

KING SAUL'S ARMOR

1 Samuel 17:31-40

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David strapped his sword over his armor. And he tried in vain to go, for he had not tested them. Then David said to Saul, "I cannot go with these, for I have not tested them." So David put them off. (1 Sam. 17:39).

Before Goliath, there was king Saul. That is, before going forth to fight the giant Philistine, David had first to overcome his own lethargic and unbelieving king. Saul was, after all, Israel's Goliath: their tall and impressive champion, the one whose prowess would gain the nation victory. But Saul had been bettered by the taller Philistine and now he was cowering in fear. So just as David had first to pass through the gauntlet of his older brother's scorn (1 Sam. 17:28), he had also to stand before the king's cynicism to get a shot at felling Goliath. So it is that those who would fight the Lord's enemies must often first overcome the doubt and skepticism of family and friends.

Much was at stake as David answered the summons to appear before king Saul. Israel's army trembled before the uncircumcised Philistine, and it seemed that not one man of faith would defend the Lord's honor. Were God's promises for Israel suddenly overthrown? Was this a power too great for Israel's covenant Lord? David answered with a resounding No, but first he had to persuade king Saul that there really was a champion in Israel.

Saul had heard of David's outrage over the Philistine's defiance and sent a summons for David to come before him. Up strode a youth not even dressed for battle, clothed as a shepherd straight from the fields. Yet it seems that his zeal and confidence overcame his appearance. It was David who spoke first, the true anointed leader respectfully

brushing aside protocol as he addressed the failed ruler. Approaching the king, David assured him, “Let no man’s heart fail because of him. Your servant will go and fight with this Philistine” (1 Sam. 17:32). Matthew Henry sums up the scene: “A little shepherd, come but this morning from keeping sheep, has more courage than all the mighty men of Israel.”¹

DAVID’S READINESS FOR BATTLE

David might have courage, but he still needed the king’s approval before facing the Philistine giant. Yet Saul was not impressed with what he saw: “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” (1 Sam. 17:33). It is apparent that Saul did not recognize David: the harpist who recently had been so important to Saul had really been only a useful tool. Now David, unrecognized, is just another reckless youth wasting the king’s time.

First, David must face the question of his readiness for battle. Saul declared him obviously unqualified. David could not fight Goliath, since a boy cannot do a man’s job – and fighting Goliath was definitely a man’s job. Reading ahead, we realize that Saul expresses the very same opinion that Goliath will state later, looking on him as a runt of a youth (1 Sam. 17:42-43). Saul and Goliath have much in common, including a way of seeing that looks only at appearances. The giant relied on his appearance to frighten his enemies into submission. Saul looked on David’s appearance, seeing anything except a warrior champion. “David does not *look* the part of a hero, and so he must not *be* one.”² Old habits die hard, and Saul was simply unable to look deeper than the outward appearance, seeing nothing of David’s heart.

David, respectful in his demeanor before the king, nonetheless disputed this poor assessment of his fitness. David asserted that his experience as a shepherd was undervalued when it came to preparing him for battle. “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

¹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 2:293.

² Richard D. Phillips, *The Heart of an Executive: Lessons on Leadership from the Life of King David* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 60.

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” (1 Sam. 17:34-36). Whether the lion or bear had sought to steal off with one of David’s sheep or whether the animal turned on David to seek his life, he had struck them and delivered the sheep back to safety.

Many people fail to learn lessons from their experience, or even learn wrong lessons, so it matters how we reflect on our past actions. David might have come away from his experiences with an arrogant over-confidence in himself. It may seem that he is speaking this way, saying, “Goliath is no different from the lions and bears I have fought. I can whip him just as I slew them.” But that was not David’s attitude: he had learned to trust not in himself but to trust the Lord. True, David thought of the Philistine warrior as little more than a beast – he said, “this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them” (1 Sam. 17:36). But he had realized in defending his father’s sheep that it was God who was with him, protected him, and gave him success in the fight. This is the lesson that David applies to this new challenge: “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” (1 Sam. 17:37).

David shows how we should use our past experiences of God’s faithfulness to embolden us in faith for the future. Dale Ralph Davis comments: “Looking back in faith enables him to look forward in faith... What Yahweh has done in the wilderness of Judah he will do in the Valley of Elah.”³ This is how our Bible study should fortify our faith: not only do we look to what God has done for us personally, but we see in Scripture how faithful he was to deliver his people time and again, against the most extreme dangers, and we are emboldened to trust the Lord for our own battles in his name.

