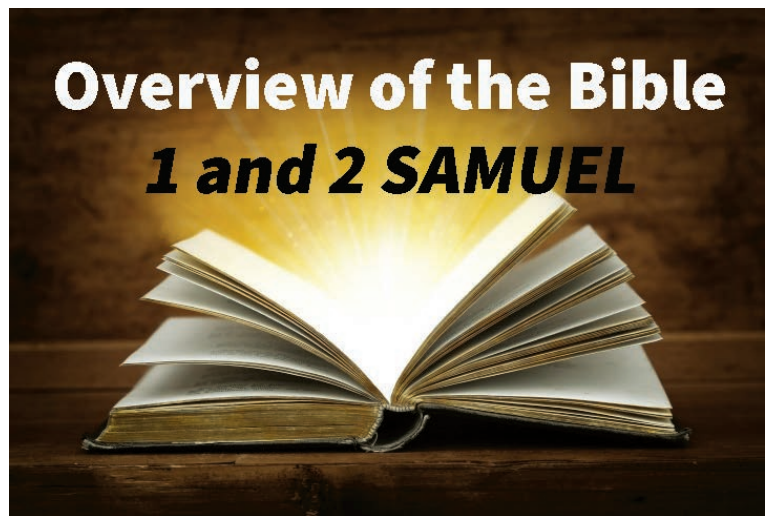


DAVIDS FAITH IGNITES A VICTORY

1 Samuel 17 *Lesson 58*

Wednesday, September 22, 2021



Big Idea *Faith in the Lord's power to save can be the catalyst for victory.*

The Text in Context

In the previous chapter, Samuel anointed David as the new king. Having departed from Saul, the Lord's Spirit came upon David, and the Lord sent an "evil spirit" to torment Saul. Through God's providence, David has arrived in Saul's royal court and relieved Saul's fears with his music. Now the stage is set for David to replace Saul. In chapter 17 the narrator continues to demonstrate David's superiority to Saul. In the face of the enemy, Saul is paralyzed by fear and cannot see beyond the surface. But David is concerned with the Lord's honor and convinced that the Lord will give Israel the victory.

The people requested a king to lead Israel's armies in battle. Their focus was on the tangible: they wanted a standing army like other nations had. Here David demonstrates that battles are fought in God's strength and for God's honor. Though warriors may show skill and daring, "the living God" is the victor. David models for Israel what a king should believe and how a king should act.

Yet David's success sets the stage for Saul's jealousy, which prompts him to plot David's demise. Beginning in the next chapter, the story will focus on Saul's relentless efforts to kill David and the Lord's providential protection of his chosen king.

Historical and Cultural Background

The encounter between Goliath and David is an ordeal of divine judgment. David treats the Philistine's words as an insult against Israel's God (1 Sam. 17:26, 36) and regards himself as the Lord's representative on the field of battle (vv. 37, 45–47). Likewise, the Philistine calls upon his gods to destroy David (v. 43).

Interpretive Insights

17:4 *His height was six cubits and a span.* When presenting Saul to Israel, Samuel drew attention to his height (10:23–24). But now the enemy produces a champion who is even taller than Saul and so impressive that Saul is paralyzed with fear. However, great physical stature does not impress God (16:7), nor does it frighten David.

17:5 *He had a bronze helmet.* The narrator gives a lengthy description of Goliath's armor and weapons, to paint a vivid picture of just how formidable a foe he appears to be. This has the literary effect of increasing the tension of the plot, but in the end, it also has the effect of highlighting the faith of David, who is not intimidated by this imposing and seemingly invincible warrior.

17:8 *servants of Saul*. Unless this is part of his rhetorical strategy, the Philistine champion, like the Israelites (see v. 11), does not see beyond his senses. He characterizes the Israelite army as simply “the servants of Saul,” when in reality they are the “armies of the living God” (vv. 26, 36). He defies the “armies of Israel” and asks for a mere man to meet him in battle (v. 10), when in reality he is facing and defying the “LORD Almighty” (v. 45). David, however, understands the full implications of the Philistine’s challenge and responds with extraordinary theological insight (vv. 26, 36, 45–47).

17:11 *On hearing the Philistine’s words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified*. Israel’s response is antithetical to the prebattle exhortations of Moses, Joshua, and the Lord himself (Deut. 1:21; 31:8; Josh. 1:9; 8:1; 10:25). Their response also marks a sad reversal of an earlier event when the people respond to the Lord’s self-revelation in the storm with great fear (12:18).

Key Themes of 1 Samuel 17

- In response to David’s faith, the Lord enables him to deliver Israel from their enemy.
- When Israel focuses on outward appearances, their faulty focus obscures reality, stifles faith, and produces paralyzing fear.

