so Samuel had to ask whether there were any more. It was only then that any of them remembered David. He obviously did not matter enough to be present at the more important family occasions when honoured guests like Samuel were present. But they were all wrong; the LORD saw the heart. They all had to wait for David to turn up. When he finally arrived, God told Samuel to anoint David as the future king, and he did so in front of his brothers. What they made of it, we do not know but we do read in 1 Samuel 16:13 something very significant: "...and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward." I expect they all went back to whatever they had been doing before Samuel arrived but things were never the same again for David - the Spirit of the LORD was upon him. Have you had a spiritual life-changing experience? Was there a moment when you came to the Lord Jesus for salvation? Do you have the gift of God's Spirit dwelling in you? Do you have eternal life? If these have never happened to you and if you are not aware of these things I have just mentioned, please do think very seriously about them. God's salvation and all that accompanies it are what God wants for us all.

We don't know how long afterwards it was but we read in 1 Samuel 17 that the Philistines had made one of their customary attacks on Israel but this time with a difference. They had a champion, Goliath. This man was abnormally huge – over 9 feet tall. His armour weighed about 125 lbs or 57 kilos. I'm not sure how many of us could even lift such a weight, plus his other armour and his weapons, never mind walk about and fight in it all!

The Israelites and the Philistines faced each other across the Valley of Elah, probably about 11 miles south west of Jerusalem. Instead of the two armies fighting each other, Goliath would challenge the Israelites to put forward a champion of their own to fight him. He suggested that, if the Israelite killed him, the Philistines would be servants of the Israelites but if he, Goliath, won, then the Israelites would be servants of the Philistines. Such an arrangement seems a lot more sensible than hundreds or even thousands of both sides being killed but the idea did not appeal to the Israelites. Instead of rising to the challenge, we read that they were dismayed and greatly afraid. They had no one, no one at all. Not even Saul, a man head and shoulders above the rest, or his son Jonathan, a heroic warrior in his own right, could attempt to meet the Philistine giant. Goliath issued his challenge morning and evening for 40 days with the same result every time - the Israelites not only failed to put anyone forward, they actually ran away. There was a failure of nerve, a failure to trust in God for deliverance and a failure even to act imaginatively. Couldn't some of them have sneaked round the back and attacked the rear of the Philistines? Wasn't it all rather futile and boring? But both sides were stuck in the situation and there seemed no way out of it.

This reminds me of the situation humanity finds itself in. There has always been the struggle against sin and all the world's evils but no one has ever had any real answer. Efforts are made - religions, philosophy, codes of ethics, laws, wars against the bad guys (of course, the bad guys are always the ones on the other side), the United Nations, revolutions and all the rest but they never seem to work. Not only does the enemy or the main problem seem enormously big and unassailable, like Goliath, but there seem to be an awful lot of people like the Philistines actually backing him. And, worse, the material the reformers, philosophers and the rest have to work on is disappointing to say the least of it. Humanity is just not up to radical improvement or even doing what we all know is the right thing. So, after thousands of years, humanity is no further forward in combating evil. Not only is there evil around us but, worse, we find it within ourselves too.

At this point in the story, David turns up. Some time before, he had been given the job of playing his harp to Saul to soothe him when an evil spirit attacked him. David was very effective at this but he used to go home sometimes to feed his father's sheep. One of these occasions was during this stand-off with the Philistines and three of David's brothers were with Saul and the Israelite army. Jesse sent David to the army with food for them and their captain and to bring back news of them - no mobiles in those days. David rose early, always a sign in the Bible of someone taking things seriously and properly, left the sheep with a keeper, another sign of David's responsible attitude, and went off with, as far as I can work out, nearly enough grain to fill a 5 gallon drum, 10 loaves, and 10 cheeses for their captain.

He arrived at the camp just as the two armies had drawn up against each other yet again. He found his brothers and was talking to them when Goliath started his usual speech. All the Israelites ran away, dreadfully afraid. They told him what Saul had promised to anyone who killed Goliath - great riches, Saul's daughter and exemption from taxes. David's reaction, however, was different from that of the others. They were not at all lured by the prospect of such honours. In addition, they spoke of Goliath's defying Israel but David spoke of taking away the shame of Israel; he described Goliath disdainfully ("this uncircumcised Philistine") and said that Goliath had defied the armies of the living God. He wasn't frightened at all as the others were and was only interested in what was going to be done about the shameful situation. We can see how that he saw things not only from the natural and patriotic point of view but also from a spiritual one. It was not just Israel's armies that were being defied but, in David's eyes, the armies of the living God. David already knew that God was not just Israel's God but the living God, in contrast to the dead idols of the nations.

David repeated this to others, despite Eliab his older brother's unjustified accusation that he had come to see the battle and had just left the sheep alone in the wilderness. We can see now that, for all Eliab's impressive appearance, he was no better than the rest when it came to a crisis. The Spirit of the LORD had definitely not come on Eliab or any of the rest of the Israelites. God had seen his heart. What is truly in our hearts is found out sooner or later.

News of David's bold words got back to Saul, who sent for him. David was very upbeat - "Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine," he said to Saul. Saul responded that David wasn't able to fight the Philistine because he was only a youth and Goliath was an experienced fighter. David was unabashed; he had a track record of dealing with difficulties. When a lion or a bear had taken a lamb from his father's flock, David had simply gone for these large and violent predators, seized them and killed them. I'm not sure that if I was confronted by a lion, I would just grab its mane and hit it. I've never tried but I feel there's a bit more to it than that!

And, of course, there was a bit more to it than that. David first of all had unusual audacity and, obviously, no apparent fear of failure. But there was more again. He attributed his success to God. This should not surprise us because of what we read earlier; the Spirit of the LORD had come upon him from the day he had been anointed. The result was

that he had had experience of what God could do and what He could rescue him from, not just once, but at least twice. He also knew that he could depend upon God for any future problems.

