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The Life of King David
Part 2

David and Goliath

1 Samuel 17:1-11

v 1 Once again, the Philistines gather their armies for war, this time at Socoh, which was a prominent, flat-topped hill overlooking the southern side of the Valley of Elah, within the territory of Judah, about 15 miles southwest of Jerusalem.

By marching into this region, the Philistine army was attempting to push into the heartland of Judah toward major Israelite cities like Bethlehem, Hebron, and Jerusalem.

Running down the center of the flat valley floor is a seasonal streambed (known today as Nahal HaElah).

v 2 In response, King Saul positioned his army to block their advance by camping in the Valley of Elah.

v 3 Both sides draw up their battle lines on the hills on opposite sides of the valley. This geography creates a tactical stalemate, as whichever army charges down into the valley first would have to fight uphill against the enemy.

v 4 A champion named Goliath steps out from the Philistine camp. He stands six cubits and a span tall (roughly nine feet, nine inches) according to modern English translations.[1] Goliath is from the city of Gath, one of the few places where remnants of the giant Anakim clans survived after Joshua's conquest (Joshua 11:22).

v 5 He wears a heavy bronze helmet on his head and a coat of scale armor made of bronze. The armor weighs five thousand shekels, which is approximately 125 pounds.

v 6 He wears bronze greaves (shin armor) on his legs and carries a bronze javelin slung between his shoulders.

v 7 The shaft of his spear is as thick as a weaver's beam, and its iron spearhead weighs six hundred shekels (about 15 pounds). Additionally, a shield-bearer walks directly in front of him to provide extra protection.

v 8-9 Goliath stands and shouts across the valley to the ranks of Israel, asking why they have come out to line up for battle. He proposes single combat to decide the war, stating that if an Israelite man kills him, the Philistines will become Israel's servants, but if Goliath wins, Israel will serve the Philistines.

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[1] That is the height recorded in the traditional Hebrew Masoretic Text, the Latin Vulgate and Syriac Peshitta. Alternatively, he is described as being four cubits and a span in the oldest surviving witnesses: a 1st-century BC Hebrew fragment from the Dead Sea Scrolls (4QSam-a), as well as the Greek Septuagint (translated around the 3rd–2nd century BC), and the 1st-century AD Jewish historian Josephus.

v 10 Goliath openly mocks the nation, declaring, "I defy the armies of Israel this day," and demands they send out a man to fight him.

v 11 When King Saul and all the Israelites hear Goliath's words, they are dismayed and terrified. Instead of trusting in God, Saul (who was noted earlier in 1 Samuel 9:2 as standing head and shoulders above everyone else in Israel) shrinks back in fear alongside his troops.

In verses 12–19 the scene shifts from the standoff in the Valley of Elah to Bethlehem, where David has resumed his responsibilities as shepherd. His father then sends him on a simple errand to check on his three older brothers at the war front—Eliab (the firstborn), Abinadab, and Shammah. Meanwhile, Goliath steps forward every morning and evening for forty days to issue his challenge.

1 Samuel 17:20-30

v 20-21 David reaches the camp just as the army is marching out to form their battle line across from the Philistines as in the previous days.

v 22 David leaves his baggage and runs to the battle lines to greet his brothers. His eagerness shows both care for his family and curiosity about the conflict.

v 23 While David is talking with his brothers, Goliath steps forward from the Philistine ranks and for the first time, David hears the challenge with his own ears.

v 24 Even after forty days, the sight of Goliath still triggers panic among the Israelites.

v 25 We learn that King Saul has promised to anyone who kills Goliath great wealth, his own daughter in marriage, and exemption from taxes (and royal service) in Israel for the victor's entire family.

v 26-27 David learns about the reward and reframes the entire conflict spiritually, asking, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" So, while the soldiers focus on the prize and the fear, David focuses on God's honor.

v 28 Eliab, David's oldest brother, publicly belittles David, accusing him of abandoning his few sheep in the wilderness out of pride and having a wicked desire just to watch the battle.

v 29-30 David responds in the typical manner of a brother, and then resumes talking to another soldier.

