



Catalog No. 1646
 1 Samuel 17:32–54
 Twenty Ninth Message
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 November 14, 2010

WHEN A MAN RISES UP

SERIES: *THE CROSSING FATES*

Several years ago I was asked to give the chapel talk to the Stanford football team. Pre-game motivational talks aren't exactly my forte, and my first attempt speaking to the Dallas Cowboys in the early 80's was not exactly what you would call a flaming success. But being that it was my Alma Mater, I thought I'd give it a second chance. The difficulty comes in knowing how to motivate players to play well without diminishing Jesus' kingdom to a football game. And so I asked them, "What is it about this game that motivates you to submit to such grueling mental and physical discipline in order to sacrifice your bodies each and every Saturday?"

The short answer is "the glory of the battle." Men are "purpose driven" and will rise up to sacrifice their lives for a battle that they feel is glorious. Every time they run out of the tunnel and step out the playing field, they find themselves competing on a stage much bigger than themselves. On game day there are thousands of spectators watching in the stands and millions viewing the game on television. But beyond the present, a player's stage is laden with memory, in some cases a century of great tradition. I mentioned to the players that when they hear the band play *It's All Right Now* after a touchdown, they may feel the elation of the moment, but for old alumni like me, it elicits decades of memories – the sweetest being our victory over USC in 1970 then culminating their year as Rose Bowl champions.

Being a champion is an athlete's dream, but it is nothing compared to the glory of being a champion on God's field of battle. Today we will travel to the Valley of Elah to conclude one of the most famous battles of all time, and we will learn how a man after God's own heart fights for his King.

Last week we saw how the Philistine army had driven deep into Judah's territory and Saul's troops rallied to head off their advance. The two armies stationed themselves on opposing hills with the Valley of Elah between them. The situation came to an impasse, as neither army wanted to make themselves vulnerable by leaving the high ground to confront the enemy in the valley below. To break the stalemate, a veteran warrior from the Philistine ranks came out to challenge the army of Israel. Goliath is called a *champion*, or literally "the man in [the space] between," an apt description of the situation. For forty days this strutting giant hurled insults and taunts that paralyzed the battle-weary Israelites in fear.

From that scene of faithless paralysis, the narrator transported us to Bethlehem to see the qualities in David's character that God used to promote him from his domestic roles as shepherd and messenger to the international stage as Israel's "man of war:"

1. David proved that he was a son whose interests were governed more by his father's concerns than his own. His obedience brought him from the fields of Bethlehem to the stage of Holy War.
2. When he arrived at the battle lines, he assessed the situation not by what he saw, but what he "heard," and took the initiative to challenge the status quo.
3. When faced with his brother's disdain, he refused to be defined by family relationships, and freely pursued his higher calling. This is what won the respect of Saul's soldiers and prepared him to persist in the face of Goliath's blasphemous curses.

As we resume the drama, we find David standing before the king with his resume in hand.

I. Volunteering for the Fight (1 Sam 17:31-37)

A. David volunteers to slay the dragon (vv. 31-32)

When the words that David spoke were heard, they repeated them before Saul, and he sent for him. And David said to Saul, "Let no man's heart fail because of him. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine." (1 Sam 17:31-32 ESV)

When you are being interviewed for a job, protocol suggests that it is wise to keep your enthusiasm in check and to speak only when asked, especially in the presence of the CEO. But the severity of the crisis, combined with David's zeal for God's name, overrules conventional wisdom. As an outsider, David is the only one who is able to see and hear with fresh eyes and ears what is going on. His words are spiritually perceptive, penetrating to the very heart of Israel's spiritual paralysis. Before the king can even formulate a question, Bethlehem's boy offers to slay the dragon.

Reflection: Courageous initiative to confront evil is not self-promotion, but confidence in knowing who you are. Without David's initiative Israel's paralysis would have gone on indefinitely. How often do we remain passive, refusing to step out in faith until we feel called upon by the powers that be?

B. The king's rejection (v. 33)

And Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth." (v. 33)

Without faith, Saul cannot "see" what David sees. Though he appreciates his youthful idealism, he reminds David of some obvious but apparently overlooked facts. "You are but a *youth* and this Philistine has been a man of war (i.e. a professional fighting machine) from his *youth*" – sensible words and well meant to prevent the naïve lad from throwing himself in front of the tank in the Valley of Elah. Saul's royal rejection should have slammed the door on the interview, but David is determined and does not give up. He persists in changing the king's heart and masterfully gives him a long look at his resume.

