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1 Samuel 17:1-31

Twenty Eighth Message

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# GIVE ME A MAN!

SERIES: *THE CROSSING FATES*

John Eldridge, the author of *Wild at Heart*, tells the story of taking his sons to the local zoo and peering into the cage of his favorite animal, an enormous African lion named *Panthera leo*. His sheer size would strike terror into any passerby. But coupled with fear and admiration, John's heart was struck with sadness for the old cat. Instead of roaming the wild, he spent every hour of every day and night alone, pent up in a cage. Sometimes at night he could hear the lion's roar in the distance, but it sounded more like a painful moan, rather than a fierce cry. Weariness and boredom had taken the lion out of the beast, so much so that during his visits, the "King of the Beasts" could never look him in the eye. Like Nathan's parable to king David, John turns our anger and sorrow for the lion's pitiful plight upon us. He concludes,

For after years of living in a cage, a lion no longer even believes it is a lion... and a man no longer believes he is a man. A man is fierce... passionate... wild at heart? You wouldn't know it from what normally walks around in a pair of trousers. If a man is the image of the Lion of Judah, how come there are so many lonely women, so many fatherless children, so few *men* around? Why is it that the world seems filled with "caricatures" of masculinity? There's the guy who lives behind us. He spends his entire weekend in front of the tube watching sports while his sons play outside—without him. We've lived here nine years and I think I've seen him play with his boys maybe twice. What's with that? Why won't he engage? And the guy the next street over, who races motorcycles and drives a huge truck and wears a leather jacket and sort of swaggers when he walks. I thought James Dean died years ago. What's with him? It looks manly, but it seems cartoonish, overdone.

How come when men look in their hearts they don't discover something valiant and dangerous, but instead find anger, lust, and fear?<sup>1</sup>

If this troubles you as much as it does me, let me introduce you to a man, a real man.

This is the narrator's third vignette to introduce us to the life of David as Israel's ideal king, a man after God's own heart. In the first (16:1-13), David was portrayed as the shepherd, insignificant in the eyes of his family, but choice and chosen of God. In the second (16:14-23), he is Israel's sweet singer, whose inspired poetry set to music subdues demons in the royal court. Now in the third (17:1-53), David is portrayed as a courageous warrior who saves Israel from its archenemy.

The chapter is built on the word *ish* ("man"), found nine times, which echoes through the Valley of Elah as the Philistine warrior, Goliath, taunts Israel: "*Give me a man.*" Because of its great length we will take the story in two parts. Today we will focus on the qualities of a man that God uses to promote him to greater stages of influence.

## The Ancient Philistines

You'll remember from our earlier studies that the Philistines were among the powerful Sea Peoples who came to Canaan on ships through the Aegean basin, or overland through Anatolia, at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Technologically, they were one of most advanced peoples in the ancient Near East. Archaeological discoveries have shown that they were not only courageous but also innovative, being able to adapt to new environments. Their cities were much more advanced than the

more primitive towns of the Israelites. Militarily, they had no rivals. From 1150 B.C.E. "until about 1000 B.C.E., the Philistine confederation was the most powerful entity in this corner of the world... The source of Philistine power was apparently in the jealously defended monopoly of iron wares and the art of forging iron (1 Sam 13:19-21)."<sup>2</sup> The beleaguered Israelites must now confront the Philistine war machine.

### I. Dismay and Terror in the Valley of Elah (1 Sam 17:1-11)

#### A. Stalemate on high ground (vv. 1-3)

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle. And they were gathered at Socoh, which belongs to Judah, and encamped between Socoh and Azekah, in Ephes-dammim. And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered, and encamped in the Valley of Elah, and drew up in line of battle against the Philistines. And the Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side, with a valley between them. (1 Sam 17:1-3 ESV)

The scene opens with the Philistines advancing deep into Judah's territory and Israel's counter initiative. The two armies have taken alternate high positions in western foothills of Judah with the Valley of Elah between them. The situation comes to a standstill, as neither army wants to make themselves vulnerable by leaving the high ground to confront the enemy in the valley below.

