

A Big Man's Small Downfall

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 October 2005

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me. That's how to respond to a bully in the schoolyard.

That's what I remember being told when I was a little kid. When I was, well you can work it out whether I was the bully or the one being picked on. And just look at this story of David and Goliath.

Goliath, this great ogre, a taunter, a giant, the archetypal bully of the school ground of ancient Israel I guess. And his taunts and his names, they don't harm little David but he in fact in turn is slain by stone.

So the moral of the story of David and Goliath is don't be afraid of bullies because sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me. There are sermons on David and Goliath that in effect say just that.

It's a bit of twaddle really. It doesn't actually capture what David and Goliath is really about. Certainly one of the best known stories in the Bible, one of the ones that children learn at Sunday school these days and in older days as well.

[1 : 14] Yet a story I suspect that is not often properly understood. Is it really about dealing with bullies? Or is it perhaps telling us that brain is better than brawn because clever David knows how to get through to the giant with his stones.

So the cleverness of a thinker will bring down the thoughtless, big ogre, bully, physical rough guy. Some would say that's the moral of the story.

Or is it, as some others might say, the triumph of the little person over the great, big, mighty person. So here is encouragement if you're a little small business fighting against one of the great, big, super, international, multi-international companies or something.

If you're a little cafe owner and you've got McDonald's next door, here's the encouragement for you that the small might beat the big. Well there's hints of truth in that by way of this story but certainly that's far from the application.

Or maybe as some would say it's really telling us that physical armour is completely unimportant, it's the spiritual armour that you put on and David took off his physical armour, he put on spiritual armour and he won the battle. All of those interpretations though are fairly wide of a mark in the end.

[2 : 33] None of those views really comes to grips with what this story is all about. One of the difficulties is this is a story or to use a more technical term, a narrative.

That is it tells us what happened and somehow we've got to work out whether what happened is what ought to have happened or not and how do we determine that.

And when we read a story, what are the clues in the story to help us understand the meaning and how to interpret the story? Indeed, so much of the Bible is narrative. You see, in many ways it's easy to preach and understand and interpret the words of, say, the epistles in the New Testament.

When Paul says, you know, don't let the sun go down on your anger or love one another, well we know what that means. We know how to apply it. Well, maybe not in all its detail but the interpretation is fairly clear.

But when we come to a great big story like this, there's no simple command. There's no final verse that tells us the moral of the story is sticks and stones or the moral of the story is don't pick on someone in the school yard.

[3 : 39] There's nothing of that here. So we've got to find, how do we interpret this passage? What's it really on about? Ultimately, as I hope to show, it's on about the honour of God.

Goliath is the enemy, a giant and a ferocious enemy that has put fear amongst the whole of the army of Israel. We're told in verse 4 how tall he is and his height is six cubits and a span.

Now, imagine that if you wrote that on your passport application form, you'd probably get it sent back to you, six cubits and a span. It's about nine and a half feet, which is taller than any of us here and it's probably close to double the height of some who are here.

This is a person who'd be first pick for a basketball game. Well, if he was agile, I suppose, especially. Nine and a half feet. He's the Philistine champion, we're told in verse 4, from one of their cities, Gath, a city that we saw a few weeks ago in the early chapters of 1 Samuel, one of their five main cities.

It's as though he's the one who's won various battles to become kingpin of the Philistines, to become the key person to go out to battle. Maybe not the commander of the army, but their champion fighter.

[5 : 06] His armour is enormous, we're told in verses 5 to 7. We're told how many shekels it weighs of bronze, but in kilograms it's about 57 kilograms.

So it's almost three times your allowance on an international air flight or a normal one, unless you're in business class or something like that, I suppose. Not that I've ever flown business class. But anyway, that's a lot of luggage.

You may not easily pick up 57 kilograms in your hands. So here is a giant who is strong wearing significant armour. And he lays down in verses 8 to 10 the challenge to a duel.

Come on you Israelites, let's find someone who's going to take me on. And Israel, we're told in verse 11, was dismayed and greatly afraid.

The king and the people, they were terrified. Now we are meant to be overawed by the description of Goliath. You see, whenever in the Bible we get a description of somebody, and that's not all that often, it's there for a purpose.

[6 : 13] It's not just there so that children's Bible illustrators have got something to draw. It's there because the detail is important. That is, this man is big, he's strong, he's ferocious.

We're actually meant to be somewhat quivering when we think of the giant that is described in these early verses of this chapter. And in contrast to him, the giant is David, the youngest son of eight, perhaps still a teenager, a shepherd boy who runs errands for his father.

This is a kid really, hardly a grown man, let alone a giant, the equal of Goliath. And we're told in verses 17 to 22 where he's introduced that he comes from the town of Bethlehem, same one where Jesus is born, that's no accident of course because Jesus is born in David's town.

