

# The Champion

1 Samuel 17:(1, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This June has been a good month for sports fans.

There are the Stanley Cup finals, obviously, which many of us are unusually invested in this year due to a certain team from our province's involvement.

There was the French Open, for tennis fans (which I am increasingly becoming).

In the world of soccer both Euro 2024 and the Copa America are running simultaneously this month.

These are the biggest soccer tournaments in the world outside of the World Cup and, like the World Cup are both held every four years. This year, for the first time ever, Canada is participating in the Copa America.

June also marks the beginning of the CFL season, which I know some people in our church are very invested in. And then there's baseball, which is on around game 70 out of 500 (or so it seems).

And of course, the summer Olympics are looming on the horizon (not June, but close enough 😊).

When it comes to sports, I have always loved a good underdog story. When I was a kid, I was a Calgary Flames fan, and they're hardly ever favoured to win anything.

I also cheered for a team called the Hartford Whalers (now Carolina Hurricanes). Why would a kid from southern AB cheer for a tiny little team from across the continent that never won a single thing in their entire existence? Because nobody else did. And because I thought they had cool uniforms. 😊

Ok, much as I would love to prattle on about sports, I know I'm losing some of the non-sports fans among us!

I don't think I'm unique in loving a good underdog story. Even people who care very little about sports love movies like *Hoosiers* or *The Bad News Bears*, or *Rocky* or *The Blind Side* or *McFarland USA*.

There is a reason why these stories are so immensely popular. We love stories about the plucky little guys defeating the big guys everyone expects to win. Of someone or some team defying the odds.

And this is not just in the realm sports, of course. Why is *The Lord of the Rings* among the most popular stories of all time? Because it's a story where the most unlikely of all characters, tiny little hobbits, end up saving the world.

These stories make us smile. Perhaps they give us hope that in a world where the strong and the powerful so often seem to win or get their way, every once in a while, the script can be flipped.

They help us to believe that anything is possible.

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The story of David and Goliath is, in some ways, an underdog story. That's not all it is, as we'll see. But that's how most people understand it, from Sunday School onward.

The phrase "David and Goliath" has entered our lexicon as a kind of shorthand for a contest where a smaller, weaker opponent faces a much bigger, stronger adversary.

(Canada's soccer match against Argentina last Thursday could certainly have been described as a "David vs. Goliath" kind of match. Even though David didn't win in this case, he put up a pretty good fight!)

Malcolm Gladwell has a book after with the phrase in the title! I haven't read the book, but I think the subtitle captures the tone: "Underdogs, Misfits, and the Art of Battling Giants."

We've heard the story, but let's take a quick peek at it again.

We met David last week. The shepherd boy who was chosen to be king despite the presence of other more impressive candidates.

Well, two chapters after the story of David's anointing, the Israelites and Philistines have gathered for battle.

The Philistines were a tribe that inhabited the southern portion of the Land of Canaan (some of which is modern Gaza). The Israelite monarchy arose amid a struggle between these two groups in the region.

David is not yet on the throne. The kingship still belongs to Saul. The Israelites and the Philistines are forming ranks on either side of a valley (I can't help but envision some of the battle scenes from movies like *Lord of the Rings* here).

And this is when Goliath, the Philistine "champion" comes out to issue a challenge.

Goliath is a large man. Depending on which ancient texts are relied upon, he could have been anywhere from close to seven feet to over ten feet tall. I read this week that the description of Goliath in a scroll of 1 Samuel found in the caves of Qumran is the most accurate one, and this would put him at around 6'10 (my son Nick's size!).

Whether Goliath was a kind of fairy-tale giant, or just a really, really tall warrior is kind of immaterial. He's huge. He's intimidating. And he's itching for a fight.

He bellows across the valley between the two armies, "Look, why do all kinds of soldiers have to die here? Why don't we each just pick our best warriors and let them decide it? If your best guy wins, we'll be your servants. And, in the far more likely event that I wipe the floor with whoever you send my way, you'll be our servants."

(That's a loose translation ☺).

Well, not for the first time King Saul does not exactly distinguish himself here. He's quaking in his boots. It says that he and all of Israel were dismayed and greatly afraid.

David, meanwhile, is taking a break from the sheep and running errands for his dad. He's supplying provisions for the real soldiers, some of whom are his older brothers.

So, he's in the Israelite camp when Goliath barks out the same challenge as before. David hears him. And his response is markedly different from Saul's. *Who does this guy think he is, defying the army of Israel and the living God? I'll put him in his place!*

The response is predictable. Saul tells him, essentially, "Nice idea, but you're just a boy and that's a real soldier over there!" You could imagine a kindly older brother condescendingly patting his little brother on the head here.

David rehearses his credentials, which mainly involve doing battle with the lions and bears that threatened his sheep. Impressive, certainly, but a lion and a bear are not a Philistine giant!

David persists. *The God who delivered me in the past will save me from the hand of this Philistine!*

Saul doesn't seem to require much convincing. Perhaps he's mostly happy that someone else is going to fight that isn't him!

Saul tries to outfit David in his armour, but it's too big, it doesn't fit. It's a bit of a comical scene that ends with David saying, "Don't want it, don't need it."

David goes and finds himself a few smooth stones and a sling and heads off to battle.

Goliath is, equally predictably, unimpressed with Israel's choice of opponent. It's an insult, clearly. He's going to make short work of this pathetic kid.