#### B. The MAN from Gath (vv. 4-7)

And there came out from the camp of the Philistines a champion named Goliath of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. He had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail, and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. And he had bronze armor on his legs, and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron. And his shield-bearer went before him. (vv. 4-7)

To break the stalemate, a veteran warrior from the Philistine ranks comes out to challenge the army of Israel. Goliath is called a *champion* (literally: "the man in [the space] between," an apt description of the situation). This gargantuan warrior was from Gath, which had become refuge to the Anakim, a race of giants in Canaan (Josh 11:22). As to his precise height, the Hebrew text lists him at six cubits and a span (9 feet, 9 inches), while the Greek text measures him at four cubits and a span (6 feet 9 inches). Either way, he towers over the average Israelite male (who measured between 5 feet and 5 feet 6 inches), and is armed to the teeth with the latest high-tech weaponry, which makes his appearance psychologically overpowering. The text describes his massive armor from the top down. Physical detail is rare in Biblical narrative, and this may well be "the most detailed physical description of any found in scripture."<sup>3</sup>

He had a bronze helmet on his head, and a coat of mail fashioned from several hundred small bronze plates that resembled fish scales. Its weight was five thousands shekels of bronze (120 lbs.). Bronze greaves protected his legs below the knee, and a bronze javelin was slung over his shoulder. His most formidable offensive weapon was his spear, whose massive "point" (lit. "flame" referring to its shape) was made of iron and weighed "six hundred shekels" (15 lbs.). The shaft of the spear was "like

a weaver's rod," which suggests it had a loop and a cord wound around it so that it "could be hurled a greater distance with greater stability by virtue of the resultant spin."<sup>4</sup>

With the added protection from the large shield carried by his armor bearer, Goliath must have appeared invincible. While Israelite soldiers wore basic clothing in battle, this warrior looks like a human tank, armored in bronze from head to toe. As Fokkelman observes, "The Philistine embodies belief in armaments, the ideology of reliance on military force, the desire for invulnerability."<sup>5</sup>

### C. The challenge from the MAN (vv. 8-11)

He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why have you come out to draw up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants. But if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall be our servants and serve us." (vv. 8-9)

Goliath's overwhelming appearance is matched by his bravado. He chides Israel's lack of resolve to fight and then intimidates them with his self-assured superiority. His question – "Am I not the Philistine (i.e. a free man, a lord even), and are you not slaves of Saul?" – "cleverly tries to sow dissension between the rank and file."<sup>6</sup> Then, to break the stalemate, Goliath educates Israel in the practice of representative combat, which was more common in Greece than Canaan. In deriding tones he offers the challenge: "Choose a man! If you win (and you won't) we will serve you ...but if I win (and I will) you will serve us."

The rogue waits for an answer, but there is none. After considerable silence, Goliath is further emboldened and heaps scorn and reproach upon the armies of Israel.

**And the Philistine said, "I defy the ranks of Israel this day. Give me a man, that we may fight together." When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.** (vv. 10-11)

Saul, having lost the enabling power of the spirit, has no courage to respond to Goliath's taunts and takes refuge in shameful silence with his dismayed troops.

**Reflection: Naming the giants in our lives** – It is tempting to distance ourselves from Saul at this point, choosing instead to align ourselves emotionally with David, the hero-to-be. But Saul's fearful cowering invites us to look closely at our own encounters with giants. Who or what are the giants in your life? Who or what intimidates you, shuts you down emotionally, steals your voice and robs you of faith? Have you ever been in the "Valley of Elah" where you found yourself paralyzed and unable to move? How do you typically respond to intimidation? Are you aware of being an intimidating force on someone else?

## II. A Son from Bethlehem (1 Sam 17:12-22)

### A. Jesse's sons, seven plus one (vv. 12-15)

Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years. The three oldest sons of Jesse had followed Saul to the battle. And the names of his three sons who went to the battle were Eliab the firstborn, and next to him Abinadab, and the third Shammah. David was the youngest. The three eldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem. (vv. 12-15)

After considerable time has elapsed since chapter 16, we are re-introduced to David and his father from Bethlehem, the "place of new things." David and his brothers are set in dramatic contrast by their age, allegiance and occupations. In the face of national crisis, Jesse con-

tributes his three eldest to the war effort. They have become elite Army Rangers resolutely following king Saul. Having gone after Saul, David's brothers will lapse into the same paralysis of spirit that has stricken their king, for as the general goes, so go the troops.

By contrast David, being the youngest, is sidelined from serving in the conflict. Instead he "went back and forth from Saul" to Bethlehem, faithfully serving two fathers. Like a student with two summer jobs, he maintained his responsibilities as court musician to Saul, and when Saul was having a good day he made regular visits home to Bethlehem to feed his father's flock. I wonder if David felt disappointed that he was left out of the fight?