17:24 *they all fled from him in great fear*. In the reference to Israel’s fleeing from the Philistine, there may be an echo of the defeat at Aphek, when the ark was captured (1 Sam. 4:10, 16–17), and an ironic contrast with Jonathan’s earlier victory over the Philistines (14:22).

17:33 *you are only a young man*. Once more Saul assesses the situation strictly on the basis of what he perceives with his senses (cf. v. 11), without factoring God into the equation.

17:34 *When a lion or a bear came*. The verbal sequence in verses 34–35 (conjunction with perfect form) indicates that these actions are customary. David is not describing an isolated incident. As a shepherd he has encountered predators on several occasions, and on each occasion, he has followed the described procedure. These experiences have taught him to act quickly, skillfully, and decisively.

17:37 *The LORD ... will rescue me*. David’s declaration echoes the speeches of Samuel, who on two occasions reminded the people how the Lord is able to deliver them from the hand of their enemies (1 Sam. 7:3; 10:18).

17:38 *Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic*. Saul has heard David’s confession of how the Lord has delivered him, and he has even prayed that the Lord will be with David. Yet his focus remains limited: he tries to dress David in his own armor. He even puts a “bronze helmet” on David’s head, as if to make him a little Goliath (cf. v. 5). But David has not specifically mentioned armor or weapons in relating his exploits: his focus is on the Lord’s enablement (v. 37), and he has a more creative plan in mind for defeating Goliath.

17:40 *approached the Philistine*. The narrator depicts David as being unhesitating and courageous. David’s aggressive forward advance expresses his unflinching faith in the Lord’s power to deliver and stands in sharp contrast to the Israelites, who fled from Goliath when they saw him (v. 24).

17:42 *He looked David over and saw ... a boy*. Consistent with this chapter’s pattern, Goliath, like Saul, cannot see beyond his senses. He sees only David, a mere boy, who seems poorly armed; he does not recognize the Lord, who is with David (cf. v. 8).

17:46 *the LORD will deliver you into my hands*. While Goliath’s focus is his personal honor and prowess (vv. 43–44), David focuses attention upon the Lord. David will act to bring glory to God, not to himself.

17:49 *taking out a stone, he slung it.* David demonstrates great courage, born of his faith in the Lord; he also displays ingenuity and cunning. The scene shows that everyone expects this battle to be fought at close quarters: (1) Goliath's weaponry (javelin [or perhaps scimitar], spear, and sword; cf. vv. 6–7, 47, 51) is designed for fighting at close quarters. (2) Saul tries to outfit David with his armor and sword, as if expecting a hand-to-hand struggle. (3) David's reference to fighting wild animals at close range hints that he might fight Goliath in the same way. (4) Goliath's movements (v. 41) and challenge, "Come to me" (v. 44), suggest that he is expecting a close-range conflict. The text makes it clear that Goliath does not see David (v. 42) until after David has chosen his stones (v. 40). When he mentions David's weapons, he speaks only of "sticks" (v. 43; cf. v. 40) and says nothing about the sling, which David uses to deck the giant in one swift, deadly moment. King and Stager estimate that one can propel a sling stone at a speed of 160–240 kilometers per hour (ca. 100–150 miles per hour).¹¹ In the hands of a well-trained slinger, this weapon can be deadly accurate (Judg. 20:16).

he fell face down on the ground. The language echoes that used for the fall of Dagon in 1 Samuel 5:3–4. Just as the Philistine god Dagon fell on his face before the ark of the Lord with his head cut off, so the Philistine champion falls on his face before the Lord's warrior, who then cuts off his head (v. 51). The parallels to the earlier text attest to the accuracy of David's perspective: he is merely the Lord's instrument in defeating the enemy, and the Lord, in contrast to the decapitated Philistine deity, is the living God.

Theological Insights

In the narrative typology of the Former Prophets, David emerges as a new Caleb/Joshua. Those heroes of the conquest period fearlessly confronted and defeated the gigantic Anakites, who had paralyzed Israel with fear (Num. 13:26–33; Josh. 11:21–22; 14:12–15; 15:13–14; Judg. 1:10, 20). Following the judges, Othniel and Ehud, there was a visible decline in the quality of Israelite leadership. Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson were plagued by weak faith and deficient wisdom. The situation took a turn for the better as Samuel assumed leadership. When David steps forward to face the Philistine giant (who may have been related to the Anakites; cf. Deut. 2:11 with 1 Chron. 20:4–8), he demonstrates the same courage born of faith that Joshua and Caleb exhibited. Like them, he focuses on God's enablement, not the strength of the enemy (Josh. 14:12).

