

1 SAMUEL 17  
BOLD, BELIEVING COURAGE

We've been watching athletics all week; the world championships have been taking place in Beijing. It is all about people running faster than before or throwing something heavy further than they've ever thrown it before, though to be fair, there have not been many world records; so it has been about doing these things better than the person next to you. It is also about jumping higher or further than anyone else. Now, I get most athletic events: I can work out how to run 100 metres fast; once upon a time...; or I can work out how to run a long way; I could never do it! I can work out how to do most of the throws and jumps, since they are all fairly straightforward! But there is one event that I can't really get my head around: the pole vault. For a start, you are going nearly 6 metres into the air; that's nearly 20 feet! Then you have to use a pole to get as high as that and it bends and sometimes breaks; and then you have to go up backwards and flip over and come back down again, backwards. I just don't get how you even learn, or what persuades you that it is a good idea to even try in the first place! But some people do and you could leap over a wall if you wanted!

*"With my God I can leap over a wall" (Psalm 18:29)* We're not at the world athletics championships any more with these words; they come from Psalm 18, written by David, perhaps at a time when God helped him through a difficult patch in his life. With God's help there is nothing he cannot do! He knows that God will help him in all of his life and he brings that bold, believing courage to bear on lots of situations that frighten him. Perhaps he was remembering Goliath when he wrote these words: Goliath was the first real test of that bold, believing courage; how would he cope? And not only Goliath, but has to deal with his weak, frightened, demoralised brothers; not only Goliath and his brothers, but well-meaning King Saul is trying to help, but in ways that are just not appropriate. As we said earlier, the value of this story for us is putting ourselves into the story: can we see ourselves as these three main "characters"? As an Israelite soldier? As Saul? As David? This is not about which character we'd rather be, but is about putting ourselves in the shoes of each, trying to find out what dominates their thinking! What dominates our thinking today?

Put yourself in the shoes of the Israelite soldier. You've been sitting for weeks in the camp in the Valley of Elah, 20 miles west of Bethlehem, on the border between Israel and the Philistines. You've been sitting there doing nothing but watching the Philistines across the valley. Across the valley this huge man, Goliath has been parading about every morning, issuing his challenge: "Come out and fight, man-to-man; you win and we will be your slaves; I win and you will serve us!" He is nearly 3metres (9 feet) of well-armed fighting machine. Will you go to fight? Will you be the man to take him on? Of course, you won't. You'll sit there and wait for someone else to be brave. But no-one does and so you just sit there and wait; nothing happens, but over the weeks you just get more and more frightened, waiting for something to happen. Life, your thinking, your emotions – everything is dominated by one thing! Goliath! Goliath shapes what you think about life, about yourself; Goliath shapes what you will do today; Goliath shapes how you feel about life and the future and everything. You are dominated by Goliath! It is terrifying, hopeless, demoralising!

What dominates you today? For lots of people, their lives are dominated by the difficult things they have to face and quite understandably these things make us frightened. You only understand what fear is when there is something that fills your mind day and night for weeks and weeks and weeks and it won't go away. That kind of fear is paralysing; we stop functioning in things that once we thought were ordinary; because we don't know what will come next, our minds are dominated by these fears. Others' lives are dominated by obsessions: money, possessions,

ambition, appearance – or more, the loss of these things; how will I cope if I lose all my money? How will I cope if I have to sell my possessions? How will I cope if that promotion doesn't come to me? How will I cope when I get old and lose my handsome good looks? Our minds become dominated by these obsessions and we become obsessed with keeping them or making them grow. These two examples are different, but equally having our minds dominated by Goliath and by fear is not the best way life can be for us. What place is there for God in our thinking? We'll come back to that in a second.

Then, there's Saul. Saul is a big man: physically he's head and shoulders above all the other Israelites; also he is an important man because he is king in Israel. But even he is dominated by Goliath. David volunteers to go, to fight the giant. His brothers laugh at him, but Saul tries to help him. *"then Saul..." (1 Samuel 17:38)* Put yourself in Saul's shoes: he's at the head of a scared army; he himself is scared – even he has not volunteered to fight Goliath. Along comes David to volunteer, having come the 20 miles from home to visit his three soldier-brothers. Saul wants to help; "let's give him some back-up; let's support the young lad before he gets killed". He offers David his armour; he puts on the armour, the helmet, and Saul gives him the sword. David puts it all on and nearly falls over! *"I can't..." (1 Samuel 17:39b)* It doesn't work; the help is genuinely meant, but Saul hasn't really tried to understand David; David is not a soldier, never has been! But God has trained David in other ways and these other ways will make the difference. Saul's help was inappropriate because he didn't stop to try to understand David.