David’s readiness to fight Goliath stemmed from his past experience in fighting, but it consisted of his certainty of God’s power and willingness to save him against his ungodly foe. Here is David’s gospel message for unbelieving king Saul: “The LORD who delivered

³ Dale Ralph Davis, *I Samuel: Looking on the Heart* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000), 150-151.

me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine” (1 Sam. 17:37). A. W. Pink comments: “The language used by [David] in the presence of the king was not the bravado of a boaster, but the God-honoring testimony of a man of faith.”⁴

While Saul languished in despair, looking on the situation only through its appearances, David gazed on the giant with the eye of faith and the lens of his own experience as it validated the testimony of the Scriptures. David’s experience taught him to believe the old stories of God’s mighty deliverance – stories that Saul had forgotten or disregarded. David saw things theologically, from God’s perspective, and his faith made him ready to face the giant in battle. A similar perspective on our situations, and a confidence in the Lord based on his proved faithfulness in our own lives, will prepare us to stand firm in battle against the spiritual enemies of tomorrow.

Along with David’s faith, there was one more feature that showed his readiness to faith the Lord’s battles. To see this, we need to return to Saul’s initial scorn: “you are but a youth” (1 Sam. 17:33). Saul dismissed David because of his weakness, but this weakness, coupled with great faith, especially readied David to stand against God’s enemy. Perhaps it was because David was the youngest of many brothers, the overlooked one sent out with the sheep, that he had turned to the Lord for his hope and salvation. Being the least significant member of his family and possessing few privileges, David had come to realize that he needed a Savior. This awareness drove him to faith and, paradoxically, his weakness ended up making him strong. K. Scott Oliphint writes:

So it is with us. If we ever think that we are capable, in and of ourselves, to fight the Lord’s battle, we lose the battle altogether. The Lord uses the weak in the world to shame the strong: he uses the simple to confound the strong and mighty. He does that, as Paul reminds us, so that no one will have occasion to boast (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).⁵

⁴ A. W. Pink, *A Life of David*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:35.

⁵ K. Scott Oliphint, *The Battle Belongs to the Lord* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003), 11.

DAVID'S REASONS FOR BATTLE

If we wish to fight in the Lord's battle today, it is not sufficient for us to be ready. We must also enter the fight for the right reasons.

Just as David differed from King Saul in his readiness – David was qualified to fight by his faith, not by his stature – the shepherd-youth also differed from Saul in his reasoning for fighting the Philistine. David makes his reasoning clear, saying, “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” (1 Sam. 17:36).

The first reason that David stepped forward to fight the Philistine was his outrage over an idolatrous pagan's defiance towards the true and living God. In other words, David was motivated by a zealous concern for God's glory and honor. David was awe-struck by Goliath, but for a different reason than everyone else: David was stupefied not that someone could be so big, but that the uncircumcised Philistine could so defy the glory of God! Moreover, the giant had challenged Israel's faith in the Lord, as if God's people would be more impressed by fear of Goliath than by fear of God. This was an outrage, an affront to God's honor, a smear on Israel's covenant name, and a cause that the Lord would surely take up himself as David put the Philistine in his place, namely, in the grave and in hell. Thus, when David finally stood before the giant, his challenge rang with passion for God's glory: “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” (1 Sam. 17:45).

Notice that David made no mention to Saul about the great treasure the king had offered anyone who would strike down the giant. In light of David's outraged concern over God's honor, vast treasures, a royal marriage, and family privileges simply had no hold in his mind. Even now, before the king, there is no “by the way” reminder of Saul's promised reward. This battle simply was not about David: his concern was neither for his safety nor his later advancement. “Goliath's challenge was a challenge to the glory and power and

honor of the Lord of hosts,”⁶ and for that reason alone David was determined to slay the defiant enemy and see God’s glory properly restored.

