

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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HOW TO SLAY A GIANT

1 Samuel 17

When you think of famous battles in history, what comes to mind? Perhaps Gettysburg. Or Yorktown. The Battle of the Bulge. The Allied invasion of Normandy on D-Day. Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. Or the conquest of Jericho by Joshua and the people of Israel. If you're a sports fan, maybe you think of the "Thrilla in Manila," the heavyweight championship boxing match between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier. Or any of the Super Bowls won by the Washington Redskins.

Perhaps the best known and most famous battle in history was fought not between two armies or two teams, but between two individuals – a young shepherd boy named David (who was no more than a teenager) and a towering giant named Goliath. The story of David and Goliath continues to amaze and to inspire some 3,000 years after it took place in the Valley of Elah.

By the way, there is a recently-released movie (2007) titled *In the Valley of Elah*. It is a contemporary story, dealing with the death of an American soldier who has recently returned to the U. S. from the war in Iraq. On the movie's official web site, there is a brief narrative of the biblical story of David and Goliath, which is found in 1 Samuel 17. At the end of the narrative on the web site, it says: "What the Bible does not tell us is how many boys the king sent into the valley (to fight Goliath) before (David)."

I beg to disagree. Actually, the Bible makes it quite clear that for 40 days, morning and evening, the Philistine champion shouted out his challenge and his taunts to the army of Israel, and no one from King Saul down to the lowliest private had the courage to step forward to go mano-a-mano with Goliath. No one, that is, until David said: "I will go and fight him" (17:32).

Let's look at what the Bible says in 1 Samuel 17. I'm going to read verses 1-11, 24-26, and 32-51. Hear the Word of God.

It is a remarkable story, isn't it? The story is seared into our cultural consciousness, even if our culture has forgotten or lost sight of the role God played in David's triumph over the giant. Still, it is not unusual to think of David and Goliath when "the little guy" takes on the big corporation or the government itself in seeking the redress of grievances. Or, in sports, where a contest appears to be a mismatch, it is often framed in the context of "David vs. Goliath." Take *Hoosiers*, for example, the 1986 movie about a high school basketball team from the small town of Hickory, Indiana going up against the big city powerhouse in the state championship game. Just before they take the floor for the championship game, a pastor reminds the team from Hickory of how David took those five smooth stones from the stream and, with one shot from his sling, slew the giant.

Hickory then went out and did the unthinkable. They beat Goliath. They won the state championship. Even this week, I can imagine some in the sports world will view next Sunday's Super Bowl as a David versus Goliath contest, with the underdog New York Giants, ironically enough, cast as David against the undefeated and seemingly invincible Goliath of the New England Patriots. In case you're wondering, I'm not making any predictions.

In 1 Samuel 17, we see that Goliath has come out to challenge and strike terror into the hearts of the army of Saul for 40 consecutive days, twice each day. And he did just that – he struck terror into their hearts. The whole army, including King Saul, was paralyzed with fear. They were intimidated and incapacitated by fear of the giant. And with good reason, at least from a human perspective. Goliath stood more than nine feet tall (17:4). To be more precise, he was about 9'9" in height. NBA star Shaquille O'Neal is huge. He goes about 7'1" tall and weighs around 350 pounds. Yao Ming is the tallest player in the NBA. He is 7'6" tall. Most of us would look tiny next to them. But here is a giant of a man who is more than two feet taller than even Yao Ming! The Bible does not tell us how much Goliath weighed, but it does say that the coat of armor he wore weighed about 125 pounds, not counting the bronze helmet he wore or the bronze armor he wore on his legs. The point of his spear alone weighed about 15 pounds. Who wouldn't be intimidated in the face of such a foe?

The most likely person to step up and fight against Goliath would have been Saul. Not only was he the king and leader of the army of Israel, he was a head taller than everybody else (1 Samuel 10:23). He was the tallest and the most battle-tested man in Israel. But Saul was just as frightened of Goliath as were his men. Though Saul had been chosen by God to be Israel's first king, the Spirit of the Lord had departed from him as a result of his disobedience and lack of faith in God, and the blessing of God was no longer upon him. His own fear of Goliath not only paralyzed him as a leader, it spread like a virus and infected his men so that they lost their confidence.

Fear itself can be an imposing giant in your life. It could be the fear of failure or the fear of rejection. It could be the fear of suffering or the fear of some kind of loss. Or it could be the fear of the unknown. The fear of what might happen or what may await us around the next turn. Fear, someone has said, makes cowards of us all. It can, if we let it. If we allow our fears to control us or to incapacitate us.

