

A Heart For God: A Courageous Heart

1 Samuel 17

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 15 October 2006

The most common command

Let's start this morning with a couple of questions. What is the most common command in the Bible? The command to love? No. Love may be the core of God's purpose for human life, but it's not his most frequent instruction. Writers about the spiritual life often speak of pride as being at the root of human fallenness, but the Bible's most frequent imperative is not about avoiding pride or gaining humility. It's not the command to walk with integrity or to show justice, as important as those qualities are. The command in Scripture that occurs more often than any other – God's most frequently repeated instruction – is this: "Do not fear. Trust me. Be strong. Be courageous. Do not fear." Now why do you think this would be the case? Fear doesn't seem like the most serious vice in the world. It never made the list of the Seven Deadly Sins, for example. No one ever receives church discipline for being afraid. So why does God tell us to stop being afraid more often than he tells us anything else? Maybe it's because fear so often keeps us from doing what God asks us to do. It's fear that keeps us from trusting him. It's fear that keeps us from obeying him. It's fear that keeps us from becoming all that he wants us to be. No wonder Henry David Thoreau said, "Nothing is so much to be feared as fear itself."

Fear and courage

For the next few weeks we're going to be looking at a number of stories from the life of David. The first full-blown story about David – and certainly the most memorable and the best known – is a story about fear and courage. Would you take a Bible and turn to 1 Samuel 17 (p.277). As we walk through this story, ask yourself the question: What are the ingredients of courage? How can I live a life that is marked by courage? Let's read the first few verses:

1 Now the Philistines [Israel's great enemy] gathered their forces for war and assembled at Socoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Socoh and Azekah. [They're down in the western foothills of Judah. This is important.] 2 Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. 3 The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them.

In the ancient Near East, people equated their military strength with their gods. They thought that if you conquered another nation you did so because your gods were superior to theirs. The Philistines, who lived on the coastal plains in what is today the Gaza Strip, thought that the God of the Israelites was a god of the hills and not the valleys (1 Kings 20:23-28). So they thought they could defeat the Israelites in these foothills, in this valley, where their gods would be stronger.

4 A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet tall. 5 He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels; 6 on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. 7 His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels. His shield bearer went ahead of him.

8 Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. 9 If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." 10 Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the ranks of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other." 11 On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.

No wonder. The text says that Goliath was over nine feet tall. Some manuscripts indicate that he was just under seven feet tall. Either way – especially for that culture – he was a monster of a man. And he's heavily armed. He's wearing what we would call a coat of mail from his neck to his knees. It alone weighs 5,000 shekels – about 60 kgs. His head is protected by a helmet. His shins by bronze greaves. He has a shield bearer carrying a shield to protect him. He's a walking tank. Take a moment and imagine in your mind how frightening it would be to take on a giant of this size protected by this amount of armour. If you look at the screen you get a feel for how the odds were stacked against anyone foolish enough to face Goliath in battle.

The most obvious candidate to take on Goliath was the king of Israel himself, Saul. It says earlier in 10:23 that he stood a full head taller than the rest of his countrymen. He was a big man himself. But he wasn't keen. So he

offered a kind of incentive package. Here in v 25 he says to his soldiers, "If anyone can kill this giant I'll give him great wealth, grant him tax-exempt status for the rest of his life, and give him the hand of my daughter in marriage." Interestingly, there are no takers. Every soldier is paralysed by fear.

Good fear and bad fear

Now fear is a natural, even physical, part of being human. The *New York Times* magazine a while back cited research that shows some people have a strong genetic disposition towards fear and anxiety. Scientists have located the gene: it's gene *SLC6A4* on chromosome *17q12*. People who have the short version of this gene are more likely to be anxious and worried than people with the long version of it. Now that you know this, some of you are probably feeling anxious and worried that you might have the short version. But there is such a thing as good fear: the fear that keeps a child from touching a hot stove; the fear that keeps me from driving more recklessly than I do. Fear can be good. The problem is that for most of us fear strikes when it is neither helpful nor wanted. It paralyses us, like it paralyses Saul and all the Israelites.

