

## Saul's Dilemma

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish  
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“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 but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth’” (I Sam. 17:32-33).

One aspect of the story about David and Goliath that doesn't get much attention is the role of poor Saul, the king. Of course it is true that Saul got himself and the armies of Israel into this predicament with the Philistines in the first place by turning away from the Lord, but if we think about Saul under the threat of Goliath we could have a great deal of sympathy for him since, in some ways, we often find ourselves in exactly the same situation! – We turn away from the Lord, doing something we're not supposed to do, and then maybe we even try to gloss it over or cover it up as Saul did. But when finally confronted we recognize our evil and acknowledge it and pray for forgiveness. Meanwhile, life goes on. We find ourselves in positions of responsibility sometimes involving many other people, and we have to make tough decisions that could affect these people either very well or very badly. How is our judgment affected in these circumstances? How can we know with confidence what we should do? (And even if we do know what to do, it's fair to say that having made major mistakes in the past our credibility on any new decisions will be suspect.)

In the story Saul stands alone, accountable in many ways for the lives of thousands, and it at least seems that he really wants to do the right thing. The Philistine giant has been challenging his army for more than forty days, morning and evening, and he (Saul) hasn't been able to find anyone to take him on. Suddenly the young shepherd boy who had played the harp for the king in his distress appears in the camp and volunteers.

What is he supposed to think? Is this brash, ruddy, bright-eyed musician/shepherd capable of such a fight, or is he just carried away by the promise of the great reward Saul had offered? Can he really take on a seasoned warrior twice his size and win, or is he simply overcome by the pride of youthful zeal? Saul isn't convinced. He says,

“You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth” (I Sam. 17:33).

What would YOU think if you were Saul? Would you trust the lives of all the armies of Israel to this one eager boy? Would YOU gamble everything on one fight between a teenager you had never seen in battle and a defiant hulking veteran? I doubt it. But of course David was ready for the king's objections. He told Saul how as a shepherd he had fought wild animals, rescuing lambs of the flock single-handedly from both lions and bears. So he spoke of his experience, courage and strength.

Still, Saul was in a difficult position. Even if he did believe the story, lions don't wear armour and bears don't carry swords and spears the size of weavers' beams.

Now all this is not to say you should feel sorry for Saul or in any way doubtful of David. The point

is to think a moment from Saul's point of view. Why? Because only when we get inside of a character like Saul can we begin to feel the impact of the lesson that the Lord presents in the story for the purpose of our spiritual growth. We need to feel Saul's doubt; we need to feel his insecurity; we need to feel his sense of guilt and fear and responsibility for what is going on. THEN, when we learn the spiritual significance of Saul and understand the Saul in us, we are at last in a position to know what WE must do in our doubt and fear, and how we may summon the confidence of David – and ultimately of Saul – against the arrogant Philistine.

So let's be clear first of all that ALL the characters (and even the material places and things) in the story are representatives of spiritual things in us. We're not just Saul; we're not David or Goliath; we're a combination of all these characters and more – very complex, very active and volatile, so that only the Lord Himself can really know the whole quality of our lives. But we can certainly appreciate the feelings that belong to each character and the thoughts that are represented by them.

In a way, we can appreciate the tension as we consider the current conflicts in the middle-east. For in the end, apart from everything else we may say about it, one thing for sure is that these illustrate the very challenging and difficult spiritual battles we must face within ourselves. Try as we might to simplify it, the situation is very complex. It's hard to tell the good from the evil; the true from the false. And that's the way it is in most of our temptations, for apart from the atrocities themselves committed in war probably the most horrible aspect of it all is the doubt, the uncertainty, the threat to our own (and our nation's) integrity, the never-ending challenge to understand the issues correctly and to fight unselfishly for what is good. Think about it. If you KNEW absolutely, really without any doubt that this or that was the right course of action to take in ANY conflict wouldn't it be a lot easier? If you could identify entirely with only one side and not the other, wouldn't it simplify everything? (In some ways, this is how it was in WW II, but since then...?)

Getting back to our story, this is exactly the challenge King Saul faced as he contemplated whether to send David out to confront the giant. And as we dig down into the spiritual meaning of the challenge we find that it represents something fundamental to our personal experience of life. For Saul as the first king of Israel stands for the truth that governs the Lord's kingdom in us. But unfortunately at this stage it is not a very deep or enlightened truth. In fact it seems to be a very external, natural and literal form of the truth corresponding exactly to the character of the man. Remember? – Saul was tall and good looking, outstanding among the children of Israel. But he was unstable, inconsistent, prone to rash judgments, and in the stories before this conflict he showed that he did not have the ability to provide real leadership. So he LOOKED good but he didn't DO well in the stress and confusion of the nation's daily struggles.

And that pretty well describes an external or literalistic understanding of the truth, actually the truth as it comes across in appearances rather than in real life. Oh yes, we may know things from the Word – or think we know them – but if this knowledge is not informed by rational understanding born of deeper perceptions and application to life it breaks down in conflict and cannot help us in our times of spiritual need. Then an opportunity is given for our spiritual enemies to challenge and threaten us. And in that situation Goliath particularly stands for the pride of our own intelligence.