David's portrayal of God is indeed theologically rich. David twice calls the Lord the "living God" (vv. 26, 36). This title is not just an affirmation of God's existence (alive, as opposed to nonexistent or dead). It also focuses on his active presence, self-revelation, power, authority, and ongoing involvement in history. He is the living God in the sense that he actively intervenes for his people. He rescues his people (v. 37), saves them (v. 47), and hands their enemies over to them (vv. 46–47). He is a mighty warrior king, who is "the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel" (v. 45). In this context the title "LORD Almighty" (traditionally, "Lord of Hosts" [KJV]) depicts the Lord as the one who leads his "hosts" (here the Israelite army) into battle. He is an invincible warrior. In fact, the battle belongs to him; he determines its outcome regardless of how well equipped the combatants may be (v. 47).

For the exiles, David's example, in both word and deed, is an encouragement and inspiration. Though they have been defeated and are under the authority of a foreign king, David's experience is a reminder that faith in God's power is rewarded, for he is the living God and is active in the life of his people. As the one who is sovereign over battles and their outcome, he has allowed his people to experience defeat and exile, but he also has the capacity to rescue and save his people. This is a message that the exiles need to embrace as they look ahead to what must appear to be an uncertain future (see Isa. 40).

Teaching the Text

1. *The Lord's power is determinative in battle, and faith in that power can be the catalyst for victory.* David's faith is exemplary. In the face of a physically imposing, seemingly invincible enemy, he refuses to focus on what he hears and sees on the battlefield. He places his faith in the living God, who has proved himself trustworthy in David's experience. As frail human beings, who are so easily influenced by our physical senses, we are prone to let the challenges of the present swallow up what we have learned in the past and paralyze us. David's faith does not allow this to happen. He remembers how God has delivered him from powerful predators, and he is convinced that the past will be repeated in the present. David is obviously skilled with the weapons of a shepherd, including the deadly sling. But he does not brag about those skills and place false confidence in them. He realizes that it is the Lord who empowers him for battle and gives him the nerve and presence of mind to use his training and weapons effectively (see 2 Sam. 22:30–46 = Ps. 18:29–45). For David, the Lord is worthy of complete trust, for he is the living, active God, who determines the outcome of battles and gives his people victory and salvation. In teaching this passage, we should follow David's lead and highlight the Lord's power rather than David's heroism or skill.

2. *Focusing on outward appearances rather than the Lord's power can obscure reality, stifle faith, and produce paralyzing fear.* In this account, Saul and the Israelites serve as a literary foil for David. David's faith is impressive, but especially so when seen against the backdrop of their fear. One expects that Saul, as the leader of Israel's armies, will be the champion, going out in the Lord's power and representing God and Israel in single combat. But Saul and the army are unable to see beyond their senses. When they hear the Philistine's arrogant challenge, they are overcome by fear (v. 11). When they see him, they literally run in fear (v. 24). When David asks for Saul's permission to fight the Philistine, Saul sees only David's youth and inexperience (v. 33). Israel's obsession with that which is tangible obscures the reality that David's faith allows him to see. The Lord is sovereign over the battle and fully capable of delivering his people and giving them the victory. Walking by sight stifles faith and brings paralyzing fear. All Israel can do is stand, wait, and tremble, while the Philistine defies them and, indirectly, their God. When God's people respond in this way, they send the wrong message to the watching world. The Lord is a living God, but the world fails to see his active presence if his people do not activate his intervention through their faith. David wants all observers to recognize God's sovereignty and God's commitment to his people (vv. 46–47).

Illustrating the Text

Walking by faith and not by sight assures the believer of God's intervention and of his power to deliver

Quote: *Reaching for the Invisible God*, by Philip Yancey. Yancey (b. 1949) reflects on a public television series based on interviews with World War II survivors. In one interview, the soldiers recount how they spent a particular day. Each one had done some small thing: played cards, watched a tank go by while engaged in firefights. Soon, however, they discovered they had just been part of one of the most crucial parts of the war, the Battle of the Bulge. As Yancey puts it,

It did not *feel* decisive to any of them at the time; ... None had the big picture of what was happening elsewhere. Great victories are won when ordinary people execute their assigned tasks—and a faithful person does not debate each day whether he or she is in the mood to follow the sergeant's orders.... We exercise faith by responding to the task ... before us, for we have control only over our actions in the present moment.¹

Works Cited

¹ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *1 & 2 Samuel*, ed. Mark L. Strauss, John H. Walton, and Rosalie de Rosset, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 121.