

“Above Reproach: Fighting for God’s Name”

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You so much for the gift of Your Word, where we hear the great stories of the heroes of the faith—and also the great power You have to work in and through Your people, and especially through Your Son, Jesus, in the calming of the storm. We ask that You would calm our hearts and help us to be attentive to Your Word. May the ministry and preaching of Your Word truly be Your Word—for the sake and glory of Your Son, Jesus. In His name we pray, Amen.

So we’ve come in our series on 1 Samuel to one of the most familiar passages in the book: the story of David and Goliath. It’s not just a beloved Sunday school story—it’s one that our culture has embraced over the years, particularly in American culture, where we love the image of the underdog triumphing over the giant.

We often hear, in sports for example, “It’s a David and Goliath story!”—a small, unexpected team beats a giant, like, say, the University of Alabama. (Not that I don’t like Alabama—go Gators!)

But if that’s the way we interpret the David and Goliath story—simply as “big guy bad, small guy good”—then we’re missing the point entirely. Sometimes it’s good to revisit these familiar stories and reflect more deeply on what they’re really about.

One of the key words repeated throughout 1 Samuel 17 is “defy,” or “reproach,” or “disgrace”—all variations of the same Hebrew word: harap. It means to reproach, mock, deride, or insult.

Let me give you just a few examples:

- In verse 10, Goliath says, “I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together.” That word “defy” could also be translated “reproach.”
- In verse 25, the men of Israel say, “Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel.”
- David responds, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel?”—again, referring to Goliath as the one who defies the armies of the living God.
- In verse 45, David says to Goliath, “You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.”

Goliath is mocking Israel. He is disgracing not only Israel and its king but also, by extension, Israel’s God.

David uses this same word in Psalm 31—a psalm that became meaningful to me during the bishop process—when he writes, “Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach, especially to my neighbors, an object of dread to my acquaintances.” And in the church, we say that a person seeking holy orders—bishop, priest, or deacon—must be “above reproach.”

So what does this word reproach mean? It has to do with how others perceive you. Goliath was actively lowering the name and reputation of Israel, undermining their honor among the nations, and insulting their God.

This is the heart of the conflict in 1 Samuel 17—and David is the one who sees it clearly and refuses to tolerate it. He will not allow the name of the Lord his God to be dishonored. That’s what sets David apart from Saul. David is concerned with the name and honor of the Lord; Saul is concerned with his own name.

This is the real challenge the story presents to our culture today. We have misused stories like David and Goliath to justify rebellion against all forms of power or leadership, claiming that anyone tall, powerful, privileged, or successful must be bad—and that those who are small, weak, or marginalized must be good. That kind of simplistic reversal of power is a form of neo-Marxism that sets society against itself.

But David and Goliath is not about that. The real opposition here is not between big and small—it’s between those who make a name for God and those who make a name for themselves.

The key to understanding this story lies in the previous chapter. When Samuel goes to anoint a new king to replace Saul, Jesse’s sons are paraded before him. Samuel sees Eliab and says, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is before me,” because Eliab is tall and kingly-looking. But God says, “Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. The Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

Earlier, Saul had been described as a head taller than anyone else in Israel—a physically impressive figure. But now Saul is afraid to face Goliath, who is nine to ten feet tall, covered in 125 pounds of armor, and wielding a spear with a 15-pound iron tip. Saul, once considered great by worldly standards, is now reduced to fear.

Why? Because Saul’s heart is weak. He measures everything externally.

Rabbi Edwin Friedman, in his book *Failure of Nerve*, identifies three emotional prerequisites for terrorism (which can apply broadly to breakdowns in leadership):

1. A failure of nerve at the top—weak leadership.
2. A vulnerability that the aggressor can exploit.
3. An unreasonable faith in being reasonable.

Saul exhibits all three. He has no nerve, is deeply vulnerable, and responds to crisis with fearful reasoning instead of bold conviction.

David, by contrast, is filled with courage—not because he is small, but because he knows the Lord. He remembers God’s faithfulness:

“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.”

David refuses Saul’s armor because he doesn’t need external strength—he has inner strength shaped by God’s Spirit.

When Goliath mocks him—“Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?”—David responds with holy boldness:

“This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand... that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord’s.”

David’s confidence is not in himself—it is in God.

And that’s precisely what our culture gets wrong. We’re told, “Believe in yourself.” But David believes in God. Stature—whether physical, political, or cultural—is meaningless compared to the strength of the Lord.

This is the same point Paul makes in 2 Corinthians. The Corinthians were enamored with “super-apostles”—eloquent, impressive people. But Paul reminds them:

“Do not receive the grace of God in vain... We put no obstacle in anyone’s way... as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, afflictions, hardships... but also through purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, genuine love, and the power of God.”

Paul’s strength is not external, but spiritual. He continues:

“We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and see—we are alive... as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.”

Like David, Paul rejects worldly credentials. What matters is God's salvation and God's power.

We live in a time where people seek to make a name for themselves—sometimes by boasting in power, and sometimes by claiming victimhood. But neither posture is from the Lord. What matters is this: Are we living to make a name for God? Are we operating in the strength of His gospel?

That is what the story of David and Goliath calls us to.

Not to believe in ourselves, but to believe in the God who delivers.