### B. A father's greatest concern (vv. 16-19)

For forty days the Philistine came forward and took his stand, morning and evening. And Jesse said to David his son, "Take for your brothers an ephah of this parched grain, and these ten loaves, and carry them quickly to the camp to your brothers. Also take these ten cheeses to the commander of their thousand. See if your brothers are well, and bring some token from them. They are with Saul and all the men of Israel in the Valley of Elah, fighting against the Philistines."<sup>7</sup> (vv. 16-19)

As the stalemate continues for forty days, Jesse becomes concerned about his sons. The lengthy standoff must have seriously depleted the food rations of Saul's army. So Jesse prepares generous portions of bread, grain and cheese for David to take his brothers and their chief officer. Bethlehem will once again prove to be a literal "house of bread." But Jesse has more concerns than bread. Sensing a military disaster, he urgently requests David to "hurry" [lit. "run"] to the camp to check on the "welfare" (*shalom*) of his *brothers*, and bring back a token to relieve a father's worried heart.

Up until now, David has proven himself well as a *shepherd* and *musician*. Now in the role of *messenger*, David will be brought to the front lines of war. Jesse's request evokes the memory of Joseph's story when Jacob made a similar request to his youngest son – "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring me word" (Gen 37:14). If history repeats itself, David is going to meet with some fierce family resistance.

### C. Embracing a father's heart (vv. 20-22)

**And David rose early in the morning and left the sheep with a keeper and took the provisions and went, as Jesse had commanded him. And he came to the encampment as the host was going out to the battle line, shouting the war cry. And Israel and the Philistines drew up for battle, army against army. And David left the things in charge of the keeper of the baggage and ran to the ranks and went and greeted his brothers.** (vv. 20-22)

For the first time in the story, David's character comes to the surface. Up until now he has been the epitome of compliance, but we have yet to hear his voice or see the drive within his soul. Now his true colors break out like the morning dawn.

If you want to know what drives a man's heart, put a camera on him at the break of day, then follow him when he is alone on a business trip and you'll quickly discover who he serves. David proves that he is a son whose interests are governed more by his father's concerns than his own. This is remarkable, when we consider how Jesse earlier treated him as a *non-son* and showed favoritism toward his older brothers. David accepts that love can be irrational, unequal, and at times, unjust. As a loving son, he nevertheless treats his father's request as a holy mission.

At the first sign of morning light he delegates his previous responsibilities and leaves the flock in the care of a shepherd. Then he gathers all the foodstuffs his father asked him to and sets out straightaway for the Valley of Elah. Though the journey was more than fifteen miles, he arrives while it was still morning, just as the opposing armies were drawing

up for battle (for you joggers, David was averaging about an 8 minute mile pace carrying more than 35 pounds of food!).

When he arrived at the camp, he “left” the provisions with the keeper of the baggage. We’re reminded how Saul hid among the baggage, when the nation was searching for their king. By contrast, David “runs” from the baggage to the frontlines to fulfill his father’s foremost concern, the well-being (*shalom*) of his brothers. But before he is able to receive a token of their safety, he is interrupted by Goliath’s brazen voice. Following after his father’s heart has led him to an international stage where his life is about to take an historic turn.

**Reflection: Obedience brings David to the forefront of Holy War** – From the moment of David’s anointing until now, God has orchestrated every event, every detail and nuance to get his “chosen” servant to the stage of battle. David has done only one thing: he has faithfully served God with the full measure of his talents and gifts in every situation God has placed him in – the king’s court, his father’s household, even the sheep pasture. Holy mission often emerges out of the daily exercise of our roles as husbands, fathers, sons and employees. Has God ever sent you on a business trip or domestic errand that ended up serving a higher purpose? Were you able to see in that moment that you were David, a son sent on a father’s mission and ushered onto a greater stage? Or were your spiritual blinders on, casting your vision downward at the mundane tasks of life and rendering you blind to the kingdom work at hand?

### III. Faulty Sight, Perceptive Hearing (1 Sam 17:23-31)

#### A. Saul’s troops are terrified by what they “see” (vv. 23-25)

As he talked with them, behold, the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, came up out of the ranks of the Philistines and spoke the same words as before. And David heard him. All the men of Israel, when they **saw** the man, fled from him and were much afraid. And the men of Israel said, “Have you **seen** this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel. And the king will enrich the man who kills him with great riches and will give him his daughter and make his father’s house free in Israel.” (vv. 23-25)

Once again the gargantuan Philistine comes out with his swaggering gait, and blasphemous bravo. And once again Saul’s troops are terrified by what they see and flee in fear. But on this occasion there’s a new player on the stage. David overhears the conversation of the retreating troops. Though Saul will not fight, he is now willing to pay someone else to fight for him. And the reward is substantial: a princess bride, a four-year scholarship at a private university of their choice, box seat season tickets to the SF Giants, a Tesla roadster, and tax-exempt status for anyone brave enough to get in the ring with the heavyweight from Gath and deliver the knockout punch.

