

And the Winner Is...

1 Samuel 17:38-58

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June 24, 2018

It is often described as the greatest upset in sports history. As the season began, the odds makers said this team had one chance in a thousand to win the coveted gold medal. Yet, there they were in the semi-final game, the U.S. Men's Olympic Hockey Team facing the mighty Soviet National Team, which had won the gold medal in five of the previous six Olympic competitions.

It was a group of college students and some other amateur players, many with Iron Range connections, facing the giants of the sport, a team of professionals that routinely dominated its opponents. It would truly take a miracle for Team USA to win. Even many of the most loyal fans were simply hoping the game was not an embarrassing blow-out!

Yet, on February 22, 1980, before 8,500 fans at Lake Placid, NY, Team USA defeated the Soviet Union by a score of 4-3. Two days later, they would win the gold medal with a 4-2 victory over Finland. Sportscaster Jim McKay said the USA win over the Soviet team was like a group of Canadian college football players beating the Pittsburgh Steelers, the then defending Super Bowl champs.

The game is known as "The Miracle on Ice," partly because in the closing seconds, announcer Al Michaels shouted, "Do you believe in miracles?" And responded with a resounding, "Yes!"

Well folks, the stories of victorious underdogs, especially those who defeat evil giants, have captured the minds and hearts of people for a long time. That is part of the reason why our text today is a favorite Bible story of many.

Our journey through the book of 1 Samuel brings us today to chapter 17 (page 240 in the pew Bibles). Here we explore the account of David and Goliath.

As many of you know, David is a young shepherd boy facing a huge, skilled veteran warrior in a one-on-one battle. David is the clear underdog. Vegas would have given him, at best, a 1 in a 1000

chance to prevail. Yet, that day, David won a victory that has inspired and encouraged people for 3,000 years.

However, like with many of the Old Testament Bible stories, we often have only a fuzzy recollection of what actually occurred in this battle between David and Goliath. And we frequently miss out on some important things God wants to say to us through this portion of his word.

Let's pause and pray the Lord would give us fresh and deeper understanding of this passage which will both encourage and challenge our minds and hearts.

Last week, we explored the first 37 verses of this chapter and saw that the Israelite army is facing the army of the Philistines, who have moved deep into Israelite territory.

A giant warrior, Goliath, has issued a challenge. Rather than having a conventional battle, he wants a one-on-one dual. The giant says, "You send out your best warrior, and if he beats me, if he kills me, our entire army will surrender and become your slaves. *But, if I kill him, you will be our slaves.*"

The entire army of Israel is paralyzed. No one dares to fight this giant warrior, who is arrayed in the finest battle gear anyone in the ancient world could imagine. It seems like a kamikaze mission that would result in a sure Philistine victory.

There is, however, a 13-14 year old shepherd boy visiting his brothers on the battlefield. And when he hears Goliath ridiculing Israel and the God of Israel, he steps forward and says, "I'll do it. I will fight the giant."

This is, however, not really an ordinary shepherd boy. This is David, the young man that Samuel has anointed as the next king of Israel and a young man the Lord has already enabled to kill bears and lions with his bare hands as he defended his flock of sheep. Oh, it still looks like suicide to take on the giant, but there are already

hints of hope. So, David volunteers to take on the giant Philistine warrior.

1 Samuel 17:38 – Then Saul had his own military clothes put on David. He put a bronze helmet on David’s head and had him put on armor.

This is an important verse in the chapter. Saul, the reigning king, the political and military leader, a man described as “a head taller” than anyone else in Israel, the closest thing to a giant warrior Israel has, is unwilling to go into battle against Goliath. He is willing, however, to help the little shepherd boy, David, prepare for battle.

It seems that, in many ways, David is already the new king, although Saul would do everything he can to hang onto that title in the chapters ahead. David, unsurprisingly finds the armor way too big for him, so he takes it off.

1 Samuel 17:40 – Instead, he took his staff in his hand and chose five smooth stones from the wadi and put them in the pouch, in his shepherd’s bag. Then, with his sling in his hand, he approached the Philistine.

The wadi is a stream or creek that was dry, except during the rainy season. The sling is not the “Y-shaped” slingshot many of us used as kids. It was two cords of rope with a pouch in the middle. A stone or other projectile would be placed in the pouch. The “slinger” would swing the weapon around and then let go of one end of the rope, launching what was in the pouch. In the ancient world, this is not a toy, but a real weapon. A skilled slinger could be very accurate and effective in battle.

1 Samuel 17:42-43a – When the Philistine looked and saw David, he despised him because he was just a youth, healthy and handsome. He said to David, “Am I a dog that you come against me with sticks...

Now, a few versions add:

...and stones?” And David said, “No! Worse than a dog!”