C. David's persistence (vv. 34-36)

But David said to Saul, "Your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God." (vv. 34-36)

To Saul's surprise, David's acknowledges that he is no fighting man but, as his resume proves, he is the consummate animal tamer. In this lively self-portrait, David details his vast experience in rescuing his father's flock from ferocious beasts (the verbal forms denote repetition and habitual patterns!). If a lion or bear ran off with one of his father's lambs, he fearlessly ran after it, struck it and snatched the lamb out of its mouth. And if the bear or lion was dumb enough to rise up and retaliate, David grabbed it by the beard and killed it. The word went out to all Bethlehem's sheep killers – "If you value your life keep your hands off Jesse's sheep, and by all means, don't mess with this shepherd!"

From David's perspective, when he *heard* Goliath defying the living God, the idol-worshipping Philistine became a beast, less than human.

With that insight, what Israel needs is not a warrior but an animal tamer, which makes David the ideal candidate for the job.

D. David lands the job (v. 37)

And David said, “The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “Go, and the Lord be with you!” (v. 37)

Confronted with the supreme logic and persistence of David’s faith, Saul is unable to formulate a rebuttal. After several moments of embarrassing silence, David continues on the offensive, listing more compelling credentials. In addition to his courage is his holy zeal for the Lord’s name and his absolute confidence in God’s commitment to him. David’s unrelenting words of faith break through the walls of Saul’s resistance and push the reluctant king over the edge. For a moment in time, the faithless king must adopt the faith of the boy. Saul not only grants his permission, he seals it with the customary blessing, “*The Lord be with you!*” God’s covenant commitment to his anointed guarantees the victory.

Reflection: Our ability to confront crisis in the public sphere is developed by faith exercised in the private and domestic spheres of home and work. In order to fight Goliath, David will remain faithful to who he is through and through: a shepherd. The apostle Paul applies this principle when he instructs Timothy how to select elders and deacons for leadership in the church (1 Tim 3:1-13) – men and women are first to have been tested and approved at home with their families and at work with their colleagues long before they are ever considered for public service in the church. What a contrast to those who aspire to go into “full-time” ministry as a way of avoiding the difficult, invisible work of serving their families and holding down a regular job.

II. The Weapons of War (1 Sam 17:38-40)

A. Saul’s imposes his armor (vv. 38-39a)

Then Saul clothed David with his armor. He put a helmet of bronze on his head and clothed him with a coat of mail, and David strapped his sword over his armor. And he tried in vain to go, for he had not tested them. (vv. 38-39a)

Having granted his permission to what he thinks is a lost cause, Saul tries his best to at least make David presentable for battle by clothing him in his armor. David politely submits and heads off to the coach’s locker room. Given the great disparity in their size, I wonder what Saul was thinking. Normally the helmet is the last piece of equipment a warrior dons, but Saul places it on David’s head as the first. I suspect its weight made David top-heavy and its size made it almost impossible for him see, let alone walk. Then if we imagine David’s gymnast frame drowning in Saul’s XXL armor, the scene verges on the ludicrous.

If you’ve ever been forced to wear someone else’s clothes because they felt that what you were wearing was inadequate for the occasion, you know how humiliating it can be. Clothing represents our persona, and Saul is attempting to give David a new persona for the battle. David may not be a warrior, but he at least needs to look the part.

Jacob suffered similar humiliation at the hands of his mother Rebekah. Overhearing the plan that Isaac was on the verge of giving Jacob’s blessing away to Esau, she forces Jacob to dress up in a ridiculous Halloween costume to look like his older brother. Rather than confronting her husband with the truth, she humiliates Jacob by making him wear a false persona in order to receive his father’s blessing. How often do parents communicate that message to sons and daughters? You can have your father’s blessing *only* when you put on the persona of your older brother or sister.

Reflection: Beware of those who want you to wear their clothes. God uses who we are and what we have become to fight his battles. We don’t have to fight a “new way” on the world’s terms. If you fight the world the world’s way the world will destroy you.

In his book, *Muslims, Christians and Jesus: Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships*, Carl Medearis tells the story of being introduced to a Saudi princess through a mutual friend. They met at her home, and

after tea they began to talk. The conversation quickly turned into a snake pit: politics. Medearis reflects, “I hate talking about politics—somebody always gets hurt.” He continues:

The princess had a unique perspective, however. She was a well-educated, highly intelligent member of the royal class, with a degree in journalism, of all things. Some of her work had been published in national presses, and she used her intellect and position to discuss women’s rights, cultural instability, and the conflict between Westernism and entrenched Islamic traditions. Throughout, she remained respectful of Islam, as it was the religion of her people; at the same time, she clearly had a deep sense of offense toward the West—America in particular.