This is important for what happened next. Saul saw that there was no stopping David, and in any case, Saul was very short of volunteers, and so he said, "Go, and the LORD be with you!" He then clothed David with his armour and sword but David declined them because he hadn't proved them. It's doubtful whether David could have worn them because Saul himself was unusually tall. His assumption that David needed his armour and weapons also illustrates Saul's lack of imagination; there was one way of fighting and only one way. It didn't work when facing an enemy like Goliath but Saul did not have any alternatives.

David took what he knew worked - his staff and his sling and most important, God's presence. Remember Psalm 23? "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." Thus equipped David selected his stones and ran towards Goliath in the name of the LORD.

Goliath was unimpressed. He was expecting a proper warrior and all he was getting was some kid with a stick. So he was rather rude and cursed David by his gods, and threatened to feed David to the scavenging birds and animals. David responded, not with curses but by saying that he came in the name of the LORD of hosts, and he threatened Goliath not just with death but with beheading, and the death of all the Philistine army.

And so it turned out, as you know. One stone from David's sling and Goliath was flat on his face, about to be decapitated with his own sword. His boasting, his pride in his size and prowess, his dependence on his pagan idols, his oversized weapons, and even the armour bearer all came to nothing in the event. The champion of the Philistines who had seemed so invincible and terrifying had died without a struggle at the hands, or rather the stone, of a youth he had despised. Actually, the fight was not so one-sided in Goliath's favour as had appeared and as Goliath had thought. His size was actually a disadvantage. He was just a lumbering hulk and the nimble teenager would have been difficult to engage with unless he had made a conventional attack. But David didn't. He stayed well out of Goliath's range. Inspired by God, he used the right tactic and doubtless it was God who ensured that the stone hit Goliath in exactly the right place with the right momentum behind it. David may have made it look easy but no one else could do it; they hadn't even thought of it.

The Philistines saw Goliath dead and their idols defeated, and they fled. The Israelites had a tremendous victory, chasing their enemies all the way back well into their home territory, but none of it would have happened without David.

It was the start of David's career as the man that God had appointed to be king – the man after His own heart; in fact, the greatest of Israel's kings. He had some very difficult patches when Saul was hunting him down (Saul did not take kindly to David's popularity and the fact that he was obviously going to be king in Saul's place) but it was all part of the preparation for his 40 years reign.

But what is the point of this incident in the Bible? The fact that it gets such a lot of detail when whole reigns of other kings of Israel, for example, are covered in only a few verses shows how important the start of David's life was, not only in the historical narrative of Israel, but in the purposes of God. For David was not only Israel's most important king, but he is also the ancestor of the Messiah, the anointed of God, our Lord Jesus Christ.

There are several important parallels between David and his greater Son. David was sent by his father to see how his brothers were and to take them food. God the Father sent His Son to be our Saviour and to reveal God as Father to us. David had a completely different and spiritual view of the situation and only he could provide the answer and carry it out perfectly. In fact, David was the answer to Israel's dilemma and powerlessness. Even more so, the Lord Jesus is the complete answer to humanity's Goliath - sin, death, hell and Satan. Only the Lord Jesus can provide this salvation for us. In addition, David was taking a tremendous risk; the fate of Israel was his responsibility. One mistake and the nation would have been in dire and tragic trouble. Even more so, humanity's fate and indeed that of the universe rested with Christ. If His death on the cross had failed or He had not risen from the dead, there would have been no hope at all for humanity. Our eternal doom would have been sealed. But both Jesus and David succeeded wonderfully.

The conventional methods of coping with humanity's sin and failure, and trying to improve humanity - rules, laws, religion, doing our best, hoping that God will let us into heaven on the judgment day - none of those will work. Our normal attitudes towards these matters are as useless as the Israelites' tactics for handling the threat posed by Goliath. The conventional methods won't work but people stick to them because they won't accept the alternative the Lord Jesus provides.

Repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus and in His sacrifice on the Cross will save us from the wrath to come and make us fit for God's presence. But how can a man's death by crucifixion about 2,000 years ago be of any use? How could a teenager with only a sling and a stone defeat the invincible? Well, he could and he did. In a much more marvellous way, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus have won the victory for us. Like the Israelites, we have now only to follow up in our lives our Saviour's triumph over our spiritual enemies. The Lord Jesus not only causes our past to be forgiven but opens up to us God's eternal heavenly glory. In addition, during our lives here in this world, we experience God's Fatherly love and care for us.

Now this is where there is no parallel with David's achievement. His victory did not lead to the Philistines' being permanently defeated. Far from it; they were a problem to Israel for quite some time afterwards. Indeed, the Philistines killed Saul in battle on Mount Gilboa years after this incident and David still had to deal with them at the beginning of his reign. In any case, David was only a normal man and what he did only benefited Israel. Of course, his confidence in God is a great example for us today. We, too, can do exploits for God in the power of His Spirit, especially if we see things from a spiritual point of view in the light of the Bible and have David's appreciation of God's power and what is due to Him, and see what is possible rather than only see the problems. However, what the Lord Jesus has done is of universal, indeed, cosmic significance reaching far beyond Israel and even the confines of this world.

As this broadcast draws to a close, let me ask you, has the Lord Jesus' victory affected you as much as David's did the Israel of his day? Is He your Saviour and Lord? Have you experienced His victory for yourself? I do hope so. Do you obey God as Samuel did or disobey like Saul? Have you David's confidence in God and a readiness to serve Him and do great things in His Name?

Let's take to heart these important lessons from David's encounter with Goliath.

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