That maybe sounds cool, but I don’t think that is what the text originally said. For one thing, Goliath likely does not even see David’s sling and

stones, but only his staff which would be a totally ineffective weapon against the heavily armed giant.

1 Samuel 17:43b-44 – Then he (Goliath) cursed David by his gods (probably Dagon and Ashteroth). “Come here,” the Philistine called to David, “and I’ll give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts!”

For an Israelite, being deprived of burial and becoming food for birds and beasts was seen as worse than death itself. The odds seem to be heavily against David, and now he is being ridiculed for even daring to accept the giant’s challenge.

Yet, David is not intimidated. He still has that God-confidence we talked about last week.

1 Samuel 17:45 – David said to the Philistine: “You come against me with a sword, spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD of Armies, the God of the ranks of Israel – you have defied him.”

Friends, who is really the underdog here? Goliath is not fighting against a shepherd boy, nor even against the army of Israel. He is going to be fighting the Lord God himself! The odds may seem to be in Goliath’s favor, but are really a zillion to one against him!

Of course, neither he, nor any of the other Philistines, nor anyone in the army of Israel realizes this. It seems that David alone knows what is really going on. He now tells Goliath and the assembled armies and us what is about to happen.

1 Samuel 17:46-47 – “Today the LORD will hand you over to me. Today, I’ll strike you down, remove your head, and give the corpses of the Philistine camp to the birds of the sky and the wild creatures of the earth. Then all the world will know that Israel has a God, and this whole assembly will know that it is not by sword or by spear that the LORD saves, for the battle is the LORD’s. He will hand you over to us.”

Wow! That is quite a battlefield speech! William Wallace in Braveheart, Winston Churchill before the Battle of Britain or Aragorn at the Black Gate

(The Lord of the Rings) did not put it better than young David.

Try to imagine the scene. Two armies with thousands of troops silently facing each other, and the shepherd boy David shouting to the giant Goliath...

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At that point, there should have been loud cheers from the lines of Israelite soldiers. But apparently, there was silence. And if Goliath would have been wise, he would have surrendered right then and there. But he didn’t.

1 Samuel 17:48-49 – The Philistine started forward to attack him. David ran quickly to the battle line to meet the Philistine. David put his hand in the bag, took out a stone, slung it, and hit the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown to the ground.

Friends, that is the description of the battle. It didn’t last very long. And it doesn’t seem like anything really miraculous happened. Being hit in the forehead by a stone traveling at a high velocity could kill anyone, even Goliath. David luckily was a skilled slinger, so it wasn’t just a lucky shot.

Yet, I believe the Lord was guiding that stone from the moment it left David’s sling until it sunk into Goliath’s forehead. The Lord was the one who defeated the giant Philistine, using whatever skills David had to accomplish his purpose. The summary of what happened is in...

1 Samuel 17:50 – David defeated the Philistine with a sling and a stone. David overpowered the Philistine and killed him without having a sword.

Amazing! Though the odds had seemed overwhelming against David, he has won a great victory. And then the writer tells us...

1 Samuel 17:51a – David ran and stood over him. He grabbed the Philistine’s sword, pulled it from its sheath, and used it to kill him.

It seems the stone had knocked Goliath out. David then kills the giant with his own sword.

1 Samuel 17:51b – Then David cut off his head. When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they fled.

Through David, the army of Israel is victorious. And finally, they begin to demonstrate a little courage and start acting like soldiers.

1 Samuel 17:52a – The men of Israel and Judah rallied, shouting their battle cry, and chased the Philistines.

They apparently killed some of them and looted where the army had been camped.

1 Samuel 17:54 – David took Goliath’s head and brought it to Jerusalem, but he put Goliath’s weapons in his own tent.

This is all pretty gruesome, and these details are usually left out of the Sunday School version of the story, but this is normal for ancient warfare.

The chapter closes with a kind of puzzling incident with Saul trying to figure out who David’s father is. Apparently, he wants to reward David’s family, as he had promised. Also, it is likely that Saul is asking David’s background, his family and social status, so that he can ask David’s father to allow his son to serve permanently in his court.

Playing the lyre or small harp for the king was something David had done in his spare time. Now, however, after this victory over the Philistine giant, Saul wants David to be with him all the time. Of course, as we will see in the next chapters, this relationship between Saul and David, the old king and the new king, will be very strained and very complicated.

Okay, that's the story of the battle between David and Goliath, the true story, the biblical version. I also fear that many sermons and lessons kind of miss the main point of this passage. I remember hearing a sermon about why David took five stones from the creek, when apparently he only needed one to kill Goliath. Folks, maybe that seems like an interesting question, but the stones are hardly what the passage is about.

