

I Samuel Chapter 17 *“A Victory of Faith”*

Introduction:

Though in modern western culture the story of David’s victory over Goliath has become emblematic of a heroic effort wherein one overcomes seemingly insurmountable odds to defeat an oppressor, this theme does not represent the original author’s purpose in the recounting of this story (and thus it does not represent God’s intent when He inspired this account). Instead, it was intended as a story about the awesome power of God that can be unleashed in the life of one who chooses to exercise genuine faith in Yahweh. This is clear, because in this story it is actually Yahweh who gives the victory to David, and God chose David to be His representative in that battle to demonstrate His power so that all who witnessed this conflict and all those who heard about it would receive a revelation that Yahweh was real, and that salvation can only be found in Him. And within this revelation God had a very specific lesson to teach the Israelites. It was an opportunity to learn that one of the most basic assumptions that had led to their demand for a king like that of the other nations had been false. Worldly resources would never save them, only their God could save them. True security for Israel would come through faith and submission to Yahweh, who could deliver His people even through the most modest of means.

I. Setting the Scene: (vs.1-3)

In these first three verses of the chapter we read, *“Now the Philistines gathered their armies together to battle, and were gathered at Sochoh, which belongs to Judah; they encamped between Sochoh and Azekah, in Ephes Dammim. And Saul and the men of Israel were gathered together, and they encamped in the Valley of Elah, and drew up in battle array against the Philistines. The Philistines stood on a mountain on one side, and Israel stood on a mountain on the other side, with a valley between them.”* Since the Philistines had previously been driven out of Israel’s heartland following the Israelite victory over them that God accomplished through Jonathan (ch.14), we are to understand that here we read about a new incursion by the Philistines into Israelite territory. The town of Socoh was in the Shephelah Valley about fourteen miles west of Bethlehem, very close to the Philistine’s territory.

In this opening portion of the narrative, no specific reference is given regarding how much time had elapsed since the events recorded in the previous chapter. What is clear, however, is that enough time had passed that David was no longer staying exclusively in Saul’s court but was now intermittently allowed to return to his father’s home in Bethlehem. There is also nothing that gives us specific insight into David’s age at this time, we simply know that he was a relatively young man.

The geographical background given in these verses inform us about where this confrontation between Israel and Philistia took place. And this in turn helps us understand the goal the Philistines had for engaging in this strategically important

battle. They intended to secure the valley of Elah for themselves, as it was the natural point of entry into the hill country of the Israelites. Therefore, taking this position was crucial to the Philistines if they were to regain dominance over the Israelites. The location of the Israelite camp was two miles east of the Philistine encampment. The placement of the Philistine encampment being close to a major Philistine city meant they were easily in range of needed provisions to support their army. The valley that is referred to here ran from west to east and was just north of Socoh. In the Hebrew language, the term translated here as “*valley*” can refer to either a narrow valley or to an extended plain located between two mountains or hills. The Philistines were on the southern ridge of the valley, while the Israelites faced them on the northern ridge. In this valley there was a riverbed that was usually dry most of the year. The narrative makes it clear that this valley didn’t represent a physical barrier between the two armies, rather it would represent a psychological barrier of fear that separated the Israelites from the Philistines. A barrier that left Israel’s army paralyzed, unable to advance on their enemy.

II. The Introduction of Goliath: (vs.4-7)

In verse four we read, “*And a champion went out from the camp of the Philistines, named Goliath, from Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span.*” The English word “*champion*” is a translation of two Hebrew words that literally mean a man in between (the implication is he stands between two armies). The use of a champion as a representative in one-on-one combat as a substitute for conflict between the represented armies is not something that was a regular practice in Semite culture, but there are historical records of this among other ancient peoples, and it may have been employed more regularly by the Philistines. The Philistine’s purpose in doing this was not because they were afraid of the Israelite army, rather in light of who their champion was, they thought they could so intimidate the Israelites that they could gain mastery over them without the need of a full battle between the two armies.

It is possible that the name “*Goliath*” was the individual’s personal name. However, a number of scholar’s doubt this, and instead think that “*Goliath*” might have been a title or nickname given to an imposing warrior with a reputation in warfare. It is argued that this conclusion is supported by the fact that a similar individual with the same name is later said to have fought with and been slain by Elhanan (II Sam.21:19). Since the two individuals die at two different times in Israel’s history, they can’t be two references to the same person. Additionally, history demonstrates that many ancient civilizations employed such titles for individuals of position or who were renowned.