As she became more vocal and adamant, delivering one criticism after another in perfect English, we could tell it was personal to her.

It had become a monologue until my friend spoke up.

“Look, one thing’s really obvious about all of this.”

Perhaps anticipating some retaliation, she snapped, “What is that?”

“Well,” he said, “you’ve been hurt very badly, and I’m sorry for that. I really am.”

“Excuse me?” She said, taken back, “What do you mean?”

“I can tell you’re very intelligent, and you’re very knowledgeable about East-West conflicts. But I can tell your feelings on these issues don’t come from your education or your work, but your heart... and your heart, Princess, is wounded.”

And then my friend started to cry. He was doing what Jesus does—looking at the heart with compassion—while I had been getting angry.

The princess broke.

After a few minutes she looked up and wiped her eyes. “You are right. I am hurt, and I see no way out of it. I’m trapped in the layers of politics and religion and culture.” She paused, “I have spent all my life to find some meaning, something to belong to, and it always circulated back to the same old things again. And it’s so disappointing. I try to reach the people of Saudi Arabia to give them hope, and I have no hope myself.”²

At that point the door opened to tell her about Jesus and his kingdom. That is how you fight God’s battles – with the heart of a shepherd.

B. The weapons of choice (vv. 39b-40)

Then David said to Saul, “I cannot go with these, for I have not tested them.” So David put them off. Then he took his staff in his hand and chose five smooth stones from the brook and put them in his shepherd’s pouch. His sling was in his hand, and he approached the Philistine. (vv. 39b-40)

After submitting to this ridiculous experiment, David candidly speaks his mind and states the obvious. If he can’t walk in Saul’s armor, he certainly can’t fight! He has no fighting experience in armor, especially armor twice his size.

Having wasted enough time in this pre-game coach’s corner, David “puts them off” and leaves them on the floor of the locker room. He refuses to be a “miniature Saul” on the field of battle. With renewed conviction, David clothes himself as the person God has made him to be – a shepherd of the flock. And as a shepherd, his weapons of choice are his staff, a sling and five smooth stones.

Recently, I listened to Oprah Winfrey interview George W. Bush, and she asked him why he wasn’t following the typical post-presidency path of being a spokesperson for a global issue or a policy influencer or humanitarian. Bush responded by saying that his presidency was just a chapter in his life, and that in this present season he wants to focus on his family – his parents, his wife and especially his children. Hearing Bush’s response, I was reminded of the psalmist’s words instructing us that our children are indeed the best weapons we have to battle the enemy.

Like arrows in the hand of a warrior
are the children of one's youth.
Blessed is the warrior
who fills his quiver with them!
He shall not be put to shame
when he speaks with his enemies in the gate. (Ps 127:4-5)

This is why I have 5 smooth stones embedded in the pavement of my front porch, a tribute to my 5 children and a reminder to make God's priorities my own.

III. The War of Words (1 Sam 17:41-47)

A. Arrogant Words (vv. 41-44)

As the two combatants approach each other on the field of battle, we wonder which one will be able to set the rules of the contest. Will it be the warrior or the shepherd?

And the Philistine moved forward and came near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. And when the Philistine looked and saw David, he disdained him, for he was but a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance. And the Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field." (vv. 41-44)

Goliath's initial impression of David totally misleads him, and as he stares long at David he is filled with contempt, "for he was but a youth, ruddy and handsome in appearance." As the gargantuan giant lumbers towards David, he grabs the opening line, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" After forty days Goliath has yet to lose his quick wit and defaming tongue, which no doubt brought cheers from the Philistine galleries.

Then he belches curses across the valley in the name of his Philistine gods and predicts a quick end to the battle. What he doesn't realize of course is that his rhetorical question and bestial curses have played right into David's hands, strengthening his imagination as Israel's greatest animal tamer. He who tamed the lion and bear will have no trouble taming a dog! David's creative vision to see what no one else can see makes him stand apart from everyone else in Israel.³

B. Courageous Words (vv. 45-47)

Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. And I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand." (vv. 45-47)

David responds to Goliath's words with words of his own. The length of David's speech makes us ask, Why does the narrator give more space to the battle of words than the actual fight? And for that matter, Why does David speak at all? Why not just silence the avenging foe with one deadly shot?

The answer is theology. Acts of salvation must be interpreted. David's opening line is the longest in the chapter and of enormous weight.