One theme which is often the focus when this passage is discussed is that we, as Christians, should seek to imitate David. We should have the courage to stand up and fight the giants we face. Whether it is a disease, earning a degree, financial hardship, or recovering from a broken relationship, like David, we need to have courage to face these challenges and defeat them with the strength the Lord gives us. Well, almost...but not quite!

As Tim Chester writes in his commentary: *It is perhaps tempting to think we are called to be like David, going into battle against the giants that plague our lives. It's a dangerous temptation. If this encourages you to take on a local bully, you may find that the outcome will persuade you to adopt an alternative interpretation.*

Friends, it is important to realize that it was not really David who defeated Goliath that day. Oh yes, the stone that hit Goliath in the head flew from his sling. And he was the one who used Goliath's sword to kill him.

However, David understood that he did not win the battle for Israel that day. The Lord did! David did not even save his own life. It was the Lord! Remember what he said as he was about to engage Goliath...

1 Samuel 17:46b-47 – Then all the world will know that Israel has a God, and this whole assembly will know that it is not by sword of by spear that the LORD saves (or even by a sling), for the battle is the LORD's.

David is not the Savior. The Lord is!

Friends, that is a truth that would be good for us to ponder. All too often, we make the mistake of thinking we can be our own savior or that another human being can be our savior or that

some other thing can save us. That happens in a variety of situations.

I think of Jane. You don't know her, but she is 32 years old, still young, but because she is still single, she feels she's getting old. More than anything, she wants to find a man, a good man who will marry her. She doesn't know who this will be, but this man will be her savior, saving her from what she has come to see as an empty life of singleness.

Or there is Joe. Again, you don't know him. He has been working so hard at his job this past year. He so badly wants that promotion at work. He is convinced that if he gets it and the 30% raise that goes along with it, then everything in his life will come together. That new job will be his savior.

Oh friends, there are all sorts of people and things out there that we think can save us: Money, a spouse, a political leader, success in a career, a new house or car, children that love and appreciate us, winning a championship, a good report from the doctor. Friends, all of these things are great, but they are false and inadequate saviors.

Friends, there is nothing wrong with desiring, working for, or enjoying good things in life. But, when you count on those things to be your savior, when you look to them to do for you what only Jesus can do for you, you are making a big mistake.

In the New Morning Mercies devotional a couple of weeks ago, Paul Tripp points out that this is especially true in our relationships with those around us.

He writes: *If you hook the hope of your heart to the people around you, you will always be disappointed. No one is able to be your personal Messiah.*

Oh yes, we should be thankful for these people. We should love these people. We should cherish our time with these people. We should seek to serve these people. But we must not look to them to provide for us what only the Lord can provide.

Tripp goes on to say: *There are many, many Christian relationships that are hurtful, painful, and marked by conflict and disappointment because the people in those relationships are*

placing a burden on those relationships that no human relationship can bear.

Friends, it is only the Lord Jesus who can be the source of our identity, the basis for our happiness, the carrier of our hope. Only he can give us a reason to get up in the morning and keep going when life is tough. Only he can change us from the inside out, redeem our past, and atone for wrongs we have done. It is only the Lord who can provide real peace and rest for our hearts.

And Tripp says when we ask another human being to do those things for us, it is like requiring that person to be a fourth member of the Holy Trinity and then being disappointed when he/she falls short.

Friends, relationships we have with other people, horizontal relationships, are wonderful. Yet, the key to real joy, the key to healthy relationships with other people is that vertical relationship we have with God through Jesus Christ.

Friends, I often talk about how the gospel, the salvation the Lord Jesus provides through his death and resurrection, impacts every aspect of our lives, especially our relationships. At weddings, I remind couples that their common faith in Jesus Christ enables them to forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven them.

I remind them that because we have received so much from the Lord, we can be generous in giving to our spouse. Yet, I also need to tell them, the gospel should also prevent you from having unrealistic expectations of your spouse. That is not a message that is easy to hear when you are about to make your wedding vows because usually you are madly in love with that other person and you do tend to think they might be the fourth member of the trinity. But a healthy marriage depends on realistic expectations of each other, or there will be consistent disappointment and frustration.

Tripp concludes the devotional with these words: *Could it be the disappointment you experience in your relationships is the product of unrealistic and unattainable expectations? Could it be that you ask another person to do for you what only God can do? There is but one Savior, and He is yours forever.*

You don't need to put that burden on the person next to you.

Friends, the bottom line is that despite David's amazing victory over Goliath, it was not David, but the Lord, who saved Israel that day. He was the victor, the winner, the Savior that day.

Likewise, it is the Lord Jesus who has saved us. To place our ultimate trust, confidence and hope in anyone else is a horrible mistake. To worship anyone else is foolish.

By God's grace, may we look to the Lord Jesus and find our deepest needs met in him.