This is God’s own first motivation in our salvation: to display the glory of his grace. Paul writes that God “predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:5-6). We are redeemed from our sins, Paul adds, “so that we... might be to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:12). It is a comforting thought that the first and primary purpose of our salvation is God’s glory, because the glory of God is a cause in which we can believe! Just as “the chief end of man is to glorify God,”⁷ so also the chief end of God is his own glory, and we who have looked in faith to Christ may be confident of our ultimate salvation because it is to the praise of God’s marvelous grace. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said of this:

The whole purpose of your salvation and mine is that we should glorify the Father... People come and talk to me, and it is generally put in that way: “What will salvation do for me?” they ask. And the answer that is given so often in our evangelism is, “Believe the gospel, and it will do some marvelous things for you.” I say, thank God that that is true, but, my dear friends, we should not put that first. The ultimate aim and object of our salvation is that we may glorify God... The essence of salvation is to bring us into the state in which we do glorify God.⁸

Notice, therefore, that while David was distressed over Isarel’s cowardice, he gave no sign of seeking that Israel would be glorified through his victory. So also in our spiritual labor, we should be motivated not for personal gain, or for the prestige of our church or our theological position, or even for the reputation of Christians in general. We fight for God’s truth because those who defy the Word of God are an affront to God’s glory. We fight to defend God’s name and to pursue his glory in the world. Waging war for this reason, we can be as confident as David was of God’s Goliath-slaying power.

Another reason David sought to fight was to deliver God’s people from danger. He was a shepherd, after all, and there was God’s flock

⁶ Ibid., 8.

⁷ Westminster Shorter Catechism, A. I.

⁸ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Saved in Eternity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, DATE), 44-45.

intimidated, disgraced, and about to be ravaged. Goliath was a bear from whose mouth God's lambs needed to be set free. If the foe turned to fight, he would have to be slain. Lastly, we may add David's full confidence in God's deliverance – "The LORD... will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine (1 Sam. 17:37) – as his final reason for entering the battle. We likewise should step forward in battle today with a primary motivation of defending God's honor, while also desiring to defend God's people and counting fully on God's faithfulness and power to save.

DAVID'S RESOURCES FOR BATTLE

It is difficult to state that Saul believed David's message of faith, for if the king had really believed he would have gone out to face Goliath himself. True and saving faith believes in God's grace for ourselves and not merely for others! More accurately, Saul was impressed with David's passion and resolve. "Saul said to David, 'Go, and the LORD be with you!'" (1 Sam. 17:37). This statement is loaded with irony, since the Lord had already departed Saul in order to be with David. Saul desired the Lord's presence and blessing for *someone* who would fight Goliath, but his heart was too hardened to repent and seek the Lord himself. Saul reminds us that biblical religion offers God's saving grace only through personal faith and repentance: the true and living God does not sell indulgences through third-party vendors! The Lord was already with David because of the faith he had proclaimed to Saul, which faith Saul admired in David but rejected for himself.

As will often be the case with unbelievers who seek to benefit from the faith of others, Saul then offered to be an investor in David's saving enterprise. In verses that are dripping with symbolic and spiritual irony, the king offered to send David into battle wearing his own armor: "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" (1 Sam. 17:38-39).

There are a number of ways we might view this action. Ronald Youngblood suggests that Saul was trying to take credit for David's valorous feat. He writes that the king's action was "probably calculated to so bind Saul to David that Saul would be able to take

credit for, or at least share in, David's victory over the Philistine giant."⁹ Alternatively, John Woodhouse sees "a symbolism to this act that corresponded to the truth that we already know. Saul was the king on the way out. David was his designated replacement."¹⁰ However true these assessments may be, I think the basic reality was that Saul was conveying goodwill to David and providing his help, but in a way that expressed his own reliance on worldly strength. We might depict Saul's offer in these words: "Here, let me help you... Let me give you *my* seal of authority – discredited though it is. Take *my* weapons – useless as they have shown themselves. God forth in *my* name – though it is a curse on the lips of every man in the army."¹¹

What is amazing is that David began to put Saul's armor on. Over David's torso went Saul's heavy armor. On David's head went Saul's bronze helmet. Strapped to David's side was Saul's heavy sword. What a picture David made: a Saul in miniature! This was a defining moment in the young shepherd's life. Would he step into the persona, unbelief, and worldly reliance of king Saul? There could be only one answer: "David said to Saul, 'I cannot go with these, for I have not tested them.' So David put them off" (1 Sam. 17:39). His formal reason for removing the armor was that he could not fight in gear with which he was unpracticed. But that cannot be the only or even the main reason for David's polite refusal. A. W. Pink explains: "David quickly perceived that such was unsuited to him: the one who has much to do with God in secret cannot employ worldly means and methods in public; the man of faith has no use for carnal weapons."¹²