There are people around who genuinely want to help others, but they go about it in all wrong ways. There are Christians who want to help people in need, but all they succeed in doing is sounding pious and patronising. They will tell you that your suffering is God's will and that something good will come out of this for you, when all you want to do is shout at God with all the anger you can muster. It doesn't help; they've not stopped for a second to try to understand how you feel. I sometimes think that it is better to do nothing than to try to help in thoughtless and inappropriate ways, even if it is meant genuinely. There is no easy answer to this; there is no one answer to this; the only answer to this is to make the effort to understand the other person's mind, even to ask the question "What can I do to help?" The answer might come: "You can pray; you can find somebody to do my garden; you can help me with my computer; you can take me to a hospital appointment!" You've asked; you've made the effort to understand; you've made no assumptions. There might be no answer; maybe "nothing" is the answer you're given, but at least you have made the effort to understand. Saul assumed that the answer to David's situation was armour; armour would have got David killed!

Lastly, put yourself in David's shoes. The young man has travelled 20 miles to visit his soldier-brothers; as quickly as he can he leaves the 10 loaves of bread for his brothers and the 10 cheeses for their commanding officer and runs off to the front line, keen to be involved in the action. He hears Goliath: *"Who is..." (1 Samuel 17:26b)* *"Let no-one..." (1 Samuel 17:32)* Indignation! God is being mocked; there is no way that can be allowed to happen! He will fight! His big brother is angry: "Who do you think you are!" Saul is relieved: "Come, try on my armour!" Goliath thinks it is hilarious: *"He looked..." (1 Samuel 17:42f)* Somewhere in this mix, David went out to fight with bold, believing courage in his heart and we know score from this match: David won, Goliath didn't! *"I come..." (1 Samuel 17:45b)* David's mind was dominated by God; God was at the centre of his mind; he had practiced that as a shepherd. When the lion and the bear came, David practiced two things: he practiced his skill with a catapult and stone, and his bold believing courage in God; both of these practices helped him beat Goliath.

I'm not sure how much value to put on learning catapult skills now, though those skilled with them in David's time could make the stone fly extremely fast; but I do know how much value to put on the practice of the presence of God. That's why David could "leap over wall", because he knew that God was there and his mind and his heart were centred on God. God shaped his mind in the sense that he saw everything through the eyes of his faith. He saw Goliath and knew that God promised to be there and to help him: "*The Lord...*" (1 Samuel 17:37) Whatever is our Goliath, the same principle applies. God is with us in everything; God is with us everywhere we go; God is able to help us in all of our lives. God is able to save, to help, to give us everything that we need. Here's an answer to the question about fears or obsessions earlier: they can be changed; I offer this as a way of dealing with, even overcoming your fears: to see the love and grace of God, sufficient for all our needs. This is why it matters that we practice the presence of God in the days when life is more straightforward; to practice the sense of God with us in the good days, to open our eyes to see the ways in which God has blessed us before – these will be the bank of grace to help us when Goliath comes to call.

There are four pieces of wisdom in Hebrews chapter 10 to keep us believing, to keep that bold, believing courage when life is hard. They all begin "Let us..." "*Let us...*" (Hebrews 10:21) It is easy to run away from God when life is hard; it is better to run to God and enjoy His presence and His love. "*Let us...*" (Hebrews 10:23) Hope is such a vital quality, the sure and certain hope that God will not let us down and will keep all of His promises. "*Let us...*" (Hebrews 10:24) The right kind of support is important, keeping each other going, bringing strength to that bold, believing courage. "*Let us...*" (Hebrews 10:25) So often we run away from Church, from other Christians at the very time we should run towards church and other Christians, because there we find support; we find help in meeting together, in mutual support and understanding. This is not a bad way of shaping our mind to be God-centred; Jesus is able to help us and here's how we can make that work.

It is a great story! It is one of these must-know Bible stories. It is the story of faith winning; the victory is for the good guy, the little guy over the big guy! It has become a legend in our language – there are "David and Goliath" battles everywhere, even in the world athletics championships. What shapes the way you think and feel today? Is it the Goliath in your life? The thing that makes you afraid, that demoralises you, that takes away your hope? What place is there for God in your thinking and feeling? There is a whole range of answers to that: from 'no place for God', God is shut out completely; to little place because we have faith but we're not sure that we believe properly; to God is the centre and we trust Him implicitly because Jesus has died and is raised. What place is there for God in your thinking, feeling? Practise His presence: this week, everywhere you go, say to yourself quietly "God is here; God is with me!" Try that; it's not a magic charm, but it might just make your faith a little stronger. "God is here; God is with me!" Maybe that will help you grow that bold, believing courage to defeat your Goliath.