Before the battle begins, David inserts God's name front and center in order to give all the players in this drama a supreme lesson in theology.

For David, rehearsing the basic tenets of his faith strengthens his resolve and keeps him fully focused on the Lord, who is at work in the situation. His prediction that he will "strike" Goliath down and "cut off" his head is not presumption on his part, but a bold declaration that those who trust in idols will become like them (Ps 115:1-8). Goliath's blasphemy made this the Lord's battle, not David's, and that battle had already been

fought and won in Dagon's house (5:4). David is operating on historical precedent and rock-solid theology.

For Israel, David's stirring words were essential to open their blind eyes to the living Lord they had forgotten. Not only was this a war of rival gods, but David also reminds God's people that their weapons were spiritual as well, "divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses" (2 Cor 10:4 NASB). It is necessary before the battle begins for David to thoroughly renounce any temptation to trust in weapons for victory.

Reflection: The greatness of a man is found in a faith that not only persists through the many faces of opposition, but a faith that he can articulate for the benefit of God's people and the whole world. The apostle Paul describes this as:

taking up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. (Eph 6:16-18)

IV. The War of Weapons (1 Sam 17:48-54)

A. The Preemptive Strike: A sling and stone (vv. 48-49)

When the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. And David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone and slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead (or "greave"), and he fell on his face to the ground.

One can hardly fail to see the contrast between the swift and light-footed David who "runs" into the battle, and "the cumbersome and laborious gate of the colossus, who is thus conditioned by the weaponry not only mentally but also physically."⁴

Before the Philistine champion can even get within range, David makes the preemptive strike with his sling and a stone. David's skill is reminiscent of those famous left-handed warriors from Benjamin, who we are told "could sling a stone at a hair and not miss" (Judg 20:16).

Where did the stone strike – Goliath's forehead or his greave? Goliath is down for the count, but there is ambiguity in the text as to exactly where the stone struck. Though all the translations interpret the Hebrew *meṣaḥ* as Goliath's "forehead," Ariella Deem observes *meṣaḥ* also means "greave," where in verse 6 it was listed as part of Goliath's armor. Fokkelman finds her arguments "convincing so that the equivalent of the Achilles' heel in the Bible must in the future be Goliath's knee." Quoting Ariella,

The agile young shepherd, skilled with his sling, aims his stone at the shinbone, immediately above the tip of the greave. Thus the stone would hit the upper shin or knee and fall into the space which *must* be left to allow the knee to bend and enable the warrior to walk. It is exactly at this vulnerable space that David deliberately aims, thereby causing the stone to "sink" into the greave, that is between the greave and the knee, so the Philistine – who at the moment is awkwardly making his way towards David – will stumble forward and fall, "on his face." Fokkelman continues,

David does not hit the man, but renders his armor unserviceable. After everything we have heard about (or rather, against) arms, this is a much more effective telling point of the dénouement than the old translation. His own armor turns against Goliath; how ludicrous now the whole catalogue of arms in the beginning. If he had been hit in the forehead, he would have fallen backwards; now he falls forwards, and thus unwittingly comes into the praying position before the God of Israel. He has to fall, just like Dagon in 5:3-4.⁵

Whenever someone comes at you heavily armed in anger, remember there is always a vulnerable opening somewhere to toss a little stone of love, to disarm them and render their armor useless.

B. The execution: Goliath's head (vv. 50-51a)

So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and with a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him. There was no sword in the hand of David. Then David ran and stood over the Philistine and

took his sword and drew it out of its sheath and killed him and cut off his head with it.

In the midst of this intense drama, the narrator stops the action mid-stream and inserts the theology of the day in bold letters – “**There was no sword in the hand of David.**” But with tremendous irony Goliath is down for the count, and to make sure he stays down, David runs past the stunned armor bearer to Goliath’s body collapsed on the ground. He takes Goliath’s sword into his hand and cuts off his head. As David would write later, “How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished!” (2 Sam 1:27).

V. The Faith of One Affects the Many (1 Sam 17:51b-54)

A. Fearful men transformed into “sons” (vv. 51b-53)

When the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled. And the men of Israel and Judah rose with a shout and pursued the Philistines as far as Gath and the gates of Ekron, so that the wounded Philistines fell on the way from Shaaraim as far as Gath and Ekron. And the people [lit. “sons”] of Israel came back from chasing the Philistines, and they plundered their camp. And David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem, but he put his armor in his tent. (vv. 51b-53)

The one who takes the initiative by faith to bring down strongholds of evil impacts an entire community (and church), drawing them in to participate in the spoils of victory and to make the way of faith their own (Eph 4:8-14; Col 2:13-15). As soon as the Israelites join in the pursuit and take part in the spoil, they are given back their title as “sons.” The son from Bethlehem has turned the shameful men of Saul into “sons,” true sons who subdue their enemies. What a day, what a champion, what glory!