And that comes from a high country up the valley and well beyond, in effect, where this battle is going to be fought. What is needed to fight against Goliath?

In verse 8, we read of Goliath's words to the ranks of Israel, Choose a man for yourselves and let him come down to me.

[7 : 30] Verse 10, Give me a man that we may fight together. What does Goliath want by way of a competition?

He wants a man. The word is simple. It's the easy sort of word that you skip over when you read the narrative. But there it is in verse 8, again in verse 10, in verse 25, if you look further down, the Israelites said, Have you seen this man who has come up?

Surely he's come up to defy Israel. The king will greatly enrich the man who killed him and will give him his daughter and make his family free in Israel.

That is, the Israelites recognise that they need a man to fight against Goliath. But in the description of David, he's not a man.

He's a youth, a young boy almost, probably a teenager, maybe even a young teenager. So in verse 33, that picks up this contrast most clearly, King Saul said to David, You're not able to go up against this Philistine to fight with him for you are just a boy.

[8 : 39] That is, Goliath is demanding a man to fight against him. The Israelite army thinks they need a man to fight against him. The king will reward the man that fights against him and wins.

And here is David who is just a boy. And the same sort of hint of David's description comes later on as well in verse 42 and then later on at the end of the chapter.

He's an unlikely hero. He's an unexpected hero. Now maybe that's part of the appeal of the story of course. He's the underdog who triumphs.

This is the great rags to riches type story that Australians seem to love so much usually in the realms of sport. But the key to David's success is not that he's just a youth.

That is, we're meant to see this big contrast between might and weakness or human strength of the man giant Goliath and yet just a boy that fights against him.

[9 : 36] But that's not to draw attention in the end to David but to draw attention beyond David. Now one of the keys when you read a story especially in the scriptures but just generally as well to find out what are the clues here that give us the key to unlock the point of all this it's often the words that one of the characters say.

We don't get lots of dialogue in the scriptures. We don't get lots of speeches of people in narratives. There are some there and they're often very significant and they are here. David in this chapter speaks three times and each time he speaks his words are important for understanding the thrust of this story.

The first time he speaks is in verse 26. David said to the men who stood by him what shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel.

For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God? Notice how David describes Goliath not so much as a giant strong armoured person but as an uncircumcised Philistine.

That is he's opposed to God and God's people. The word uncircumcised he means it no doubt literally but Israel the people of God are circumcised at least the men are.

[11 : 04] That was part of the command of God to Abram way back in Genesis chapter 17. So to use the language of the enemy being uncircumcised makes it clear that this is not just a battle between two nations but a battle between the people of God and the enemies of God and the people of God.

So the issue is that Goliath is not just defying Israel he's defying God. That's the language that David uses to imply that and David here is not motivated by the reward.

He asks what will the king give the man who kills this Philistine but the end of his speech makes it clear that there is a more significant issue that is the defiance of God.

He's defying the armies of the living God the end of verse 26 says. That is in effect he's defying God. It's not even at the level of Philistines versus Israel it's at the level of God and the enemies of God and the character of God being in effect challenged.

So this little speech of David here adds a dimension to the story we must not overlook. That is the David and Goliath story is a story of enemies of God and God's people Israel but also David's speech here shows that this story is told against the people of Israel.

[12 : 34] They're fearful of the giant and David says at the end of verse 26 who's this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?

That is David's speech is almost rebuking the people of Israel their king and their army commanders saying who's this man to defy you? They see him as a giant and they're afraid David sees him merely as an uncircumcised man and therefore in opposition to God who's more powerful they say who's this man?

Who's he to defy the armies of the living God? Now the Philistines are long standing enemies of Israel those who are here in recent weeks when we looked at the first chapters of 1 Samuel we'll remember clearly from many of those chapters that the Philistines were the enemy the setting of this story which was told to us in those long words of verses 1 and 2 at the beginning of the chapter places it in the rolling hills between the seaplane along the Mediterranean Sea that the Philistines inhabited with their five cities and the high rugged mountainous area where Jerusalem and Bethlehem and other places are this is Israel's territory it's part of the promised land described in the books of Deuteronomy for example and even way back in Genesis it's part of the land conquered by Joshua in the book of Joshua it's Israel's territory it's promised land so when the Philistines are coming out to attack they're coming out to take promised land from Israel the Philistines are making incursions into God's land in effect and it tells us that Israel

Israel is failing to keep its land David is mocking Israel in these words at the end of verse 26 he's mocking their fear of the giant he's mocking Israel who seem to have no or little consideration of the power of God in their past history and at present he's mocking Israel for they seem to have no recollection of their taking the promised land 400 or so years before under Joshua he's mocking Israel because they've forgotten that the enemy when they conquered the land included giants such as Og King Og whose bed was vast in Deuteronomy 3 and the other giants who are in the land as described in Deuteronomy 1 and other places like that numbers 13 and 14 he's mocking Israel who have not learned from their mistakes in the past and indeed from their conquests in the past as well for under Joshua with the power of God those giants and armies and nations in the land were easily conquered so David's words at the end of verse 26 are mocking the people of Israel including his king who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God