We are told that Goliath’s height was “*six cubits and a span*”. Measurements in the ancient world were not precisely standardized as they are in the modern world. A “*cubit*” was the length from one’s elbow to the tip of their middle finger. As a round figure a cubit is assumed to be about eighteen inches. A “*span*” was the distance between the thumb and the little finger when the hand was stretched out, or approximately nine inches. Therefore, Goliath’s height would have been

equivalent to approximately nine feet nine inches. Such a stature would naturally be very intimidating, particularly since the ancient Israelites tended to be shorter in height than modern Americans are. Liberal scholars who are inclined to find errors in the Bible say that at best this was an intentional exaggeration (or purely mythological). However, given the weight of Goliath's weapons, and the fact that there have been rare instances where men of that size have known to exist, there is no reason to doubt the detail. But this observation, while explaining why the Israelites were so intimidated by Goliath, also has an ironic element to it. This is because when Saul was presented to Israel, attention was given to Saul's height (10:23-24). But here the height of Goliath dwarfed Saul, and rather than him acting heroic and strong, he was filled with fear. Thus, a person's physical stature alone was not enough to make that person truly heroic enough to act as Israel's deliverer.

In verses five and six we read, "*He had a bronze helmet 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 bronze javelin between his shoulders.*" The armor of that time and place was a coat of mail that was fashioned from several hundred small bronze plates that resembled fish scales. In contrast to Goliath, the average Israelite soldier only wore regular clothing into battle, not armor. The weight of the armor is said to have been five thousand shekels. That would be equivalent to 125 lbs. This gives us an important insight into what takes place later. Wearing such heavy armor and carrying heavy weapons would mean that Goliath would be somewhat slower in hand-to-hand combat than someone who was not outfitted this way. However, the more immediate literary effect of this detailed description of Goliath's armor would have been that it painted a vivid picture of what a formidable foe Goliath appeared to be to the Israelites, and at the same time it set the stage to highlight the faith and courage of David who confidently chose to engage that man in battle. We know that the description of the armor is important to the story, because more detail is devoted to it than to the actual battle between David and Goliath. Therefore, the author wanted the reader to truly recognize how intimidating Goliath would appear to the Israelites. As a sidenote, though the type of armor that is described here was common in the Aegean world, it was not common in the Near East, and thus they are not mentioned anywhere else in the OT. This makes sense however, because we know from history that the Philistines, as a people, had migrated from the area around the Aegean Sea.

We are told a little bit about Goliath's weapons. The Hebrew word translated as "*javelin*" actually refers to a scimitar; a short, heavy sword-like weapon that started with a straight piece and then curved at the end. The scimitar had a cutting edge only on the outer side of the blade. The idea of the Hebrew phrase translated as "*between his shoulders*" conveys the idea that the scimitar was hung from his shoulders resting on his back.

In verse seven we read, "*Now the staff of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his iron spearhead weighed six hundred shekels; and a shield-bearer went before him.*" The Hebrew term translated as "*weaver's beam*" referred to the leash

attached to a loom. The comparison then is not with the size of the rod, which was unremarkable, but with the leashes of cord that were attached to it. The idea seems to be that this spear was designed to be slung by means of these leashes creating a considerable increase in the force generated to propel the spear, and it would have had rifling for more accuracy in throwing. We are told that the head of the spear weighed six hundred shekels, which would have been equivalent to 15 lbs. The detail that only the spearhead was iron, whereas the rest of the weapons were made of bronze fits the era in which this took place, since iron had only been available for a short time at this point in history and it was expensive. We are also told that a shield-bearer went before Goliath. What this means is that though Goliath carried a small round shield he would use to protect himself, a second much larger shield would be carried by another soldier assisting him. This second shield was a rectangular standing shield, and the shield-bearer would not simply carry the shield from place to place but was responsible to manipulate and position it strategically to protect his master. With the shield bearer going before Goliath, it would have appeared to onlookers that it would be nearly impossible for anyone to successfully attack Goliath with a weapon. This long and detailed account of Goliath's size, armor, and weapons was to highlight how formidable he was as a warrior and the degree of courage that would be required of anyone who would dare to face him.

III. Goliath Issues a Challenge: (vs.8-11)

In verses eight through ten we read, "*Then he stood and cried out to the armies of Israel, and said to them, 'Why have you come out to line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and you the 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.'* And the Philistine said, *'I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight together.'*" What is recorded here is a taunt, Goliath was challenging the Israelites with the question of why they had lined up for conflict if they were unwilling to meet him in one-on-one combat. The idea was that he was accusing them of merely posturing, as they were apparently unwilling to fight. In referring to the Israelite soldiers as "*servants of Saul*", Goliath was demeaning the Israelites, calling them nothing but Saul's slaves. Goliath's taunt reveals that he saw the conflict that day as one completely between himself and the Israelite army, whereas when David entered the scene, he demonstrated a different perspective. He saw that Goliath was ultimately facing a Divine opponent, Yahweh.