B. The token of “shalom” (v. 54)

And David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem, but he put his armor in his tent. (v. 54)

The only unfinished business of the day was for David to bring back to his worried father some token of “*shalom*” regarding his brothers’ safety. As an obedient son David brings back the head of Goliath, a fine token indeed!

Why does man long for a battle to fight? Since the opening pages of Genesis, there has been a war on, with God engaged in an intense fight for our freedom. In Exodus, he is given the title, “*Man of War*” (Exod 15:3). In Samuel, he is known as “the *LORD of Armies*.” In the Psalms, he is invoked to do battle against the enemies of his Anointed. In Isaiah he “*goes out like a mighty man, like a man of war he stirs up his zeal; he cries out, he shouts aloud, he shows himself mighty against his foes*” (Isa 42:13). In the gospels, his Son ruthlessly battles the enemy, drawing him out and exposing him for who he really is. And in the final conflict, the Son crushes the serpent’s head, announcing freedom to all the captives. As our Commander in Chief, the risen Christ calls upon his disciples to join in the fight and liberate the captives in every tribe and nation. The question is, Will you answer the call?

VI. Answering God’s Call

A. Go to the recruiting office and meet your commander

Jesus invites us, “Follow me and I’ll make you fishers of men.” If you would join the battle, you must see where it is Jesus is going, and follow him. To our surprise, it seems Jesus prefers to pursue the worst among us and the least among us. He had no trouble leading his disciples out of their comfort zones, especially when he asked two terrorists to join the group – a zealot and a tax collector. Make no mistake: the Good Shepherd will lead you into battlefields that you did not consider before enlisting, to bring good news to the very enemy you most hate and fear.

B. Enlarge your vision

What does it take to become a champion, to be the “man in the space in between”? It takes an enlarged vision, the ability to see by faith the big picture of the battle that God is waging. It doesn’t take many “champions” to change an entire community, and those who will step out of the ranks of their comfort zones and venture forth into the Valley of Elah will discover they are called to the glorious task of liberating the captives. Start by getting connected to a missionary. Allow yourself to be captivated by what God is doing in their community, and challenge yourself to enter in fully by supporting them with your prayer, your time and your resources.

C. Go to boot camp

With your enlistment papers in hand and an expanded vision of the battlefield, head to the front lines: go on a mission trip. As a parent, make sure your son or daughter goes on a missions trip; or better yet, take them with you. Expose yourself and your children early and often to the work God is doing around the world. Not only will you see firsthand that the Kingdom of God is alive and well on earth, but you will discover the myriad ways in which the culture of the Silicon Valley distorts and blinds you to the real work to which God calls you.

D. Stay healthy – nourished

Lastly, it is necessary we stay healthy and strong for the duration of the campaign. Therefore you must stay focused on the cross and keep yourself nourished on the body and blood of Christ. At the Lord’s Table we most fully worship, entering into his life as the substance and sustenance of our own.

When Jesus walked the earth, all of Israel lay paralyzed before the might of the Romans, the great military machine of that day. But then the one from Bethlehem was brought into the camp. Reports about him were met with disdain by his Jewish brothers and by the authorities. Before the confrontation, one of his own, Peter, offered to arm him. But, like David of old, this one rejected the warrior’s weapons and clothed himself as a shepherd. The New David did not cut off the head of the Romans. Instead, he was pierced by a Roman sword. The enemy won. But in his apparent victory, the greater Goliath, the devil himself, was disarmed. John in his gospel said that the greatest weapon of the shepherd was his own life. He laid down his life to protect his sheep. But in dying, he won. “When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him” (Col 2:15).

Instead of asking the Israel of God to subdue the Romans, Jesus asked them to suffer like him and invite the Romans, and all nations, to join his kingdom and participate in salvation worldwide.

“They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.” (Rev 12:11)

1. I have been greatly helped by Fokkelman’s masterful insights on this text. J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative, A Practical Guide* (Leiden: Deo Publishing, 1999), 31.

2. Carl Medearis, *Muslims, Christians, and Jesus, Gaining Understanding and Building Relationships* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2008), 92-94.

3. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 31-32.

4. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1986), 184-185.

5. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates*, 186.

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