

The World is Looking for a Hero

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[0 : 00] Right, well, good evening. Tonight we're looking at possibly one of the best-known stories in the Bible. At least in name, even if not really in full understanding of the content.

I would say it probably sits closely behind the nativity, and maybe even ahead of the events of Easter, in the understanding of our secular culture around us.

Because, you see, it's the classic underdog story. And there's something in our psyche that loves an underdog. Whether it's the Jamaican bobsleigh team, or the 300 Spartans at Thermopylae, or however you pronounce that, or the 5,000 to 1 outsiders, Leicester winning the Premier League. Whatever it is, we love these stories of unlikely people winning against all the odds. And so here we've got a boy against a giant.

You can't get much better than that. Although, as we look at it a bit more, we'll see that perhaps the tables are not stacked quite the way it looks at first.

[1 : 17] But it's also a story of a people that are in need of a hero, but who are looking in all the wrong places. So hopefully tonight we'll be able to get past that familiarity, and learn something about what this passage, about events so far from us in time and place, can teach us today.

And the first three verses are basically setting the scene, giving the context for the rest of the chapter. Chronology is not entirely clear, quite how this sits with the previous chapter.

I think it may be that they overlap, that this sits somewhere in the middle, particularly the way that David's introduced, as if we've never heard of him before. It sounds as if these are separate accounts of separate stories, each with their introduction, events, and conclusion.

Certainly later on in 1 Samuel, the events of David's life are clearly told out of order when his last words are reported before the exploits of him and his mighty men.

So it doesn't really particularly matter. It's really a bit of an aside, but just if you're slightly confused about what's going on, that might be why.

[2 : 45] But we have here the Philistines, and they appear to have been fairly recent invaders of the land by recent, you know, last century or two. They seem to probably be some of the sea peoples that the Egyptians write about.

And interestingly, recent DNA testing of pig bones seems to tell us that they came from the Aegean. Who knew that you could DNA test 3,000-year-old pig bones to tell where they'd come from, but apparently you can.

But these Philistines, anyway, have settled to the west of Israel and to five main cities. Gaza, right down on the coast, still a name that we know today.

Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, and Gath. And Gath is the closest one to Israel, right at the east of the Philistine territory. And that's where Goliath comes from.

And so in this passage, we see that the Philistines have gathered their army together and are encroaching into Judah. And Saul has gathered together the Israelites to oppose them.

[4 : 02] And the two armies are lined up facing each other across the valley of Elah. This is on the road from Gath to Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

And in fact, it's only about 20 miles away from Bethlehem where David lives. That's similar to the distance from here to North Beric.

Something easily walkable in a day. But we see here that no actual fighting's taking place. They seem to have reached some sort of stalemate.

The two armies lined up against each other. And Israelites are in a good defensive position but don't seem to have the strength or maybe just the courage to go on the attack.

But there's a routine going. Every morning, both sides line up facing each other across the valley and shout their war cries at each other. because that's going to be effective.

[5 : 05] And every morning and evening the Philistine champion comes out and shouts his defiant challenge. And we see that this has been going on for 40 days.

This is not just something that's gone on for a day or two. This is going on a long time. And Israelites are absolutely terrified. And quite frankly, I don't blame them.

Because when we carry on to the next few verses we read about the Philistine champion. In verses 4 to 7 we read the description of Goliath.

And the first thing that's obvious about him is his height. At six cubits and a span depending on the size of your cubit it's somewhere around nine foot four.

a good few inches taller than the tallest man recorded in recent history Robert Wadlow who measured in at eight foot eleven. So only five inches above that.

[6 : 11] It may be that this is the result of some sort of genetic anomaly because certainly it seems to run in the family. His brothers seem to be huge as well. But he's clearly not just tall but also strong.

Or at least he's certainly not weak going by the weight of armour that he's carrying. He's an impressive figure standing there tall and armoured like a tank.

Bronze helmet bronze armour scales bronze greaves on his legs. This is not just heavy but this is expensive. This is all the best of the military hardware that you could have at the time.

And he's even got that new technology he has an iron head on his spear. This is someone to be feared. Standing in front of him is a man carrying his shield.

He's confident and he's arrogant as he shouts out his defiant challenge. And in verses 8 to 11 we discover what this challenge is.