It happened to Saul and his army. But not to David. David had been sent to the front by his father, not to join Saul's army, but to take provisions to his three oldest brothers – Eliab, Abinadab, and Shammah – who were serving in the army. David was to see how his brothers were doing and then report back to his father concerning their well being. As David was visiting with his brothers, out came Goliath once again to issue his challenge. It was day 41. While the whole army of Israel was overwhelmed with fear and discouragement, David said: "Who does this pagan, this uncircumcised Philistine think he is? How dare he defy the armies of the living God?" (17:26)

David understood that Goliath was not just taunting Saul and the army of Israel. He was taunting God. He was blaspheming the very God of the universe. David was neither impressed nor intimidated by the giant. The only giant in David's life was God. As far as he was concerned, no matter how big or strong or great the giant might be, God was (and is) greater still. No matter how powerful the giant may be, God is not only more powerful, He is all-powerful. Omnipotent. (Swindoll, pp. 36, 43).

So David, a mere teenager, too young to serve in the army of Israel, stepped forward and said to the king: "I will go and fight him" (17:32). Saul may have had to stifle a laugh as David volunteered for duty. Send out a boy? One who has no experience in battle? Out of the question. Later on, when David did go out to meet Goliath, the giant took it as an insult that the army of Israel would send out a mere lad to do battle with him (17:42-44). Insulted that Israel would not send out someone more experienced, someone more qualified, someone who *might* be able to make it at least remotely interesting. He expected a *man*, not a boy to come out to fight him.

But David made his case to Saul. He told the king how the Lord had enabled him to kill both a lion and a bear. And he made this declaration of faith to Saul in verses 36 and 37: "Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

What was it that gave David confidence to face the giant when the whole army was cowering in fear? It was the object of his confidence that made all the difference. David's confidence was not in his own ability or strength. Nor was it in his personal track record of success in killing the lion and the bear. It was not self-confidence but God-confidence. It was his confidence in the presence and unrivaled power of God. Though he went out to face Goliath with only his shepherd's staff, his sling and five smooth stones, David had a hidden weapon, a weapon the giant could neither see nor understand. That hidden weapon was his confidence in the true and living God. And that confidence gave him a holy boldness as he confronted the enemy.

Listen again to what David said to Goliath in verses 45-47 as they faced each other in the valley of Elah: "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty (Yahweh Shaddai), the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, 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."

You're going down, big guy. And it is not because I (David) am so great. It is not because of me. It is because of God and His greatness. He is the One who will do it.

Because of his confidence in the power and faithfulness of God, David exhibited no fear of Goliath. He exhibited no fear of failure.

Big Fish is the name of a wonderfully entertaining movie about a man from a small town in Alabama, a man named Edward Bloom, who loved to tell stories – wild stories – to entertain his young son at bedtime. One of the stories he told was about the time a giant invaded Ashton, causing a panic among the townspeople. The residents of the little town feared for their lives as this monster ate their livestock and wreaked havoc in the town. Because Edward Bloom had had an experience as a boy that allowed him to see that he would not die until he was well up there in years, he stepped forward and volunteered to confront the giant on behalf of the town.

An angry, frightened crowd had gathered around the mayor in the town square. The mayor motions for quiet and says: “Calm down! Just calm down!”

One person calls out: “Mr. Mayor, he ate an entire cornfield.”

A little girl adds: “He ate my dog.”

Another person pipes up: “If you’re not going to stop him, Mayor, we will.”

To which the mayor responds: “I won’t have mob violence in this town. Has someone tried talking to him?”

“You can’t reason with him,” says a voice in the crowd.

“He’s a monster,” adds another.

From the back of the crowd comes another voice. “I’ll do it,” says Edward Bloom with confidence as he makes his way through the parting crowd to the mayor. “I’ll talk to him and see if I can get him to move on.”

The mayor replies: “Son, that creature could crush you without trying.”

“Trust me,” says Edward. “He’ll have to try.”

We then see Edward walking toward a cave along the riverbank outside of town. He calls out to the giant, introducing himself. The giant repeatedly tells Edward to go away, but Edward doesn’t. He persists in wanting to talk. Finally, a shaggy-haired, 10-foot-tall giant appears. Edward begins to throw rocks at the intimidating creature.

In a voice over, we hear Edward explain why he is willing to face danger: “Armed with the foreknowledge of my own death, I knew the giant couldn’t kill me. At the same time I preferred to keep my bones unbroken.”

After boldly confronting and challenging the giant, Edward is able to befriend the giant and to persuade him to leave, bringing peace to the town.