#### B. David indignant by what he “hears” (26-27)

And David said to the men who stood by him, “What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?” And the people answered him in the same way, “So shall it be done to the man who kills him.” (vv. 23-27)

David continues his conversation with the troops, gathering precise details of the king’s offer. While Israel is governed by what they “see,” David is governed by what he “hears.” He does not see Goliath as an invincible warrior, but a blasphemous idol worshipper who worships dead deities. “He does not intend to stand and gape at a mythical figure.”<sup>8</sup>

David’s first speech is filled with zeal for God’s name. He cannot believe that Saul’s troops permit this pitiful blasphemy to go unchallenged. The contrast could not be greater; while Israel languishes in resignation, David is enraged with indignation. Implicit in his conversation with the troops is an offer to take up the challenge. David’s obedience brought

him to the forefront of the battle, but his holy zeal and personal initiative will propel him into his historic role as Israel’s savior.

In like manner, it was Jesus’ zeal that propelled him front and center before Israel’s leadership. Seeing that the court of the Gentiles had been turned into a marketplace, Jesus was consumed with indignation and rage. And with no warning he cleansed the temple with a ferocious exercise of authority and power. “And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and oxen. And he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. . . His disciples remembered that it was written, ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’” (John 2:15, 17).

If there is one quality lacking in our ranks today, it is holy zeal. In our age of tolerance, there is precious little moral outrage.

**Reflection: Like David and Jesus, we should not be bound by the role given to us by our family or employer.** As we faithfully serve in the realms God has assigned to us, opportunities will arise “to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18). When these divine encounters arise, like Philip (Acts 8:26 ff.) we are to seize the initiative, knowing God has orchestrated this moment and wants to use us as an instrument to further his kingdom. Taking the initiative is not self-promotion, but answering the divine call with zeal to crush the serpent under our feet (Rom 16:20).

### IV. Family Tension (1 Sam 17:28-31)

#### A. The oldest disdains the youngest (vv. 28-29)

Now Eliab his eldest brother heard when he spoke to the men. And Eliab’s anger was kindled against David, and he said, “Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle.” (vv. 28-29)

As David probes for further information from the men who were standing with him, his eldest brother was seized with anger and unleashes his fury on his little brother. He reproaches David with rhetorical questions that assume evil motives and condemning actions. He caustically berates him for abandoning his domestic responsibilities in order to become a thrill seeker. The perceptive reader knows that Jesse’s firstborn has no “heart” to see what God sees. The real reason for his rage was his jealousy of David and his shame at being rejected.

#### B. The youngest holds his ground (v. 29-30)

And David said, “What have I done now? Was it not but a word?” And he turned away from him toward another, and spoke in the same way, and the people answered him again as before. When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul, and he sent for him. (vv. 29-31)

Rather than justifying his actions in a lengthy defensive dialogue, David refuses to back down and fires back two rhetorical questions of his own. The first demands hard evidence from Eliab to back his haughty accusations. David refuses to entertain hearsay and often uses this refrain to prove his innocence (1 Sam 20:1; 26:1; 29:8). David’s second question is brief but cryptic, and is translated variously by different versions: The NASB: “Was it not just a question?” The TNIV: “Can’t I even speak?” The JPS: “I was only asking!” The ESV: “Was it not but a word?”

While all these translations suggest a defensive posture, Fokkelman perceives an offensive thrust in David’s words. He translates David’s question as “**Isn’t this the matter then?**”<sup>9</sup> David holds his ground and points out the real reason for big brother’s anger was that his “words” brought to light the underlying problem that no one was willing to address. “Isn’t this the matter then?” is no apology; these words cut Eliab to the bone. Big brother, you’re a coward! “Prudent speech” at its very best (16:18). David is not a man who concedes, defends, explains or

justifies himself with self-protecting, self-pitying words. He is one who turns the discursive tables to reveal the true emotions and intentions of those around him. Later, his greater Son will exhibit the same prudent speech with a well-placed word or rhetorical question that silences the self-righteous and calls sinners to repentance.

David refuses to be defined by family relationships, and will freely pursue his higher calling. He turns away from his older brother and shows him his back, a symbolic act signifying that Eliab no longer exerts emotional control over him. We witness the same behavior from Jesus, in Mark 3:20-34. While he is engaged in “holy war” with the scribes, his family has come to retrieve him, thinking he has lost his senses. But Jesus refuses their request and redefines who his family is, prioritizing the community of faith over and above the obligations of kinship (Mark 3:33-35).