Or almost all the Israelites. About 12-25 km away, out in the Judean hill country, looking after his father's sheep, is a teenager called David. He's too young to fight, but one day his father asks him to carry some supplies to his brothers at the battlefield. He arrives just as Goliath steps out and bellows his usual challenge. The text says in v 24, "When the Israelites saw the man, they all ran from him in great fear." But look at how David responds in v 26. He asks the men standing near him, "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this *disgrace* from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should *defy* the *armies of the living God*?"

Imagination: learning to see things from God's perspective

There's an interesting story in chapter 16 where God sends Samuel to Bethlehem to anoint the next king of Israel. And God says to him these words: "Do not consider his appearance or his height ... The Lord does not look at the things people look at. Human beings look at the outwards appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). He sees past the way things appear to the way things are. David has learned to see things from God's perspective. Saul and his army see an intimidating warrior who is bigger and stronger than them. David sees an uncircumcised Philistine, who worships lifeless idols, insulting and blaspheming the living God. So he sees that this is not ultimately a battle between the Philistines and the Israelites, this is a contest between the dead gods of the Philistines and the living God of Israel. It's no contest.

This is the first secret of a courageous life: learning to see things from God's perspective. Over the last thirty years the most dominant movement in American psychology is what is known as cognitive psychology – built around the truth that you are what you think. Whether we are filled with confidence or fear depends on the kind of thoughts that habitually occupy our minds. If you read the Psalms you realise that as a shepherd, tending sheep out in the fields on his own, David obviously spent hours talking to God, meditating on God, singing about God. He'd filled his mind with God, learned to see things from God's perspective. What about you? What do you fill your mind with? If you were Greg Murphy about to drive a high-performance car in Bathurst, what are the odds that you'd fill the tank with unleaded, low-octane fuel from a local service station? If you were serious about competing in next week's Auckland marathon, and wanted to do really well, how likely would you be to go on an all-chocolate diet between now and then? One of the genetic dispositions that our Emma has unfortunately inherited from me is an incessant desire for chocolate. Sometimes it seems like the all-consuming goal of her life is to eat sugar. So Lorraine and I have to carefully monitor how much sugar she eats. As a rule we're careful about what we feed our cars, our bodies, our children, our pets. Because we know that the fuel that goes into things ultimately determines their performance and well-being. The mind is no different. Can I challenge you over the next few weeks as we study the life of David, to read through the Psalms that he wrote? Because the first secret of a courageous life is filling your mind with God's word, God's perspective.

Tribulation: learning to trust in everyday challenges

That's what David did. And as a result, this is what he says to King Saul in v32:

³² "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him."

³³ Saul replied, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a fighting man from his youth."

34 But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, 35 I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. 36 Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. 37 The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine."

Imagine you're David, out in a field on your own watching the sheep and a lion comes along. You have no gun – just a stick and a sling. What would you do? David could have run away. Nobody would have known that he gave up without a fight – nobody except David and God. But David stayed. He fought the lion and the bear. And he learned – firsthand – that God could deliver him from his enemies, that God could deliver him from any challenge – any Goliath – that came his way. That's the second secret to living courageously: It's in the everyday challenges of life, when nobody is watching, that we learn we can trust in God.

We live with the illusion that when you face your moment of crisis, your Goliath moment – and we will all face a Goliath moment – you just find the courage somehow to act in the face of your fears. But the truth is if you wait until you're facing Goliath you probably won't do so well. It's like that story about a man who arrives at the pearly gates of heaven and Peter says to him, "Well, I can't find in your record that you did anything particularly good or particularly bad. Can you tell me one really impressive deed that you've done?" The man says, "Well, one time I saw some bikers menacing a young woman. I stopped my car, walked up to the leader – a huge, hairy, ugly guy with a big nose ring. I reached up, ripped the ring right out of his nose and said to them, 'You leave this girl alone, alright!' They all just stared at me, so I said to them, 'Get out of here, every one of you, or you'll have to deal with me.'" Peter is impressed and asks, "When did this happen?" The man answers, "About two minutes ago."