In regard to the terms of the challenge, the fact that the Philistines soldiers reneged on the terms of the representative combat, implies that Goliath was not making a genuine offer. Most likely he and those commanding the Philistine forces proposed those terms because they were confident he could defeat any champion that Israel would send against him, and thus they wouldn't be faced with needing to honor the terms they were offering. The Hebrew expression translated as "*defy*"

means to heap shame upon someone. This is a key term in the chapter, and its repetition emphasizes the contempt that Goliath expressed toward the Israelites.

In verse eleven we read, “*When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.*” This portion of the account was meant to set forth again the reality that Saul was not the sort of king who could deliver the Israelites, and that the Israelite elders had been wrong in their assumption that having a king like those who ruled over the surrounding nations would bring them security as a nation. For in that situation, and given the assumptions that brought Saul to power, he would have been the natural one to step forth and meet Goliath’s challenge. However, we are told that Saul, like the rest of the Israelite army, was paralyzed with fear. Goliath’s appearance and gear accomplished the desired effect, the king and his army were frightened and intimidated. However, if the Israelites did not send forth a champion, Goliath would win by default, and the Philistines would once again become the masters of the Israelites. The reader is meant to understand that this response of fear by Saul and the others was contrary to the admonitions Israel had been given in the past by Moses, Joshua, and Yahweh Himself, that they were not to fear, but have faith in their God that He would deliver them if they would simply have faith (Deut.1:21; Josh.1:9; 8:1; 10:25). Therefore, the Israelites’ fear demonstrated their unbelief.

IV. How David Became Involved: (vs.12-21)

In verses twelve through fifteen we read, “*Now David was the son of that Ephrathite of Bethlehem Judah, whose name was Jesse, and who had eight sons. And the man was old, advanced in years, in the days of Saul. The three oldest sons of Jesse had gone to follow Saul to the battle. The names of his three sons who went to the battle were Eliab the firstborn, next to him Abinadab, and the third Shammah. David was the youngest. And the three oldest followed Saul. But David occasionally went and returned from Saul to feed his father’s sheep at Bethlehem.*” These verses give the reader David’s background and they function to introduce how he was sent on the errand that would lead him to Goliath. First, we are told that David was an “*Ephrathite of Bethlehem*”. This designation refers to an ancestor of David, Ephrathah, who was an important matriarch in the Judahite clan (I Chron.2:19; 4:4). She was the mother of Hur, who was an influential figure in the history of Bethlehem. Second, we are told that David was one of eight sons of a man named Jesse. In these verses we are told twice that Jesse’s oldest sons followed Saul (literally, they walked after him). This was done for emphasis (a third reference exists in the Hebrew that is taken out of the English translation for stylistic reasons). It seems to have been the practice in that culture not to require a family to send more than three sons to war (for later we see Saul also had three sons in battle with him, while others were not with him). This detail was inserted to explain why David, who had been employed by Saul as an armor-bearer (16:21), was not with Saul at the encampment facing the Philistines when Goliath shouted out his challenge. At that time, David was serving as Saul’s minstrel, providing soothing music during the periods of the king’s suffering because of the demonic

spirit, he had this additional responsibility even though officially he was one of Saul's armor bearers in the king's court. Earlier David was also referred to as a warrior (16:18). This seems to imply that David had some role in the army but was freed from full-time service to the king, most likely when his three elder brothers were enlisted in the army. At this point David's service was limited to an occasional support role, where his time was divided between his duties to the king, and helping his father by tending to the sheep.

In verse sixteen we read, "*And the Philistine drew near and presented himself forty days, morning and evening.*" The purpose of this verse is to connect the backstory of David's arrival to the main narrative, making it clear that David arrived in the midst of the challenges from Goliath. This forty-day ordeal would have had a serious impact on agriculture since this was a time of harvest and many of Israel's men were not in the fields but were instead encamped opposite the Philistines doing nothing. But this detail mainly serves to convey that the Israelites fear of Goliath and their lack of faith was not a momentary reaction, but that they continued in their fear for a long time. The implication at this point is that had it not been for David, the Israelites would have eventually surrendered.