**Reflection:** *None of us enjoy rejection, especially when it comes from those closest to us. But rejection played a key role in making David a leader.* Standing firm against the ridicule of his brother strengthened David when he had to put his resume before a king who lacked confidence in him, and to stand undaunted against the fury of Goliath’s reproaches. Therefore, don’t expect those closest to you to embrace your “anointing,” nor expect universal approval before taking the initiative to act in faith. If David had needed familial “approval” before acting, Goliath would have lived to see retirement.

Undaunted by his brother’s ridicule, David continues his detailed investigation of royal matters uninterrupted. Because of the zeal of his faith and careful investigation, others take him seriously and begin to see a ray of hope in their deplorable situation. As a result, Jesse’s youngest is sent to the king.

Following his father’s heart places David on the stage of the battle where his life will take an historic turn. As David makes his father’s priorities his own, we observe his transformation from a shepherd, to a messenger, and to a warrior. This is a man, a man after God’s own heart.

At the Men’s Retreat this fall we heard the story of Carl Medearis, a man whose reputation is like David’s – prudent of speech with a heart that follows hard after God. An expert in the field of Arab-American and Muslim-Christian relations, Carl left his home in America and moved to the Middle East in 1983 where he lived until 2004. In his book *Muslims, Christians and Jesus*, Carl recounts the following story that took place during one of his trips into Iraq after 9/11:

I was sitting in a hotel lobby in a small southern Iraqi town when three young staff members walked over from the front desk and sat down. “What are you doing in Iraq?” asked one of the guys. “Aren’t you Americans? My friend says you are Christians.”

“Yes, most of us are Americans,” I answered, “but we live here in the Middle East. What do you mean when you think we might be Christians?”

“You know,” he said, “Christians! People who believe in Israel and the Trinity, and don’t like us.”

“Well, I can’t speak for others, but I’d love to tell you who we really are.” They were hooked and obviously bored in their jobs and pulled a sofa closer to hear my story.

“We are people of faith. Like you. People who believe in one true God. Like you. People who want to love their wives and children and do good. Like you. We take prayer seriously. We want to be godly and act justly. Like you.”

“We also try to follow the ways, teaching, and life of Jesus the Messiah. He’s our model for all we do and think and say. We’re

at it, but this is our goal. So we’ve come here looking to find out if Jesus is here already and what he might want us to do here.”

They loved what I was saying and asked for a story about Jesus. My Arabic is not very good, but I shared the story Jesus told about the prodigal son. Everything went great until I got to the part when the son returns home. In the Lebanese dialect the words for *village* and *snake* are very similar. So that they heard me say was, “As the boy approached his snake...” They gasped and with worried looks interrupted me to ask if he got bit. “Not snake... village!” The story hit home, and God’s Spirit was palpably present.

Then one of the young men said to me, “When I was ten, a German man gave my daddy a cassette of stories of Jesus. We gathered at our table and listened to that cassette every night for almost a year. Then it broke. The German man had told my father that Jesus had a book out, but he didn’t have one to give us. He told us to look for it and someday we’d get one. Do you know about the book Jesus has?”

Carl ran to his room and gave them a gospel of Luke. The young man burst into tears, put it first to his forehead and then to his lips and kissed it. Without another word he took off running to show it to his father. A while later, he returned and said, “I showed it to my father and uncles and they all agreed this was the book that had the truth about Jesus. But they said I had to get more for other family members and friends. Please, do you have more?”<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the majority of Americans, who stereotype the Muslim world as violent terrorists, Carl is a true biblical “champion” (“the man [in the space] between”). He has refused to be intimidated by the stereotypical myth and instead courageously crossed the Valley of Elah. Disarming those he met with love and humility, he has made countless friends in the Middle East, most of whom love to talk about Jesus.

May the Lord grant a new generation of Davids to spring up among us.

*Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one,  
in your splendor and majesty!  
In your majesty ride out victoriously  
for the cause of truth and meekness and righteousness;  
let your right hand teach you awesome deeds! (Ps 45:3-4)*

1. John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart, Discovering the Secret of a Man’s Soul* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 40-41.

2. H. J. Katzenstein, “Philistines,” *ABD*, 5:326.

3. Boogaart, “History and Drama in the Story of David and Goliath,” *Reformed Review* 38 (1985), 207.

4. Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands*, trans. M. Pearlman (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), 354-355.

5. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1986), 148.

6. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 149.

7. I have used the TNIV’s translation for v. 19, which attributes the words to Jesse and not the narrator. Jesse believes that his sons are engaged in combat, but the reality is more depressing—they are paralyzed in fear.

8. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 161.

9. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 165.

10. Carl Medearis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus, Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2008), 77-80.