We can observe three distinct perspectives in this passage. The Israelite soldiers manifest fear by seeing a giant too big to fight. Eliab manifests jealousy and pride by seeing a younger brother overstepping his place (likely remembering how Samuel anointed David over him). Only David manifests faith by seeing a mortal man insulting the living God.

1 Samuel 17:31-40

v 31 The bold words David spoke among the soldiers in verse 26 were overheard and reported directly to King Saul, who summons David to his tent.

v 32 While the king and his warriors are paralyzed by fear, a shepherd boy steps up to steady the nation's courage by telling the king not to let anyone lose heart because of the giant Philistine.

v 33 Saul immediately dismisses David's offer based on outward appearances, pointing out that David is only a youth while Goliath has been a trained warrior from his youth.

v 34-35 David counters Saul's objection with real-world experience from his life as a shepherd, explaining that whenever a lion or a bear carried off a sheep from his father's flock, he chased it down, struck it, and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When the predator turned on him, David grabbed it, and struck and killed it.

v 36 David connects those private victories directly to Goliath, stating that this uncircumcised Philistine will be just like one of those wild beasts because he has defied the armies of the living God.

v 37 David gives all the credit for his survival to God rather than his own strength, declaring that the Lord who rescued him from the lion and the bear will also rescue him from the Philistine. Convinced by David's conviction, Saul finally relents and says, "Go, and the Lord be with you."

v 38-39 Saul dresses David with conventional military gear, but David is not prepared to fight in that manner.

v 40 Instead, David takes his wooden shepherd's staff in his hand, walks down to the streambed, chooses five smooth stones, and puts them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag. With his sling in his hand, he steps forward to approach Goliath.

If David had complete faith that God would deliver Goliath into his hand, why did he gather five smooth stones instead of just one? Practical wisdom and biblical context offer two helpful insights:

- Military Preparedness. Faith is not presumption. Ancient slingers always carried extra ammunition in case the first shot missed, deflected off a shield, or if enemy soldiers rushed forward after their champion fell.
- Goliath's Relatives. According to 2 Samuel 21:15–22, Goliath had four giant relatives in Gath (including Ishbi-Benob, Saph, Lahmi, and a six-fingered giant). Many Bible teachers note that David was prepared not just for Goliath, but for his entire family if they stepped onto the battlefield.

1 Samuel 17:41-51

v 41-42 When Goliath saw David approaching, he despised him because he did not have a threatening appearance.

v 43 Insulted that Israel sent out a shepherd instead of a warrior, Goliath mocked David's wooden staff and cursed David in the names of his Philistine gods (such as Dagon and Baal).

v 44 Then, he threatened to kill David on the spot and feed his flesh to birds and beasts.

v 45 David answered Goliath's threats by contrasting their weapons, declaring that Goliath comes with humanity's conventional weapons, but David comes in the name of *Adonai Tzevaot*—the LORD of Hosts (or the LORD Almighty), the God of the armies of Israel whom Goliath had defied.

v 46 David declares the reason for fighting Goliath. It is not to win Saul's prize money, marry the king's daughter, or prove his own bravery. His stated goal has spiritual implications, namely "that the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.

v 47 David states the theological core of the entire chapter by saying that everyone present will know that Adonai delivered Israel not by earthly weapons, but simply because "for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

v 48-49 As Goliath moved forward to attack, David did not hesitate or retreat. He simply fired a stone with his sling that struck the Philistine on the forehead with a fatal blow.

v 50 The narrator pauses to emphasize that David triumphed over the Philistine without a sword.

Modern readers often picture David's sling as a child's toy, making his victory seem purely miraculous against a heavily armed soldier. But in the ancient Near East, slingers were elite, lethal artillery units (like the left-handed Benjaminites in Judges 20:16 who could sling a stone at a hair and not miss). Using a braided leather sling with a smooth stone the size of a tennis ball (weighing around 8–10 ounces), a skilled slinger could launch a projectile at 100 to 150 miles per hour—carrying the stopping power of a modern .45 caliber handgun. Goliath brought heavy infantry gear to a ranged artillery fight, and David used speed, distance, and God-given skill to expose the only unarmored spot on Goliath's body.

v 51 In order to finish the task, David used Goliath's own massive sword to kill him completely and cut off his head. Seeing their champion dead, the Philistines panicked and fled.