Then, David speaks the famous words:

You come to me with sword and spear and 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 battle, David says, belongs to the Lord.

Goliath steps forward to engage, David slings his stone, and the giant is felled in one shot.

That's where our reading ends today. If we were to go to the end of the chapter, we would see that the Philistines were disinclined to honour the deal their champion had made. They do not meekly offer themselves as Israel's servants. They simply flee.

And there is a gruesome end to the story. The Israelites pursue the Philistines, kill a bunch of them, plunder their camp. Meanwhile, David is busy cutting off Goliath's head and taking it as a trophy.

It's an interesting and complicated story.

I'm not sure what your reaction to hearing it again today was. Maybe it's been decades since you've last encountered it.

It was for me. Like I mentioned last week, I have never preached on this story in sixteen years of preaching. I'll confess, these are not the kinds of stories I am drawn to in the Bible (which is part of the reason why I decide to preach on it!).

I'm guessing the story may have seemed foreign, very removed from our time and place.

And I suspect many of us instinctively and understandably recoil from the violence of the story. It's hard to square any of it with the teaching of Jesus (cutting off your enemy's head would seem an odd way of loving them!). I'll try to address a bit of this later.

But whatever else we might say about David or this story, his courage isn't based in who he is but in who God is.

The rescuer. The deliverer. The one who fights for him. The one who does for him what he cannot do for himself.

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So, what might we be able to take from it all these years later?

In the email I sent out to those involved in the worship service this week, I said, "I'm not going to reduce this story to a tidy morality tale about the underdog" or about how anything is possible with faith.

But I rethought that a bit as the week went on. And I think that while I would never *reduce* this story to a simple story about how if you have enough faith, you can topple giants, I do actually want to start there!

This metaphor will sound like a cliché, but I don't apologize for it. Quite simply I do think that everyone has a Goliath in their life.

There is an aphorism that Robin Williams popularized, but it was actually coined by a 19th century Presbyterian minister named Ian McLaren. "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about."

Every human being is doing battle with something. These giants may not be the same for each one of us. But I think everyone has or has had something that seems overwhelming in our lives.

I think all of us have been, or maybe even *are right now* in a place where we lack courage, where the way forward looks fraught and uncertain.

I don't know what it is for you. But I do know that we all need courage.

What would it look like to have a courage that's based not in who you are what has been possible in your past, but in who God is and says He is? What would it look like for you today to believe that the Lord fights the battles?

It might not always mean victory in the ways we want or expect, but can we cultivate a faith that trusts that ultimately, the battle belongs to God, that ultimately, good will triumph over evil, whether in our own lives or in the grand story of the universe?

So, yes, maybe there is a simple word here about courage and faith in the face of overwhelming odds.

But there is more going on than this.

(In what follows, I am indebted to a sermon I listened to this week preached in 2018 by Episcopalian priest David Zahl.<sup>1</sup>)

What if we were to kind of zoom out from focusing on the character of David, which is our instinct, and focus on the broader scene.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://mbird.com/ct\\_sermon/episode-1093-david-and-goliath-slight-return-david-zahl/](https://mbird.com/ct_sermon/episode-1093-david-and-goliath-slight-return-david-zahl/)

The challenge that Goliath bellows across the valley, to have one fighter from each side do battle on behalf of everyone else, is referred to as “representative battle.”

Each side in a conflict selects a champion, and those two champions do battle on behalf of their side. Whatever the outcome is, it saves lives (assuming everyone accepts the verdict... which, as we’ve seen, doesn’t always happen!).

It’s interesting to ponder the mechanism of Israel’s salvation here with the whole story of Scripture in view. David saves those cowards on the sidelines by imputing his victory to them.

It’s kind of like when your team wins a game and you say, “we won,” even though you didn’t get any playing time. The same thing is true here, but on a larger scale. The victory of David is imputed to the Israelites.

It’s imputed to those who have little faith of their own, those who are cowering and making excuses, those only see the reasons why not to go forward. Yet here is this representative whose victory they can claim is their own.

This should sound familiar to us. This is, of course, what Jesus does for us.

In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is described as the “author” or “pioneer” or “perfector” of our faith. Some translations also use the word “champion.”

I think all these words tell the truth in their own way. But I’m intrigued by that word “champion.”

Jesus Christ entered the valley of death to save those who were not up to the task, who were about to be done in by their own cowardice, to save them at the cost of his own life.

In Hebrews, it also says:

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb 12:1-2).

As Christians, and as inheritors of this beautiful, baffling library of books called the bible, we believe God has been active throughout history, working and speaking at all times and

through all kinds of people and even through all kinds of violent and complicated stories that we struggle to understand.

*But*, the writer of the Hebrews says, the last word about who God is and about what God wants has been spoken through Jesus.

All the giants in our life, they have been and will be vanquished in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. There is no threat that he has not overcome.

The Son of David triumphs in a very different way than David does. Jesus does not defeat his enemies by killing him, but by laying down his life for them.

Jesus doesn't cut off anyone's head but allows a crown of thorns to be lowered on to his own.

When he speaks, it is not the sabre-rattling rhetoric of war but words of forgiveness, even for those who are driving the nails into his hands.

Jesus is the last word. Jesus is a champion like no other.

The good news of the gospel is that God, in Christ, has triumphed and will ultimately triumph over every enemy through the victory he accomplished on a cross and in an empty tomb.

And that, through faith, his victory is our victory.

For this we say, thanks be to God.

Amen.