We should probably consider the offer of Saul's armor the greatest trial of David's faith. The sight of Goliath did not daunt the young hero: he knew how God would handle a blaspheming Philistine, just like a bear or lion seeking after God's sheep. But by far the more subtle temptation was the offer to step into the shoes – that is, the armor – of the disgraced king. David's faith knew how to say Yes to a daunting challenge: it was equally important that his faith knew to say No to worldly compromise and unbelieving help.

⁹ Ronald F. Youngblood, *1 & 2 Samuel*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 700.

¹⁰ John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 332.

¹¹ Phillips, *Heart of an Executive*, 63.

¹² Pink, *Life of David*, 1:36.

Divested of Saul's armor, David turned to face the Philistine giant: "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" (1 Sam. 17:40). But it was not with these only that David went forth to fight Goliath: "He went to the conflict with a blazing concern for the honour of God, with confidence in the certainty of his promises and with the power of the Spirit of God."¹³ David advanced against the Philistine not in the armor and identity of "a king like the nations," which Saul was (1 Sam. 8:5), relying on nothing really different from the armor and weaponry of evil Goliath, but rather he went to battle as a shepherd-servant of the Lord, defending God's honor and protecting God's people in the power of the Lord himself. In this way, whether he realized it or not, David identified with God's great champions of prior years, shepherd-leaders like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, men of spiritual valor who lived and fought by faith in the promises of God.

Reflecting on this vital turning point in his life, we cannot help but think of psalms that David penned, perhaps earlier but probably later in life. Was David thinking back on this event as he wrote the words of Psalm 3, or might David have had this prayer in his heart as he turned from Saul, leaving behind the armor, and turned to slay Goliath?

O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of my soul, there is no salvation for him in God.

But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. (Ps. 3:1-3).

THE ARMOR OF SAUL TODAY

How does the interplay between Saul and David translate to the battles of our time? What are the weapons of the world that Christians and churches are tempted to employ in our attempt to beat back the advance of darkness, worldly unbelief, sin, and evil? The answer does not stretch our imaginations. The Sauls of today urge Christians of the need to seize political power, so that believers

¹³ Roger Ellsworth, *The Shepherd King: Learning from the Life of David* (Darlington, UK: Evangelical Press, 1998), 31.

can install godly laws with the same worldly power used by unbelievers to advance their secular agenda. Godly laws we indeed desire, but the ways of the world are never the ways of God's people. Others would insist that preachers must embrace the advertising prowess of Madison Avenue, creating celebrity speakers whose messages are crafted with data from surveys and messages designed to tickle the ear. Other Sauls will turn to the electricity of Hollywood entertainment, urging the church to recast sacred worship as worldly entertainment and to replace the preaching of God's Word with video clips and skits.

Behind each of these well-meant suggestions – just as Saul's armor was offered in good will – is the conviction that the battle must be won by the strength of our own hands. Goliath is mighty and terrible. He has lawyers so the church must hire its own. Goliath is served by political action committees, so the army of God must send its legions to Washington D.C. The Philistine is able to recruit large numbers by offering desired goods and services, so we must make use of the same marketing data to enlist an army of our own. The worldly advance is fueled by sensual thrills, so the church must fight back amplifier for amplifier and emotional high for emotional high.

What would David say if he surveyed the spiritual challenge facing Christians today? Would he say that God's church must conform its message and methods to match the weapons of the world? Surely David would challenge the assumption that Goliath must be slain with our own power. Surely he would answer, as he declared to Goliath himself, "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... The LORD saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD'S, and he will give you into our hand" (1 Sam. 17:45, 47).

If the battle is the Lord's, what are the weapons with which God would have his people step forward into battle? The apostle Paul answered, pointing to the Word of God: "For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey

Christ” (2 Cor. 10:3-5). Coupled with God’s Word is the power of prayer. Paul writes of spiritual warfare: “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. 6:17-18).