David's words are in effect rebuking Israel's fear and lack of trust in the power of God now in response to David's words his eldest brother in verse 28 Eliab heard him talking to the men and Eliab's anger was kindled against David and he said why have you come down with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness I know your presumption and the evil of your heart for you have come down just to see the battle typical big brother language isn't it putting down the little brother go back to your few little sheep you know go back to your playroom and play with your toys sort of stuff we're doing men's business here we're fighting against the enemy you've just come to watch he's put in his place but it's great irony in Eliab's words as he rebukes David because he claims to know David's heart he says to David

[16 : 36] I know your presumption and the evil of your heart and if you've been reading 1 Samuel up to this point you'll say Eliab you don't know what you're talking about because in the very previous chapter chapter 16 we know that his words about the evil of David's heart are not true the Lord said to Samuel in chapter 16 verse 7 do not look upon his appearance or on the height of his stature because I've rejected him that's all for the Lord does not see other brother because for the Lord does not see as mortals see they look on the outward appearance the Lord looks on the heart and he goes on to anoint David that is humans don't know the heart God says God knows the heart and he chose David you see we know that Eliab's words are false and stupid they're full of pride really against his little brother he doesn't see the truth though he claims to he assesses things by appearance and therefore he's ignoring

God David though is different David unlike Israel acknowledges the living God the end of verse 26 said that is he's not acknowledging an idol a human made God a little statue like the Philistines God of Dagon etc he's not acknowledging a God that is weak and impotent that has to be carried into battle he's acknowledging the living and powerful God in effect you see David has brought into his calculations about this battle about the enemy the situation the context not just human appearances what reason might tell you on the outside he's brought into the equation the living God and he gets a vastly different answer from the fearful Israelites including their king they're afraid of the giant that's what they see physically but David acknowledges the living God and so he sees the giant not as a giant to be afraid of but as simply an uncircumcised

Philistine who's defying the armies of the living God see so often our eyes and our human reason are very deceptive we're led astray by it if we don't keep central in our calculations the God who is so powerful beyond measure well David's second speech comes from verse 32 to 37 in that section and this time he speaks to the king David said to Saul the king let no one's heart fail because of him your servant that is David talking about himself in humble terms before the king will go and fight with this Philistine not with this giant but with this Philistine putting him down Saul said to David you're not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him for you're just a boy and he's been a warrior from his youth but David then gives his credentials in verse 34 onwards 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 rescuing 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 defied the armies of the living God see that language that shows his contempt of Goliath he's not afraid of the giant he's just a little puny man in effect by comparison with the living God trying to defy the living God and the living God's armies and David says in verse 37 at the end of this speech the Lord that is Yahweh the name of God whenever you see Lord in capital letters in the Bible it's the name of God Yahweh or Jehovah personal name to show a personal relationship Yahweh who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will save me from the hand of this

Philistine you see David's not really boasting about his strength he's boasting in the Lord see David said I fought lions and bears and I won I prevailed but he's saying but it's not my ingenuity or my strength or my skill that will bring victory here it's Yahweh who saved me from the paw of the lion and Yahweh who saved me from the paw of the bear and Yahweh will save me from the hand of this Philistine see David's credentials David's CV is in one sense virtually blank other than a testimony to the saving power of the living God that is it's a statement of trust in Yahweh to bring victory because the enemy is an uncircumcised Philistine the language is showing God will bring victory because this is a challenge against God and God's vastly more powerful than even this ogre and this giant Goliath without God's help

[22 : 05] David's skill counts for nothing his experience counts for nothing God alone will bring the victory and it's a reminder to us wherein lies our confidence in our own strength ingenuity brute force physical cleverness or mental cleverness or does our confidence come from the living God verse 37 is the first time in this story that the name of Yahweh has been mentioned no Israelites mentioned it thus far that's very telling nobody else has until David and David is here calling on the name of the Lord and indeed as the New Testament reminds us whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved so another undercurrent is here not just David's words are showing a story that's told against Israel although that's still a theme running through this speech as well it's also a story against the king against Saul who shows his ignorance in saying to David you can't do it

Saul as we know is on his way out as king if you've read the previous chapters up to this point Saul was the first king and he was chosen to fight against the Philistines back in chapter 9 he was tall chapter 10 tells us he was a model a human being to fight and lead an army into battle but he was a king like the other nations that is somebody physically strong but spiritually weak as the chapters leading up to here have shown and as indeed his words to David here show as well he's a failing king well David's third speech is to Goliath himself and that comes in verses 45 to 47 David refuses the king's armour leading up to this speech because he's not used to it and he takes five stones and a slingshot Goliath when he sees him almost laughs with ridicule in verses 41 to 43 and he curses