1 Samuel 17:52-58

v 52-53 Energized by David's victory, the men of Israel and Judah pursue and slaughter the Philistines, and plunder their camp.

v 54 In order to understand this verse, we need to recognize that ancient Hebrew writers often grouped related details together topically rather than chronologically.

So when we are told that David took Goliath's head and brought it to Jerusalem, this is a forward-looking summary called a prolepsis that describes events happening later in David's life, rather than immediately after the battle. In this case, Jerusalem was still largely controlled by the Jebusites and would not be captured by David until years later in 2 Samuel 5 when he was king.

We are also told that he placed Goliath's weapons in his own tent. This was a temporary situation, as we are told in 1 Samuel 21:9 that his sword eventually ended up at the tabernacle in the priestly town of Nob. Ancient Near Eastern cultures viewed wars as battles between national deities. Placing an enemy's armor or sacred objects inside a temple publicly demonstrated that the victor's god was superior.

v 55-56 In a flashback to the moment when David went out to confront Goliath, Saul asked Abner, the commander of his army, who the father was of the young man (David), and then instructed Abner to find out.

v 57 As soon as David returned from killing Goliath, Abner brought him before Saul while David was still holding the Philistine's head in his hand.

v 58 When Saul directly asked him about his father, David replied that he was "Jesse of Bethlehem."

We can ask why Saul inquired about his heritage? Does it indicate that Saul did not recognize that David is the one who has been playing the harp for him in chapter 16? The most likely explanation is that Saul promised to exempt the victor's entire family from taxes and royal service, so he was asking about his family house and lineage so he could fulfill his royal pledge to Jesse's household. Another option is that David had been serving part-time at court (v. 15) as a young musician, and Saul's mental state was clouded by a distressing spirit (1 Samuel 16:14). So, by seeing the boy transformed into a fearless giant-slayer on the battlefield, Saul was prompted to take a fresh look at his background.

Psalm 9

In 1 Samuel 17, we see David as both the shepherd and the warrior—the young man who stepped onto the battlefield so that 'the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel." But David wasn't just a fighter; he was a worshiper who turned God's victories into songs for God's people to remember.

In that regard, ancient Jewish tradition actually connects Psalm 9 directly to this exact battle. The title of the psalm mentions a tune called 'The Death of the Son'—or in the ancient Targums (Aramaic translations), 'Concerning the death of the champion who went out between the camps.'

The key to understanding this Psalm is by recognizing how David reflected on this moment—not by bragging about his accurate aim with a sling, but by celebrating how God puts proud, intimidating enemies in their place and reminds the world that even giants are only human.

v 1-2 David declares he will give thanks to the Lord with his whole heart and recount all of God's wonderful deeds. This mirrors his declaration in 1 Samuel 17:46 that his victory would cause the whole world to know there is a God in Israel.

v 3-6 David describes his enemies turning back, stumbling, and perishing before God's presence, noting that God has rebuked the nations and blotted out their name forever. In 1 Samuel 17:51–52, Goliath fell facedown and the entire Philistine army panicked and fled.

v 7-10 David affirms that the Lord sits enthroned forever as a righteous judge and serves as a stronghold for the oppressed. While Saul and the Israelite army trusted in bronze armor and height, David trusted in the Lord as his true defense (1 Samuel 17:37, 45).

v 17-20 David's words directly echo Goliath's mortal pride and David's refusal to let a mere human defy the living God (1 Samuel 17:26, 47).

In a broader sense, this Psalm confirms the pattern in David's life of taking on giant

challenges. Throughout his life—from battling wild animals to fleeing King Saul in the wilderness to fighting surrounding nations as king—David repeatedly faced overwhelming odds. Psalm 9 captures his lifelong theology by declaring that human strength is fragile ("they are but men," v. 20), but God reliably vindicates those who seek Him (v. 10).

There is also a Messianic foreshadowing in David's triumph over the champion of God's enemies. For just as David represented all of Israel in single combat—winning a victory that his fearful brothers could not win for themselves—Yeshua defeated sin and death on behalf of His people in a defining moment of history.