In verses seventeen and eighteen we read, "*Then Jesse said to his son David, 'Take now for your brothers an ephah of this dried grain and these ten loaves, and run to your brothers at the camp. And carry these ten cheeses to the captain of their thousand, and see how your brothers fare, and bring back news of them.'*" A more literal rendering of the Hebrew words in verse seventeen indicates that Jesse told David to run and make haste. Most likely, Jesse expressed it this way out of concern for the welfare of his sons. The detail about bringing food to the troops from an individual family reflects the cultural norm of the time. The surrounding civilian population would be responsible for providing the army with the food they needed while they were encamped in their area. In regard to this, some scholars have suggested that the detail that Jesse sent dried grain for his sons was intended to convey the poverty of David's family as this was a favorite food of the poor. However, this sort of comment ignores the circumstances. The reality is that when bringing food to a battlefield, there were circumstances that limited what one could bring. No one expected a gourmet meal when standing ready for battle. Roasting was the fastest way to prepare the grain for eating, and historical evidence indicates that this was a common food for people of all classes at the time, because it had the advantage of being something that would keep well and that didn't need to be re-cooked. Jesse's instruction, "*bring back news of them*" would be better translated as "*bring back a token from them*". It was a request to bring back some token that would establish that Jesse's family had not only fulfilled the requirement to supply food to the troops in case there were an inquiry later, but also (given the meaning of the word) it was a reference to a type of compensation that would go to families who supported the war effort by sending their sons to fight in the army. It would function as a sort of promissory note wherein the family would gain a share in whatever plunder was taken from the enemy in the event of a victory. And of

course, at the same time, gaining this token would demonstrate that Jesse's sons were still alive.

In verses nineteen through twenty-one we read, "*Now Saul and they and all the men of Israel were in the Valley of Elah, fighting with the Philistines. So David rose early in the morning, left the sheep with a keeper, and took the things and went as Jesse had commanded him. And he came to the camp as the army was going out to the fight and shouting for the battle. For Israel and the Philistines had drawn up in battle array, army against army.*" The reference in verse nineteen to the men of Israel fighting with the Philistines, does not mean that anything had changed. The two armies were still positioned on opposite sides of the Valley of Elah. The purpose of the verse is to renew the flow of thought back to where it was prior to the short narrative about the events behind David's arrival at the battle lines. David must have begun his journey to his brothers very early, because the distance that David had to travel to the battle lines would have been approximately 15 miles. The detail about David securing a shepherd to watch the sheep while he went on his errand was included in order to reinforce the idea that David, in contrast to Saul, could be trusted to fulfill his responsibilities and thus was a good leader. When we read about "*shouting for battle*" it is a reference to yelling out a war cry, which was meant to rouse one's troops. All of this was apparently for show because though the two armies deployed themselves in battle formation opposite one another, they had not chosen to engage in any direct conflict between them. They were at a standoff until Israel would choose a champion.

V. David's Reaction to Goliath's Challenge: (vs.22-30)

In verses twenty-two through twenty-five we read, "*And David left his supplies in the hand of the supply keeper, ran to the army, and came and greeted his brothers. Then as he talked with them, there was the champion, the Philistine of Gath, Goliath by name, coming up from the armies of the Philistines; and he spoke according to the same words. So David heard them. And all the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him and were dreadfully afraid. So the men of Israel said, 'Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel; and it shall be that the man who kills him the king will enrich with great riches, will give him his daughter, and give his father's house exemption from taxes in Israel.'*" Here the narration makes clear that the Israelite soldiers did not simply fail to advance when Goliath stepped forward, they actually retreated from him as he advanced toward them. It is made clear later by David's question that he did not hear what was being spoken by the men of Israel. Therefore, the phrase relating this detail would be better translated as "*the men of Israel were saying among themselves*". What the expression tells us is that word had spread among the soldiers that Saul wanted someone to volunteer to meet Goliath's challenge. In response, Saul would handsomely reward anyone who would successfully kill Goliath. Among the many rewards offered, the offer of gaining the king's daughter in marriage would have been particularly appealing in that culture because it would provide access to additional unnamed privileges reserved only for those of the royal

household. Ancient kings were often interested in procuring the allegiance of those who had demonstrated military prowess. Marriage agreements in the ancient Near East would often function as political or social alliances between families and thus benefit both parties. Thus, the champion's family would receive important recognition from being connected to the crown, while the king would be allied to the renowned hero who had killed Goliath. The Hebrew says nothing about taxes, only that his father's house would be free in Israel. This probably described a family that had become clients of the crown, supported by allocations of plots of land and supplies. The expression "*his father's house*" referred to a person's extended family, which was smaller than a tribe or a clan, but larger than what would be understood in our modern context as being a household. The expression referred to all the descendants of a single living individual, excluding married daughters, but including male and female slaves and their families, resident neighbors, and if present a resident Levite. The expression could refer to a group comprised of 50-100 individuals residing in a cluster of dwelling units.

What David did hear was Goliath's challenge and blasphemy, and at the same time he also witnessed the army of Israel reacting to that blasphemy not with outrage, but with fear. This may have been the first time in David's life that he heard ridicule being directed toward Yahweh Himself. David, having heard these things during what would have otherwise been a short visit, did so not as a matter of coincidence, but as part of the outworking of God's providence.

