

**I Samuel 17**  
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I used to love this story as a kid. What kid doesn't? This is a great story with the little guy triumphing in the end against all the odds. I loved it as a kid, because I saw myself as David. Doesn't every kid? Didn't you? When we were kids, our worlds were filled with giants, fears, terrors to overcome. If David could do it, so could I, right? Today—Fathers Day—I remember that my dad once made me a sling, like David's. We lived up in the mountains so there was plenty of room for this kind of goofing off. Have you ever used a sling like that? Not a sling shot, those Y-shaped things with a rubber band that we used to shoot at each other, but a real old fashioned sling. Dad found a couple of rawhide strips, each about two feet long. To their ends he attached a softened leather pad into which one could place a stone. With a little practice, I could lace one of the strips through my fingers so I could hold on to it, put a rock in the pouch and hold the end of the other strap just under my thumb. Then I would start to twirl the sling around and around, faster and faster until I opened my thumb, one of the straps was released and the stone hurtled through the air. Never towards the house, or in the vicinity of my brothers, of course. But the stone flew with surprising speed and, of course, it always struck my imaginary Goliath right on the forehead. In reality, I was never much of a marksman with the sling and David—clearly—was much better than me.

Last week we were introduced to the character of David in the Hebrew Scriptures, David who is seen by later Jewish history as the ideal king, a man after God's own heart. But it is this story, before he ever becomes king, that seals his place in the affection of the Israelites and solidifies his place in history. One of the most famous stories of all the Bible, the story of David and Goliath. Since biblical times until now this story has resonated with all kinds of people.. David was the patron saint of Florence during the Renaissance, and in that city painters and sculptors and tapestry weavers used the story as an artistic subject, the favorite view being of David holding up the head of Goliath. Some of you

may be familiar with Emily Dickinson's poem "I Took My Power in My Hand," that uses the David and Goliath images, or in the world of sports David defeating Goliath has become almost a cliché.

David's faith in God overcoming the more powerful Goliath.

But this story is not just about the triumph of the underdog, as much as we might love that story. It is also the hope of all people who when they are faced with an overwhelming evil power that there is a way to overcome. This story has been told and retold especially by the weak, the oppressed, and the powerless—those who do not simply hope for a David, but see themselves as David, faced with the giants in their lives and who know that their only hope lies with God. But we never really seem to learn that lesson. The Philistine giants in our lives cannot be overcome on their own terms. One of the great scenes of this drama is when Saul accepts David's offer of help and begins to outfit him in his own armor. David puts on the breastplate and the helmet and takes the sword and the shield and the spear, as if these are going to help the boy overcome the power of the giant warrior. Bruce Birch, dean of Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington DC notes, "We never seem to learn that violence and power are never overcome with more violence and power. That just leads to arms races, mistrust, and stalemates. This is the reason that the violence of crime is not overcome by counterviolence in brutal prisons and capital punishment."<sup>1</sup> We have a hard time trusting the words of David, "The Lord does not save by sword or spear."

Do we want to use the same old tools, or do we have enough trust in God to believe that God is asking us to do something different, because God is taking us somewhere new? The Israelites and King Saul in this story are the ones who are too often like us. The encouragement in the David and Goliath story is not just to have faith in the God of Israel and not the gods of the Philistines, but to beware of the lack of faith of those who claim God's name. Saul and the Israelite armies can think of nothing more to do than to imitate the forces they oppose. Remember when they clamored for a king, they said that they wanted to be like all the other nations. Well, they have accomplished that, to their detriment. But how often are

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1 Birch, Bruce, *The Interpreter's Commentary on the Bible: I Samuel 17:1-58, Reflections*. p. 1114

we like that? When we want to change the societal structures around us, how quickly do we adopt the power-seeking tactics of any political group? How often do we go clanking around in the armor of Saul attempting to imitate our enemies? How would it be if we heard the call of God to do something different? How would it be if we believed that it is God who saves, not Goliath? How would it be if we began to think that bigger and stronger and more powerful may not be what God has in mind? One would think that we might have learned this lesson in the last century? Was it more powerful political movements that pushed for civil rights in America, or was it faithful people walking across the Edmud Pettis bridge, come what may? Was it a great army of tanks that knocked down the Berlin Wall, more powerful than the Soviet forces arrayed on the other side, or was it an army of poets and students and folks with hammers chipping away? Was it a conquering army that took down the system of apartheid in South Africa without a bloody revolution, or was it an insistence on truth and reconciliation? The power of God may be in a small smooth stone, cradled in the pocket of a sling, wielded by the arm of a young man, but it can slay giants.