David in verse 43 by his nameless gods see the words of verse 43 am I a dog that you come to me with sticks and the Philistine cursed David by his gods unnamed David responds in verse 45 naming again Yahweh the God of Israel you come to me with sword and spear and javelin but I come to you in the name of Yahweh of hosts or Yahweh of armies we might say the God of the armies of Israel whom you have defied this very day the Lord will deliver you into my hand and I will strike you down and 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 I've won that Israel's mighty no that all the earth may know that there is a

God in Israel and that all this assembly may know that Yahweh does not save by sword and spear for the battle is Yahweh's and he will give you into our hand this speech lifts the whole story to yet another plane you see it's not simply Israel Philistines it's not simply Philistines versus God Goliath curses David in the name of his gods David replies in the name of Yahweh this is a contest between Yahweh the living God the God of the Bible and the gods of the Philistines similar perhaps to the story of Elijah on Mount Carmel that is this is a contest between God the real God and other so-called gods human made gods as they are of the Philistines that's the level that this whole battle has been lifted up to in David's third speech it's not David and Goliath it's not Israel and the Philistines but it's Yahweh and the gods of the Philistines the living God and dead idols you see in the end it's not

Saul or Israel or David who's been affronted by the taunts of Goliath it's the living God and in the name of the living God David goes out to battle not with great armour not with all the latest of military warfare because it's very clear that it is God who brings the victory David goes out with five smooth stones here is the smoothest stone I could get from the valley of Elah the very stream where David picks up his five stones here it's not that smooth but I guess two three thousand years of tourists have taken all the smooth ones but that's from the very same place doesn't have made in Israel on it but then on the other hand it doesn't have made in China either and this is one of the slings probably that David would have used didn't pick this one up from the valley of Elah but out of Jerusalem there was this little old man with these things from which I bought this and he was amazing really he would put the stone in the sling

[27 : 44] I better be careful here there's a church warden around and somehow I can't even remember which way he does it I think he does it round like this but I'm not even going to go that because it's a stained glass window behind me and flips around a few times very fast and then with a flick of his wrist down the centre of the aisle goes the stone and he demonstrated this down this little laneway out of Jerusalem and every time it went straight as a die it doesn't matter how big you are you wouldn't want to stand at the other end and have even this little smooth stone hit you in the forehead but that's what happens to Goliath and down he falls and David stabs him with his sword and then chops off his head this is not David's boast it's not David's strength in fact the story has emphasised David is weak he's just a youth just a boy he's not even a man but David acts for the honour of Yahweh the living God and the living God wins the battle that is clear the story's been told in such a way to make that clear so that we don't attribute victory to David to his ingenuity his skill his experience but it's attributed to

God and God alone you see it's not about the triumph of a little small person over a great big bully it's not to be applied in the sense of the little company or organisation can somehow defeat the great multinational as I've heard this applied it's God who's the victory not the small man it's God and God alone and God will not allow the honour of his name to be dragged through the mud by any uncircumcised Philistine God will act to restore the honour of his name using means that look to be weak and look to be puny so that when the victory of God happens we don't get fooled into thinking someone else has won the victory time and again in the Bible from beginning to end that's how God works as Paul says when he wrote to the Corinthians God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong and so on and God still acts like that choosing what is weak so that when he brings victory there is no other explanation than that this is the hand of the living God at work little Israel coming out from Egypt and the might of Pharaoh's army the triumph of God's people over vast giants and nations in the days of Joshua here as well but nowhere more clearly seen in an act of astonishing weakness and impotence when a man hung on a cross and died there was the greatest victory the greatest power over all the enemies of God including death seen publicly when the grave was empty a couple of days later and God still works through what looked to be weak so one of the traps that the church of the west these days is falling into too often is trying to pick up the powerful means and mechanisms of our western world and apply them to themselves get the latest razzmatazz that will draw the crowds in have the person who's full of eloquence who's dressed the right way and who's had various facelifts so they'll be attractive to draw people that's not what Paul was like the apostle or Moses who lacked eloquence see the church is very weak you and I are very weak look around and think goodness me can't God pick better people than us but you see when a person places their faith in Christ and comes to

Jesus there is a victory that is attributed to God not us it's how God works so learn the lesson that David did and don't attribute your own success to yourself but acknowledge the hand of the living God at work and like David let us be zealous for the honour of God's name which time and time and time again is brought into disrepute in our Philistine uncircumcised world let's pray God our heavenly father make us zealous for the honour of your name confident in your power not fearful for our own weakness and the might of the enemy but trusting in your mighty sovereign power and victory demonstrated through the scriptures and not least on the cross and in the resurrection of Jesus

Amen Amen you