In verse twenty-six we read, "*Then David spoke to the men who stood by him, saying, '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?'*" Here David's words represent a radical contrast to what had previously been spoken by the soldiers of Israel regarding their assessment of Goliath and the situation that was before them. This is clearly seen when we set the statements of each party side by side:

| <u>Men of Israel</u> | <u>David</u> |
|-----------------------|---|
| Goliath-this man | Goliath-this uncircumcised Philistine |
| He defies Israel | He defies the armies of the living God |
| The man who kills him | who kills this Philistine, removes disgrace from Israel |

Unlike Saul and his soldiers, David was incredulous, for Goliath was not simply insulting the Israelite army, he was issuing a challenge to Yahweh as well. David's point of view is revealed to be centered in the reality of God's existence, and against that backdrop, Goliath did not appear frightening at all, but rather as someone who needed to be punished for his sin. Biblically, the expression "*living God*" expressed the contrast that existed between Yahweh who actually existed and the lifeless pagan gods and the nonentities that were venerated by the Canaanites and Philistines. This title for God is always used to stress the reality and actual power of the God of Israel and was quite often used to censure those who would dare to mock or otherwise revile Yahweh. These words came as part of David's question regarding the reward that would be given for slaying Goliath.

In verses twenty-seven and twenty-eight we read, “*And the people answered him in this manner, saying, ‘So shall it be done for the man who kills him’. Now Eliab his oldest brother heard when he spoke to the men; and Eliab’s anger was aroused against David, and he said, ‘Why did you come down here? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your pride and the insolence of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle.’*” Eliab, was David’s eldest brother. This brother’s response was most likely motivated by jealousy. Though some liberal commentators suggest that this account seems to forget that Eliab witnessed David’s anointing by Samuel, it actually does just the opposite. Eliab’s response makes more sense in light of that previous account, for Samuel had initially been inclined to anoint Eliab, because of his stature and appearance, but was told that God had rejected him. This interchange was included to reveal what it was that Yahweh saw in Eliab’s heart that led Him to reject the older brother. Eliab, rather than being submissive to Yahweh’s choice (and maybe even seeking to learn how he needed to repent in light of his unworthiness) became jealous of his younger brother to the point he apparently hated him. Assuming the worst about his hated brother, he concluded that David’s motives were as selfish as his own and angrily confronted David over his presence among the troops and criticized his character. Eliab’s response was likely also fueled by shame, since he, like everyone else in the army, was afraid of Goliath. In making his reference to David leaving the sheep in the “*wilderness*” Eliab was not saying David left them in the middle of nowhere, rather the Hebrew word translated as “*wilderness*” simply refers to any open unfenced range land that was not cultivated for crops, but in this context it would be assumed that it was suitable for animals to graze upon. Therefore, we are to understand the accusation simply as saying David abandoned the sheep where they were being fed without securing any supervision for them (an accusation that the narration already clarified as being false).

In verse twenty-nine we read David’s response to Eliab’s rebuke, “*And David said, ‘What have I done now? Is there not a cause?’*” A more literal rendering of the Hebrew words that David spoke are: “*isn’t that just a word?*”. Although there are a number of suggestions regarding how we are to understand David’s words here, the best is found in the NIV, which renders the statement as “*can’t I even speak?*”.

In verse thirty we read, “*Then he turned from him toward another and said the same thing; and these people answered him as the first ones did.*” Since he could not have a civil conversation with his brother, David turned to someone else in the battle line and asked that man the same question, and then David was told what Saul had said about what would be given to the one who would defeat Goliath.

VI. David Persuades Saul to Let Him Face Goliath: (vs.31-37)

In verse thirty-one we read, “*Now when the words which David spoke were heard, they reported them to Saul; and he sent for him.*” This verse functions as a transition from David’s arrival at the scene to his conversation with King Saul. Apparently, David’s outrage at Goliath’s defiance and his interest in Saul’s reward came to Saul’s attention, and as a result he chose to have David brought to him.

In verses thirty-two and thirty-three we read, “*Then David said to Saul, ‘Let no man’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.’ And Saul said to David, ‘You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are a youth, and he a man of war from his youth’*”. Idiomatically, the expression “*a man’s heart fails*” means to lose courage, and David used the reference “*this Philistine*” derisively. David was saying that no one needed to be afraid any longer, because he was not afraid and he would accept Goliath’s challenge and kill him. David’s complete confidence that Yahweh would be with him gave him the courage to do what everyone else in the Israelite army was afraid to do. In his response to David, Saul revealed that he only saw the situation before him from a worldly point of view, defined by a military perspective alone. Therefore, in this short exchange the author highlighted a significant contrast between Saul and David. Saul was only aware of physical things, while David counted spiritual realities as being more significant than those physical factors.