[7 : 22] Choose a champion. choose a representative to fight me on behalf of all of you. Your fate depends on the success of this single combat.

Forget about these armies about this defensive position that you've got yourself into. Gamble everything on the success of this one fight man against man.

And if you remember back before Christmas in chapter 10 we read that Israel did just that.

They chose a champion to represent them. They chose someone to go out before them and fight their battles. they chose an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites.

A head taller than any of the others. A man named Saul. He may not be a giant but he's still an impressive champion.

[8 : 27] He's fought several successful battles and as we read further down he has the kit. He has the bronze helmet. He has the coat of armor. So where is he?

He's there but like the rest of the Israelites he's terrified. It doesn't sound as if he's there out at the front facing the enemy leading his army.

Instead he's skulking somewhere in the back probably back in his tent in the camp. Israel had wanted a champion but when they chose a human hero they found him distinctly lacking.

They needed someone else to step up and fight for them. And I think as we look around we see that our world too is looking for its own heroes.

We may not be facing a giant or an enemy army but our world is groaning and people are hurting. Around the world there are wars and conflicts and strained relationships between nations.

[9 : 46] Our physical environment is polluted exploited and under threat. Our government quite frankly is in a total shambles. I think whatever your political persuasion you can agree with me on that.

but neither to home in Scotland. It's estimated that over 600 people will be sleeping rough in our cities tonight. And that's not counting the thousands and various sorts of temporary accommodation.

Or then there are the personal crises, the broken relationships, the illnesses, the bereavements, the unemployment, the loneliness, the depression, the anxieties, the everyday struggles of life, big and small.

People are looking for heroes, for someone that can put things right, for someone that can stand up for them. And this is nothing new.

Throughout history people have been telling stories of champions, of heroes, of people greater than themselves. We love the stories of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, and we don't particularly care about the historical accuracy of them.

[11 : 07] We flock to see superhero films, heroes with special powers that they will use to right wrongs, to defend the ordinary people.

But back to real life, we find that, like Saul, our heroes have feet of clay. One repeated theme of the last couple of years is of how our heroes, our role models, are shown to be flawed, and not who we thought them to be.

Around the world, statues have been pulled down of people where we find we can no longer overlook the darker side of who they were, people that we once celebrated.

But then also we see figures across the whole spectrum of public life, whether in entertainment, sports, politics, business, have been disgraced by the Me Too campaign and other things like that, as we've seen that these people that we thought we could look up to, maybe weren't so great after all.

Or maybe, maybe like Saul, we think that we are the ones that are meant to be the champions, but we're aware of our own inadequacies, and so we retreat from the battlefield in fear.

[12 : 44] Our culture would tell us to search for the hero inside yourself, but we know what is inside ourselves. We know there is no hero there.

So then in the next big chunk of the passage, from verses 12 all the way down to 40, we're introduced to an unlikely champion, David.

He's described as being little more than a boy, boy. Terms used are quite vague, but he's certainly not a grown man, probably some sort of teenager, not quite sure, but certainly he's the youngest of the family, and although he may be young, he is hardy.

He's not closeted at home, but he's out looking after the sheep, and that involves protecting them from whatever dangers might come their way.

But last week, we were also reminded in Alistair's In Unimitable Way, that as well as keeping sheep, he likes to write psalms and using them.

[14 : 03] For him, the worship of God is not just an occasional civic duty. That's an integral part of his life. God directed Samuel to him, saying that God looks on the heart.

And later we find David described, despite all of his faults, as a man after God's own heart. And so we see that Jesse sends David with food to his older brothers, and to bring back news.

They're about a day's journey away. He seems to have a tent with him, as mentioned later, and I assume he has a donkey or some other sort of beast of burden to carry all this stuff with him because it's a bit much to put in a backpack.

But so he gets there, he delivers the goods to the keeper of the stores, and to me sounds slightly naively goes to talk to his brothers on the front line, because of course that's what you do, you just go to the front line for a chat.

But when he's there, he sees what's going on. He sees Goliath, what's going on, he sees what's really going on.

[15 : 37] Because the question he asks the people shows how he understands the situation. Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?

As far as David sees it, this is not a battle between two earthly armies. This is defiance against the living God, as opposed to the lifeless false gods of the Philistines.