David, so far as we know, had not been given a vision of his death or when it might occur. But David did have this memory and this assurance to rest upon as he went out to face Goliath. Not only did he have confidence in the sufficiency of God's power – a power that far exceeded that of this towering giant. David also had confidence in the trustworthiness of God's promises. He had been anointed in the name of the Lord by Samuel. He had been chosen and set apart to be the future king of Israel. I'm convinced David was convinced he had nothing to fear from Goliath, because God, who is forever faithful, had told him he would be king. Knowing his future was safe in God's hands gave him confidence and courage to go out and face the giant head-on.

And face him head-on he did. He still had to face the giant. And Goliath was an imposing presence. But David's eyes were not fixed on the giant before him. His eyes were fixed on the Lord. And David knew this battle was not his, it was the Lord's (verse 47). So, undaunted by fear of the giant – and undaunted by the giant of fear – David ran quickly toward the Philistine champion and struck him right between the eyes with a single stone from his sling shot. It was the only uncovered, unprotected part of the giant's body. David's aim was perfect. I can imagine the late Howard Cosell, if he had been there to call the action, shouting into his microphone: "Down goes Goliath! Down goes Goliath!" (Maybe I'm the only one who can imagine it.)

"So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him" (17:50). To make sure Goliath was dead, David took the giant's sword from its sheath and used it to cut off his enemy's head.

What lessons can we learn for our lives today from this old, old story?

We can see, first of all, that David's faith was greater than his foe. The Bible says in 1 John 5:4: "This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith." That faith that overcomes the world is not some kind of generic faith in faith. It is not faith in some false god who is powerless and unable to deliver on promises made in his name. The faith that overcomes the world is trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God and the Savior of sinners. It is faith in the one, true, living God and His sovereign power. It was this faith, this confidence in God, in the sufficiency of His power and the trustworthiness of His word, that gave David victory over his foe. Faith, said Martyn Lloyd-Jones, is a refusal to panic. When facing the giant, David refused to panic. His faith in the Lord was greater than his foe. And that is the key to victory for us, as well, whatever may be the giant in your life or mine.

Second, we can see that David's God was greater than the giant he faced. David did not fear his foe because he knew God was greater than Goliath. Saul and his army made the mistake of thinking the giant was greater or more powerful than God. They thought God was impotent in the face of this towering giant. They thought victory over Goliath was

impossible. Not David. He knew God. He knew God was greater than the giant. And he acted on the basis of what he knew to be true.

I don't know what the giant (or giants) may be in your life today. But, as Max Lucado has written: "Goliaths still roam our world. Debt. Disaster. Dialysis. Danger. Deceit. Disease. Depression. Super-size challenges still swagger and strut, still pilfer sleep and embezzle peace and liposuction joy." The Goliath in your life may be financial worries or a dead-end job or unemployment. The giant in your life may be fear – fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of being abandoned, fear of being alone. It may be the giant of impossible expectations or a dysfunctional family. It may be an addiction of some kind. It may be a difficult person or a marriage on the ropes. It may be some unresolved guilt from the past.

Whatever it may be in your life, when you measure the size of that giant against the size of your own strength and your ability to overcome it, it can be terribly discouraging. You can feel overwhelmed and defeated even before the battle begins. But that is because we look to the wrong place for the power we need.

If, on the other hand, you measure the size of your giant against the size of God, you can face the giant in your life with confidence. The way David did. As Bible teacher Beth Moore points out, this is not to say that our battle will be effortless if we measure our giant against God and His greatness. David still had to face Goliath in battle. He still had to use the strength and skill God had given him. But his confidence was in God. And God, in His grace and power, gave David the victory.

Your battle may require great effort and discipline and perseverance. Great faith. Maybe even great risk. And God may not give you victory over your giant instantaneously. But He is able to give you victory one day at a time. One hour at a time. One moment at a time.

One last thought. Notice that David did not run away from the giant when the moment of truth arrived. He ran *toward* him. He faced the giant head-on. That takes courage. And the courage we need comes from God. Harry Emerson Fosdick was an influential theological liberal in the 1920s and 30s who got a lot of things wrong. His theology was woefully inadequate. But Fosdick got this right. He wrote a hymn I love, which includes this prayer: "Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, for the facing of this hour."

For the facing of this (and every) hour, and for facing the giants in our lives, we need wisdom and courage that only God can give. May His wisdom and courage – and grace and power – abound to us as we seek to slay the giants in our lives. To the glory of His name. Amen.