When Saul used the Hebrew term translated as “*youth*”, he was not using it as a reference to chronological age, but in reference to David’s lack of military experience. Saul’s words here were to remind David that Goliath was a man with experience in warfare, while he was only a novice.

In verses thirty-four through thirty-seven we read, “*But David said to Saul, ‘Your servant used to keep his father’s sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear; and this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God.’ Moreover David said, ‘The LORD, who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.’ And Saul said to David, ‘Go, and the LORD be with you!’*” In antiquity lions were found from Greece to India, and a type of brown bear was still in the region of Israel until the early part of the twentieth century. At that time, the interior hills were more forested than they are now, and those areas were the habitat for such predators.

Since Saul was king, his authoritative rejection of David’s offer should have ended the discussion. However, David’s idealism was exceeded only by his determination and his faith in Yahweh. Consequently, David continued in his appeal with the king to seek to change his mind. In response to Saul’s warning, David stressed his credentials and experience that would enable him to fight Goliath. He expressed the conviction that just as Yahweh had given him the victory over lions and bears, so He would give David a victory over Goliath. It is helpful to understand that the grammar in these verses indicates that David was not referring to one or two isolated incidents but was referring to customary circumstances associated with his guarding of his father’s sheep. These encounters had trained him to trust in God in dangerous situations, but also trained him to act quickly, skillfully and decisively, characteristics that would serve him well in a fight with Goliath. Some might wonder about the translation “*beard*” in reference to David’s success in defending his sheep from predators. The grammar indicates that

David's account focused on his slaying of lions, and the Hebrew word translated as "*beard*" seems to be a colloquial reference to the lower portion of a male lion's mane as the place David grabbed the lion's head. In making this argument David was expressing his confidence that just as God had enabled him to kill lions and bears, so God would do it again as he fought this new adversary. What seems to have changed Saul's mind was the confidence David possessed that he would be victorious. It is ironic that Saul expresses his blessing that Yahweh would be with David. Because in this case Saul is more correct than he could realize, Yahweh would indeed be with David, but for reasons that Saul did not understand.

There is a principle revealed in David's reasoning here; namely that the faith we develop in past trials prepares us for future ones.

VII. David's Battle with Goliath: (vs.38-51)

In verses thirty-eight and thirty-nine we read, "*So Saul clothed David with his armor, and he put a bronze helmet on his head; he also clothed him with a coat of mail. David fastened his sword to his armor and tried to walk, for he had not tested them. And David said to Saul, 'I cannot walk with these, for I have not tested them'. So David took them off.*" David's faith and courage were as compelling as his logic. The speech moved the king, and it influenced him to make what was perhaps the biggest gamble of his military life, he accepted David's offer.

In the ancient world the armor and tunic of a king would have been distinctive and thus it would appear (from a distance at least) that Saul had gone out, and because of this some scholars have suggested that this might have been Saul's motive. This appears unlikely since nothing in the account hints at this. Other scholars suggest another possible motive, that in the ancient world it was believed that if one wore the clothing of another they were in some sense present with you in what you did, and thus Saul may have thought that this was a way for taking some of the credit for the victory. There is also nothing in the text that would indicate that this was something that the author was trying to convey. The best conclusion is that Saul's choice to give David his armor reflected Saul's reliance on his own resources. The author's choice to include Saul's attempt to cloth David with his own armor was probably made to serve two functions. First, to illustrate that Divine enablement was of greater value than human resources. Second, and more importantly to symbolize David's rejection of Saul's approach to kingship. Whereas Saul was a king like those who ruled over the pagan nations, David was a man who relied on God just like the other great saints of Israel had done. Thus, this detail continues to illustrate the contrast the author was making between Saul and David.

In verse forty we read, "*Then he took his staff in his hand; and he chose for himself five smooth stones from the brook, and put them in a shepherd's bag, in a pouch which he had, and his sling was in his hand. And he drew near to the Philistine.*" The sling was known as a weapon in Israelite warfare (Judg.20:16). In the account of that verse, it is said that those men of war were so accurate with their weapon that they could aim at a hair and hit it. The average size of the stones used in such a sling were the size of tennis balls.

There is a sense of irony in the details given in this portion of the narration, for previously it was revealed that part of the Philistines' strategy of oppression was to deny the Israelites weapons made of iron and bronze (13:19-22). Here David in God's providence chose weapons that weren't made of metal to defeat their greatest champion, thus demonstrating that God could deliver His people regardless of the circumstances they were in.