We were reminded this morning in Psalm 2, probably written by David, of how the nations stand and defines against God and his king.

In words that I can only think of set to Handel's music, why do the nations so furiously rage together? Why do the peoples imagine a vain thing? We shall break their bonds, asunder.

So David sees that this Philistine is defying God and his people and no one is doing anything about it.

[16 : 43] He sees that despite the promised rewards, and they seem quite impressive rewards, no one else is willing to do anything. And so he steps forward, confident, humble.

His confidence comes not from himself, from his own skill, but from what he knows about God. And this is not just what he's learned about God, but this is what he has experienced, how he has experienced God's help in the struggles of his day-to-day life, albeit slightly more dramatic struggles than most of us have on a daily basis.

I'm not sure how many of you expect to be wrestling bears and lions this week. But he tells Saul of his experiences looking after the sheep, and he concludes, the Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.

To him, someone who defies the living God is no different than the lion or a bear, just someone that God will help him to fight against.

Saul offers him his armor, and he does try it on, but ultimately rejects it. He's not going to pretend to be what he's not.

[18:21] He's not a trained warrior. He knows he isn't a champion. He isn't a hero. Instead, he goes out as he is.

A mere shepherd boy, armed with just a sling and five stones. Oh, I'm with the Lord of Heaven's armies by his side. I wonder how often we look at the challenges before us and think, you know, someone should do something about that.

Or how often do we, like David, say, no one is doing anything about that, and step forward and do it ourselves. Not because we think we're anything special.

not because we think we have skills and abilities that we don't, but because we see the task, and we trust that God will give us the strength and resources that we need to do it.

But I wonder also how much, like David, we are aware of our reliance on God in our day-to-day life. Do we trust him when we come to the big battles because we have known him as help in the small challenges?

[19:48] Or do we think, yeah, I can cope with this, I can cope with this, it's fine. And then when the big challenges do come, we don't have that confidence that comes from experience, and our faith may be shaken.

I don't know, I'm sometimes a bit wary about the whole asking God for a parking space type of prayer. It can almost seem a bit petty, and sometimes we have to accept that God is not a genie there to do our bidding, but that actually he is shaping us to his will, and his will today might be, that you're going to park ten minutes away and walk from there.

But are we going into business meetings where we know we have a tendency to be cynical, asking for God's help, to be open minded, to contribute positively?

Are we going into situations where we know we will face temptation, asking God to make his son look so glorious in our eyes, that our hearts want nothing more?

But also there's often, I think, the perception that to be used by God we have to be some special sort of person. I remember back when Tim was applying to go to the Faith Mission College, and I had to fill out a reference for him.

[21:28] If anyone has been through that process, it is horrific. It basically requires complete character assassination as it quizzes you on all their weaknesses.

But the last question is the one that I remember. Do you think this person is suitable for Christian service? Not quite sure what answer they were looking for, but my answer was that from the beginning God has used weak, broken people to do his work.

That there are two qualifications for Christian service, being a Christian and being willing. And, in fact, it's not even an option. It's a requirement of all Christians, although it takes many different shapes and forms.

people to do things. So, are we looking for special people to do things? Or are we expecting God to use us? And how often do we think that we'll be able to do something for God once we have the right armor, the right equipment, the right resources, the right training?

once we've got all these things, and they are good things, then we can serve God. Or how often do we just say we go in faith, our own great weakness feeling, not pretending to be any more than we are, and not relying on our ability, but relying on God.

[23:08] whatever the situation you're called into, whether it's to be a hero to your child who skinned her knee, or to get alongside your brother or sister who's really struggling, or to invite your colleague to the Life Explored course, or maybe you are called into global politics.

Maybe, as Delirious sang all those years ago, for those of you that can actually still remember Delirious, maybe you are called to be a history maker in this land, a speaker of truth to all mankind. But then in the next verses, verses 41 to 47, we see an unlikely and frankly ridiculous scene. A huge, heavily armed warrior. and a boy with a sling approaching each other across the battlefield. And Goliath takes this as an insult.

He understands strength. He understands war. He has no time for weakness. And they've sent a boy. He curses David in the names of his Philistine gods and shouts a defiant challenge.

[24 : 35] come closer and I'll kill you. He assumes that the outcome of this fight is a mere formality. But David, however, has a slightly different view of the situation.