When you think about it. Goliath-sized challenges don't come along very often. But lions and bears come at us on a daily basis. It might be a difficult situation at work or school, or in your family. You could avoid it and run away. Or you could pray, "God, with your help I'm going after that bear." And our heart will get a little bolder. It could be a difficult friend or a grumpy spouse. You could react by slowly withdrawing. Or you could pray, "God, with your help I'm going after that bear to which I'm married." And you'll discover – firsthand – that God is faithful. It was in the everyday moments in his unglamorous job as a shepherd when nobody was watching him that David day-after-day learned to trust God. If he'd waited until he faced Goliath, he would have run like everyone else. But he didn't. He took on those everyday challenges – lions and bears. And grew in courage.

Motivation: learning to seek God's honour above all else

King Saul, by contrast, has run from lions and bears all his life. So he thinks that if this little shepherd boy is going to stand any chance at all against Goliath, he's going to have wear the king's armour, wield the king's sword. Rely on the weapons and resources that the other nations – that Goliath himself – relies on. But David refuses. In v 40 it says: "[H]e took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine." The famous sculpture by Michelangelo depicts David as he's about to approach Goliath. Verse 41:

Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David. 42 He looked David over and saw that he was only a boy, ruddy and handsome, and he despised him. 43 He said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. 44 "Come here," he said, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beasts of the field!"

This kind of sledging or psychological warfare was standard operating procedure in those days. David's never been in this situation before. But his response is incredible. He says (v 45):

"You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. 46 This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel." 47 All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

This is the third secret to David's incredible courage. He's motivated by the desire to see his God honoured. His primary concern is to see people everywhere know that his God is real. I saw an ad a while back for the Schwarzkopf line of hair products. It said, "It's all about me." For David, "It's all about God." I guess that's why he's known as "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). He loved God more than anything else. Wanted to honour God more than anything else. So he runs quickly towards Goliath, takes a stone, slings it at Goliath. It

hits him in the one place where he has no armour, in the head. And Goliath falls facedown on the ground. Dead. The contest is over almost before it's begun. Bill McKee once said that Goliath's last thought as the rock hits his head was probably, "Nothing like this ever entered my mind." Goliath never expected this. He'd never faced someone like this – a skinny kid with no armour, no experience, no sword, spear or javelin – nothing but the God of Israel. But God was enough.

We're going to sing one more song. I wonder if the worship team could come up. Would you take the stone you were given as you came in and stand up. (If the team gets a little off-key up here, you know what to do.) I don't know what your Goliath is this morning. I don't know what creates fear or anxiety in you. Maybe it's a difficult person. Or a difficult, painful relationship. Maybe it's your health. Maybe it's a vocational decision you need to make. Or a risk you're afraid to take. I don't know what your Goliath is. But I do know this: If you let your Goliath intimidate you, if you keep running away from him like the Israelites did, you'll never fulfil your God-given potential. Never demonstrate to the world as well as you could that God is real. That he lives. But if you will face your Goliath with one small stone, trusting in God, that giant doesn't stand a chance. Because this is not so much a story about David's raw courage or David's skill with the sling. This is a story about God, and what God can do with a little stone offered to him in simple trust. Would you commit right now, as you hold this stone, to live with confidence in God? Would you put this stone in your purse or your bathroom – some place where you'll see it – and let it be a reminder to you that one small stone, with simple trust in God, is more than enough to handle any challenge you face.

Questions

1. On a "fear management scale" of 1 to 10, where would you rate yourself between 1 ("I often live paralysed by fear") and 10 ("I almost never let fear stop me")?
2. What is your greatest fear?
3. What is the cost of living in fear? Soren Kierkegaard wrote: "It is a dangerous business to arrive in eternity with possibilities that you have prevented from becoming actualities ... Trusting in God, I have ventured, but I have failed – there is peace and rest and God's confidence in that. I have not ventured – it is an unhappy thought, a torment for all eternity." What do you think?
4. Read 1 Samuel 17:26-29. Why do you think David's older brother, Eliab, treat David so harshly? What might this say about the cost of living in fear?
5. "Fear has created more practical heretics than bad theology ever has, for it makes us live as though we serve a limited, finite, partially present, semi-competent God." Discuss.
6. Can you recall a time you acted boldly in the face of your fears?
7. Look at 1 Samuel 16:13. What does that tells us about the secret of David's great courage?
8. What three secrets of a courageous life are demonstrated in the story of David and Goliath?
9. What is one step you could take this week to grow in courage and faith?