In the reference to David advancing on Goliath, we are given a direct contrast between David's actions in response to Goliath with the rest of the Israelites present that day, for when Goliath advanced upon the army as a whole, they retreated in fear (vs.24).

In verses forty-one through forty-four we read, "*So the Philistine came, and began drawing near to David, and the man who bore the shield went before him. And when the Philistine looked about and saw David, he disdained him; for he was only a youth, ruddy and good-looking. So the Philistine said to David, 'Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?' And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. And the Philistine said to David, 'Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field.'*" When the narration tells the reader Goliath's evaluation of David, this was done as a contrast to what was written earlier about how Goliath appeared to the Israelite army. The purpose of this contrast was to picture how insignificant David would have looked to everyone from a human perspective in light of the threat posed by Goliath. In other words, David, from a natural perspective, would look like he was no match for Goliath. It also serves to indicate that Goliath's assessment of David was identical to what Saul's had originally been. Goliath's words to David indicate that the Philistine thought that winning a contest against a crudely armed, underage challenger would not be particularly prestigious victory for him, and this made him despise David as he saw David as an insult to his pride. Goliath saw himself as both physically so much stronger than David, and himself as so much better armed than David that the young man did not have a chance against him. As the story unfolds it is revealed that this was overconfidence on Goliath's part. Goliath's reference to a dog and sticks means that Goliath saw that David was coming at him with some sort of staff that was more appropriate for beating away a dog, than for being equipped for hand-to-hand combat. Goliath made no reference to stones because David had picked them up in a way that was hidden from Goliath's view and was hiding them in a pouch. This indicates that Goliath had no idea what David was planning to do.

Goliath is said to have cursed David by his gods. Goliath's insults and curses against David and his God reflect a common rhetoric in these types of confrontations that is found throughout the Near East and the general eastern Mediterranean world. Insulting bravado was intended to demoralize and intimidate the opponent. These curses were included not as merely empty words but were presumably backed by the person's deity. However, there was also a theological reality at work in Goliath pronouncing curses upon David. In God's covenant with Abraham, God had promised to curse those who cursed him and his descendants (Gen.12:3). Therefore, Goliath was bringing down the curse of Yahweh

upon Himself, and so he was virtually guaranteeing a victory for David because he was further antagonizing the one true God.

The reason for the reference to leaving David's body to be exposed to the elements after his death, was to suggest that the Philistine was going to do something horrific to David according to the sensibilities of that time. To both the Israelites and to the surrounding people groups, having one's body decompose in the open was considered to be the most shameful fate one could suffer (Ps.79:2-3).

In verses forty-five through forty-seven we read, "*Then David said to the Philistine, 'You come to me with a sword, 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 and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's, and He will give you into our hands.'*" The use of the construction "you...I" highlights the contrast that David was making between himself and Goliath. While Goliath was focused on his own personal honor and reputation, David was focused on bringing glory to God rather than on himself. The narration also contrasts David with Saul, for David's actions, unlike those of Saul were motivated by his confident faith in Yahweh. In David's speech, he confronted Goliath with the reality that he had committed a capital crime by insulting and blaspheming the God of Israel (Lev.24:16). David understood what few others in Israel did; this conflict had serious theological implications, and in fact all of their conflicts were fundamentally religious in nature since they as a people were subjects of the one true and living God. In addition, the battle when won, was not merely a military victory, it would be a revelatory event, declaring the reality of God's existence. Though not intended as a denigration of his own abilities, David expressed complete confidence in Yahweh, and none in himself. The expression "*all this assembly*" referred to both the Israelites and non-Israelites who were witnessing that conflict. David's point reflected what was taught in the Torah, that it would be God Himself who would fight for Israel and thus He and He alone was their resource for victory. Whatever weapons or persons were involved were not the cause of the victory, but only the implements or vessels through which God would do His work. This passage then conveys the key idea in this chapter, that it is Yahweh who saves.

In verses forty-eight and forty-nine we read the short account of the battle itself, "*So it was, when the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, that David hurried and ran toward the army to meet the Philistine. Then David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone; and he slung it and struck the Philistine in his forehead, so that the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the earth.*" That David ran while the Philistine walked, indicated that David was in a position to be the most dynamic and mobile in the conflict. The narrative makes it clear that Goliath was anticipating combat at close quarters, but David was not going to fight the way Goliath expected him to.