You see, the Philistines in the Word generally represent “the knowledge of the interior truths of faith” (AC 9340:4) that can help us through life. They were in fact clever people, aggressive, warlike

and skilled in working with iron, using chariots for battle on the relatively flat plains of their territory. You may recall, too, that both Abraham and Isaac at different times lived among the Philistines and made covenants with them (Gen. 20 & 26). So – representatively – we see that our own spiritual life at times depends on a healthy relationship with such knowledge – knowledge that provides a fundamental strength for overcoming obstacles. But when knowledge is separated from a life of charity it can easily lead to arrogance and conceit, taking form as it has done in many churches in the concept of “salvation by faith alone,” salvation based on what you know rather than on how you live. And that is nothing but trouble. It generates false confidence and contempt for others, it is often belligerent and it can be mean.

*This* is the giant, Goliath, within us. It is not somebody separate from us, outside of us, threatening us as if we were completely innocent. It is a part of us that seeks to dominate over the other parts that remain loyal to the Lord. It claims our attention morning and evening, that is to say, in our morning states and in our evening states, when we are alert and when we are tired or confused. It says, “I know, I know; I understand; I’m not stupid! I don’t need any help; and not only do I not need religion but I find it annoying – encroaching on my turf, taking up important time and energy.”

In fact this is a sort of spirituality without the Lord, a sort of enlightenment without any real concern for the neighbour; it is what we call “enlightened self-interest,” true and valid insight that is used, unfortunately, merely for purposes of self-promotion or self-aggrandizement. And of course, it actually separates us from the Lord. It causes us to pull away from the protecting sphere of His love and if it is allowed to dominate our thinking it leaves us spiritually weak and helpless.

This was the situation on the battlefield of Judah, where Israel was camped on one side and the Philistines on the other side of a great valley. And here’s an example – just to get you thinking – from ordinary life today: you know that the Word says “Judge not that you be not judged,” but you are struggling with what to do about a situation in which a neighbour or a family member is making bad decisions. Or again, you’re struggling with how to vote on a particular issue that involves a judgment on the behaviour of others. It’s hard. You don’t know what to do. Love and compassion seem to suggest that you cannot judge, and must accept whatever decision others make in freedom, but then, common sense tells you that without any judgment or discernment at all there would be anarchy and a lot of people could get hurt.

The Philistine argument in this case might be that the Word teaches not to judge. And in a sense it’s true. This idea comes from a knowledge of the interior truths of the Word. But it’s not related to life, is it? Life requires us to make judgments, or to use a more neutral-sounding word, decisions about what we will or won’t support. Knowing that the Lord loves what is GOOD and wants us to make GOOD decisions for ourselves and others we try to argue, to make a case, but we get nowhere. We are like Israel, helpless before the Philistines.

What can we do? In the story it is a *young shepherd* who comes in to save the day. David, the son of Jesse, bringing food for his soldier brothers, is amazed at the situation and looks around in wonder, saying, “Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?”

Circumcision for the Jews was a rite of purification, protection from disease and a sign of

commitment to the Lord. The fact that the Philistines were uncircumcised represents the fact that this Philistine attitude is impure, defiled in fact by the love of self, lacking in any real commitment to the Lord or the neighbour. In our example it represents the easy way out: don't take a stand, don't risk your reputation, don't worry about anyone but yourself. David, on the other hand, represents all that is clear and strong and insightful with a view to defending what is good and true from the Lord. He represents the deeper spiritual truths that come with the acknowledgment of the Lord and with a real appreciation of the spiritual sense of His Word. The fact that he was young – like Joseph when he was thrown into the pit by his brothers, or like the Lord Himself when He taught the teachers in the temple – represents the innocent idealism he brings to the story. And the fact that he was a shepherd represents his desire and ability to care for the human flock that is the church – all the elements of faith and charity that are in us.

You will recall the 5 smooth stones of the brook with which David approached the giant. These represent the simple, basic truths of the Word that have been polished in our minds by consistent application to life. What we see now in the story is that when Saul after forty days of harassment comes to realize that he is helpless (representing our own experience when we are exhausted by the doubts of temptation) at last he agrees to let this confident young lad face Goliath with these little stones. (Well, almost. At first he tries to cover him in the chain mail and armour that represents our old superficial understanding, but when David sees that this only makes his life difficult he casts it off and runs without it to meet the giant.)

Just so when we come to the point in temptations where we realize that we are getting nowhere, if we will open our hearts and minds to a deeper understanding of the Word in its spiritual sense and innocently, *simply* commit that understanding to doing what is right, we will be able to overcome the enemies of our spiritual life no matter how intimidating they may seem.

In our example David represents the Lord Himself showing us that true love to the neighbour is loving what is good IN the neighbour, and that true judgment is not condemning any person but rather condemning the evil IN a person - to the extent that we can see what that is. Remember, the Lord also said "Judge righteous judgment," in other words, make FAIR judgments, always giving the benefit of the doubt (CL 523).

Of course, since our lives *are* complex we can't always expect the resolution of a conflict within us to be as clear as it is shown in this story. But the story shows us the *principles* that are at play, and it shows us that if we stay focussed on one problem at a time – the main problem, the **BIG** problem – and let the Lord address it through a spiritual understanding of His Word, the giants of our own spiritual arrogance will fall and the perception of interior truths – truths that flow from the Lord's love – will grow in strength even as David's reputation and power grew in the kingdom of Israel where he became a great conquering hero.

Amen.

Lessons: Matthew 8: selections  
Children's talk on the Lord's Ministry of Healing (unrelated to the above)

I Samuel 17:17-36 & Apocalypse Explained #817:6-7