This is precisely how God’s champions have shaken the world and cast down strongholds in generations past. John Calvin stood in Geneva’s pulpit with a Bible alone and God raised up a new Jerusalem for the Reformation. John Knox prayed and Mary Queen of Scots trembled. Like the heroes who have gone before us, and like David departing from Saul to face giant Goliath, our great need today is simply faith: faith in God’s Word, faith in God’s grace to answer prayer, faith in God’s power to uphold his people and preserve the honor of his name, and faith that the battle belongs to the Lord and must be fought with his weapons. Oliphint writes: “What is needed in the Lord’s battle are weapons that will cause people to bow down, to bend the knee and acknowledge that the Lord, and he alone, is God. Only supernatural weapons can accomplish that task.” With our eyes fixed on God’s power and our aim directed to God’s glory, “We will not use the weapons of the world. We will fight, if we fight the Lord’s battle, with his weapons. And the chief weapon that he has given to us is his sword, the Word of God itself.”¹⁴

This principle applies to our personal lives as well. What are analogies to Saul’s armor for us as individuals? Surely it is success, material affluence, stature in the world, and popular approval. Do we trust in these for our security, happiness and blessing? The reality is that only with God’s Word and with prayer can we possess blessing, joy, strength of heart and peace of mind. We do not need worldly success in order to persevere in life with blessing, but we absolutely need God’s Word and prayer, wielded by faith.

In the end, if we fight in God’s battles using God’s weapons, relying on God’s faithfulness and seeking to raise high God’s glory, we will have the satisfaction of hearing the cheers and appreciation of heaven itself. This is what we find in the book of Revelation, where the conquest of God’s enemies is celebrated, through the valiant warfare of God’s people: “they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb

¹⁴ Oliphint, *The Battle Belongs to the Lord*, 13.

and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. Therefore, rejoice, O heavens and you who dwell in them!” (Rev. 12:11-12).

THE BATTLE BELONGS TO THE LORD

We cannot reflect on David’s heroism without realizing that his example points us forward to the coming of God’s true champion, the royal Savior of the house of David, God’s Son, Jesus Christ. From the earliest days of the church, God’s people have seen David’s victory over Goliath as a picture of our deliverance from Satan and the bonds of sin and hell. Caesarius of Arles wrote in the sixth century A.D.: “All that we read prefigured in David at that time, dearly beloved, we know was accomplished in our Lord Jesus Christ; for he strangled the lion and the bear when he descended into hell to free all the saints from their jaws.”¹⁵

Like David, Jesus’ readiness to serve as Messiah was doubted by those who noted his lack of earthly stature or worldly power. Pontius Pilate spoke for many when he incredulously asked, “Are you the king of the Jews?” (Jn. 18:33). Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn. 18:36). Jesus’ fitness to save was expressed in his prayer to the Father the previous night: “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do” (Jn. 17:4).

Like David, Jesus’ reason for battle was not one that the world understands. Jesus prayed, “Father, the hour has come,” he prayed; “glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him” (Jn. 17:1-2).

Finally, like David, Jesus conquered Satan, sin, and death with resources that are not of this world. Peter explained, “You were not ransomed... with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). Jesus wages war today, throwing back darkness and gathering his flock with the power of God in his Word. He comes not as an earthly king but as a Shepherd-Savior: “I am the good

¹⁵ Caesarius of Arles, Sermon 121.4, in John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, OT vol. IV (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity, 2005), 271.

shepherd,” he declares. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand” (Jn. 10:14, 27-28). Jesus wages war still today, as John saw him in the book of Revelation: “In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength” (Rev . 1:16).

Do we need the armor of Saul or the weapons of the world with so great a Savior at our head? If the battle is the Lord’s, do we need any weapons except those he places into our hands, strengthened by grace through faith? Readied by faith in him, fighting by reason of his glory, and armed with the resources of heaven’s armory, we will surely succeed as the Lord grants us to stand and to advance.

Fierce may be the conflict, strong may be the foe,
But the King’s own army none can overthrow;
Round his standard ranging, vict’ry is secure;
For his truth unchanging makes the triumph sure.
Joyfully enlisting by thy grace divine,
We are on the Lord’s side, Savior, we are thine.¹⁶

¹⁶ Frances R. Havergal, “Who Is on the Lord’s Side?” 1877.