The text offers no information concerning the range between David and Goliath when David took his shot. But we know that a stone from a slingshot is capable of delivering a killing blow but only when striking a few strategic areas of the head (which was protected). David's shot targeted one of the few vulnerable areas that were exposed and where the blow would incapacitate Goliath. David's weapon of choice (the sling) provided him with a tremendous advantage over the weapons at Goliath's disposal. All of Goliath's weapons were of value only in close combat; even his spear, since it was so heavy, could not be used against an opponent who was no more than a few feet away. On the other hand, David could use his sling with deadly force from comparatively great distances. Also, without the encumbering weight of armor, David could move quickly to locations from which he could hurl the stone directly at Goliath where he was most vulnerable. In modern times it has been calculated that a stone propelled from a sling can travel from 100 to 150 miles per hour. And though David was certainly proficient with his sling, the reader is meant to recognize that this was no lucky shot, nor was it simply a matter of David's skill, ultimately David's accuracy was guided by Yahweh's hand.

In verses fifty and fifty-one we read, "*So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, and struck the Philistine and killed him. But there was no sword in the hand of David. Therefore David ran and stood over the Philistine, took his sword and drew it out of its sheath and killed him, and cut off his head with it. And when the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled.*" The account indicates that David hurled the rock with such great force that it crushed the frontal bone of Goliath's cranium, sinking into his forehead, either rendering him unconscious or in some other way incapacitated, but still alive. Though the wording of the Hebrew is a little ambiguous, the sense from the context is clear, David took Goliath's own sword, slayed him with it, and then cut off his head with the sword. It can be assumed that Goliath's head was a trophy that was to be put on display. This would have been in harmony with the practices of the day to demonstrate that someone was dead, that you had disarmed them and that it was you who decapitated them. Interestingly, this account seems to echo an earlier one where Dagon the chief Philistine god was found on its face with its head severed before the Ark of the Covenant (I Sam.5:3-4).

VIII. What Followed David's Individual Victory: (vs.52-58)

In verses fifty-two and fifty-three we read, "*Now the men of Israel and Judah arose and shouted, and pursued the Philistines as far as the entrance of the valley and to the gates of Ekron. And the wounded of the Philistines fell along the road to Shaaraim, even as far as Gath and Ekron. Then the children of Israel returned from chasing the Philistines, and they plundered their tents.*" The distance of Israel's pursuit of the Philistine army was approximately ten miles. During that pursuit the Israelites killed those soldiers that could not keep up with the retreat, doing so until the Philistines reached the safety of their walled cities of Gath and Ekron. Then we are told that after the Israelites returned from the pursuit of the retreating Philistines, they plundered the Philistines abandoned camp.

In verse fifty-four we read, “*And David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem, but he put his armor in his tent.*” This detail is interesting and unexpected, because at this time Jerusalem was not yet in Judean control. Therefore, one might wonder why David would take his trophy to a city he would have no access to. The best answer seems to be that David did not take the head into the city, but rather he put the head on a post outside the city so it could be seen by those behind the walls. David most likely did this to put the Jebusites (who were Canaanite enemies of Israel who had control of that city) on notice that they, as had the Philistines, would be defeated by David (it was only a matter of time). This would make sense because one of the first things that David did when he became king of all Israel was to conquer Jerusalem and make it his new capital.

The reference to “*his tent*” can only be to Goliath’s tent, because David as a visitor to the battle scene would not have had his own; therefore, the armor and everything in Goliath’s tent were taken by David as plunder.

The chapter concludes with verses fifty-five through fifty-eight. In those verses we read, “*When Saul saw David going out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, ‘Abner, whose son is this youth?’ And Abner said, ‘As your soul lives, O king, I do not know.’ So the king said, ‘Inquire whose son this young man is.’ Then, as David returned from the slaughter of the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand. And Saul said to him, ‘Whose son are you, young man?’ So David answered, ‘I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite.’”* This final portion of the chapter begins with a flashback to a conversation that began between Saul and Abner prior to David’s defeat of Goliath. One common question that is asked when reading this passage is why was it that Saul did not recognize David, who had already served him for some time as musician and armor-bearer? The answer is rooted in recognizing that Saul’s question did not indicate that he did not know who David was, rather he did not know anything about David’s family. It is actually quite reasonable that Saul would not have taken notice of someone’s family line just because he served in a lower position in his court. That this is the correct understanding of the text is made clear by the answer that David gave when he returned to the king. David did not say ‘*I am David*’, rather he said, “*I am the son of your servant Jesse of Bethlehem*” (v. 58). And the query about who David’s father was related to the promise that Saul had made to the family of the one who would defeat Goliath.

Though the initial question from Saul to Abner took place when David first advanced upon Goliath, David’s conversation with Saul took place after the battle but before David posted Goliath’s head outside of the walls of Jerusalem.

Conclusion:

This story conveys the truth that what Israel needed was a leader who was devoted to and in submission to Yahweh, for through such a leader the nation would receive the promised blessings from Yahweh.