He sees the apparent mismatch, but he knows that he's not the one that should be afraid and shouts back his own challenge. Some of this seems to be just out of standard military taunting. Goliath has said he'll give David's flesh to the birds and wild animals. David trumps this by saying he'll give the carcasses of the whole Philistine army to the birds and animals. But his challenge is not just bravado. Because his challenge is based on his understanding of who God is. He calls him the Lord Almighty.

Sometimes translated the Lord of hosts, or as we sang the God of angel armies. The God of the armies of Israel whom you have defied.

[25 : 46] He knows that the God Goliath has set himself up against is no mere distant deity. Nor is he just a personal God.

He is an awesome God who is here. He's not distant from his creation, but he's at work throughout it and still totally other.

But his challenge is also based on his trust in God. Because he says he will deliver you into my hands. He's not relying on his strength or his skill, but in God fighting for him.

And this is not just because of his inexperience and weakness, the fact that as far as we're aware he's never fought a battle before. Because as we read of many battles afterwards, even once he's an experienced warrior, his trust in God, not his own strength remains.

He writes in Psalm 19, some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God.

[27 : 02] This morning we were reminded by Scott Hamilton telling us about the work of UCCF, that they could put on all the slickest presentations. They could have the best speakers, they could do everything really, really well.

And if God wasn't in it, they were wasting their time. But lastly, his challenge is for God's glory.

He doesn't care about his own reputation, whether he comes out of this looking good. Instead, he fights so that the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel.

He carries on, the battle belongs to the Lord. God because it is God who will give the victory and it is God who will get the glory.

And then we come to the account of the fight itself and it's in verses 48 to 51, it's very short.

[28 : 12] It only takes three and a half verses. He hits Goliath on the forehead with one stone, sinks into his forehead, kills him, he then runs up, cuts off Goliath's head with Goliath's own sword, done.

There's little more to be said about it than that. It really seems anticlimactic. You're expecting some description of a titanic struggle here where despite the crushing odds David eventually subdues his opponent and crawls out wounded but victorious.

Nope, nothing like that here. Despite outward appearances, the odds were so heavily stacked in David's favour that there's little to comment on.

In fact, to call it a fight is really stretching things. And the remainder of this chapter is just the aftermath.

Having seen the Philistine champion defeated, the tables are turned. It's now the Philistines who are running in fear and the Israelites, having seen God at work, have the confidence to chase him down.

[29 : 28] But I don't know, as I come to this, particularly as I read of this ridiculously short fight, I can't help thinking of another champion.

A champion who also looked like nothing special. David is at least described here as handsome, but this champion had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him.

Nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was a champion who, when taunted by his adversary, could say, it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only.

A champion that, as he approached the battlefield where everything seemed stacked against him, could say to his father, not my will, but yours be done.

A champion whose greatest victory was won when it seemed like his enemies. All the powers of darkness and death itself were invincible and yet he could cry out, it is finished.

[30 : 47] But a champion who promised he would be with us always, even to the end of the age. A champion that promised a comforter to walk beside us, to walk with us through life, to give us the power to face up to these challenges that we see in the world around us, that we are unable to meet

with our own strength.

But a champion that will not leave us fighting running battles forever. A champion who will himself come onto the battlefield at the end of the age.

If we thought the description of the battle here was an anticlimax, try reading Revelation 19. There we see our champion on a white horse.

He has the names faithful and true, and king of kings, and lord of lords. And armies are massed against him, led by the beast and false prophet.

The kings of the earth are furiously raging against him. And then instead of an epic battle, the beast and false prophet are captured, and the rest are killed by the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the white horse.

[32 : 09] Just like that, no fuss. We talk about Armageddon as if it's an epic battle of good against evil. evil. It isn't. It's plain, straightforward defeat.

The powers of evil don't stand a chance. And the powers of evil will be defeated. All the wrongs in this world that we've thought about, and many others, will be put right.

We have a champion who will wipe every tear from our eye. And in the meantime, he is with us as we go into the battle tomorrow and the next day until he comes.

Just want to finish with words of verse of a song. I can see the son of man descending, and the sword he swings is brighter than the dawn.

And the gates of hell will never stand against him. So, in the night, my hope lives on. Amen.