

Sermon

Pastor McCants will be preaching this Sunday, November 7, 2021

Text: 1 Samuel 17:37

A man steps out of the ocean, onto the shore. He's just finished a 2.4-mile swim, the first leg of a grueling Ironman Triathlon. But unlike all the other swimmers that day, this 59-year-old man is towing a raft. And in that raft is his 37-year-old son, Rick. Rick suffers from cerebral palsy. He has since birth. Rick can't walk. He can't talk. He can barely hold up his head and raise his right arm. But there he is with his dad, swimming, biking, running his way to finish an Iron Man. Rick Hoyt and his dad have become famous on the racing scene. They're called Team Hoyt. People asked Rick's dad, "Why are you doing this? Why are you pushing and pulling your disabled son through all these grueling races?" And he says, "Because he asks me to."

It started back in 1977, their very first race. Rick's dad pushed him across the finish line in a wheelchair that looked like a shopping cart. And Rick was smiling from ear to ear. Later, Rick used his computer interface, which translates his head movements into letters to tell his dad, "Dad, when I'm running, I don't feel like I'm disabled anymore." Years later, after decades of competitive racing, Rick's dad wrote this: "Rick and I took every race, not as an obstacle to be overcome, but as an exciting challenge to bring us closer together. At first, it was about how, how to overcome obstacles. But then it was about who, who was with you in the midst of these obstacles."

On this program, we've been listening to the Old Testament books of 1 and 2 Samuel. And today we are going to hear Samuel's most famous story, "David and Goliath." But first I want to suggest that we've been missing something important in this story, something that Rick Hoyt and his dad can help us see. Author Malcolm Gladwell, in his book about David and Goliath, makes a similar point, but in a different way. Gladwell also suggests that we've been misreading David and Goliath. Gladwell says that we hear David and Goliath as a story about a battle won miraculously by an underdog. But, Gladwell says, look again. And then he takes his reader on a journey into the tactics of ancient warfare, focusing on the highly formidable weapon known as the sling. The sling in experienced hands was a devastating weapon and every seasoned foot soldier knew it.

A slinger could hurl a baseball-sized stone as fast as a major league pitcher and no less accurate. The book of Judges in the Bible reports that ancient Israel had a regiment of slingers. And every one of them could sling a stone at a hair and not miss. An experienced slinger like David could kill a well-armed foot soldier like Goliath from a football field away. So, Gladwell says, that's the first thing we get wrong. We underestimate the advantage of the so-called underdog. And second, we overestimate the power of the giant. Historians now surmise that Goliath suffered from an overactive pituitary gland. For example, Robert Wadlow, the tallest person in modern history who

was nearly nine feet tall, also suffered from this condition. And a common side effect of this giant-making condition is poor eyesight. This raises interesting questions about Goliath. Why does he say that David has come at him with sticks? David only had one stick, his staff. Maybe Goliath's got double vision.

And why does Goliath have a shield bearer? Foot soldiers didn't normally have people carry their shields. Maybe he's a guide for a nearly blind giant. Gladwell concludes, this isn't the miracle story we thought it was. David won because he changed the rules. Gladwell's book has helped me see the story of David and Goliath in a new light. But I still think he's missing the most part of the story. It's something that many of us miss.

Think about how you've heard David and Goliath applied. Many applications I've heard focus on *how*. How did David do it? How do we face our giants? Secular-minded people might say, "Change the rules; disrupt the system. That's how." Religious-minded people might say, "Look to God and wait for a miracle." But the biblical account, when you listen to it, has something more important to say. It's not about how, but *who*. Who is with you in the face of these giants? So here it is, the story of David and Goliath.

Now the Philistines gathered their armies for battle and Saul the king of Israel. And the men of Israel were gathered and encamped at the Valley of Elah. And they drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. The Philistine army was on the hill on the one side and Israel was on the hill on the other side, with the valley in between them. Then, from the camp of the Philistines came a champion, Goliath from Gath. He was over nine feet tall. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of chain mail armor. The coat weighed more than a hundred pounds. And he had bronze armor on his legs and a bronze javelin slung between his shoulders. And his spear, the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and the head of the spear was 15 pounds of iron. And his shield bearer went before him.

And he stood and shouted at the ranks of Israel. "Why have you lined up for battle? Am I not a Philistine? Are you not servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. And if he is able to fight me and kill me, we will be your servants. But if I prevail over him and kill him, you will be our servants and serve us." And then the Philistine said, "I defy the ranks of Israel. You choose a man, and we will fight each other." And Saul, and all Israel, when they heard these words, their confidence was shattered and they were greatly afraid.

Now, David was the son of an Ephrathite by the name of Jesse. Jesse was from the town of Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Jesse had eight sons. And in the days of Saul, Jesse was already an old man and advanced in years. His oldest three sons followed Saul into battle. David was the youngest son, and he went back and forth from Saul to tend his father's sheep in Bethlehem. And for 40 days, the Philistine came out morning and evening and took his stand.

Now, Jesse said to his son, David, "Take this ephah of roasted grain and these 10 loaves

of bread to your brothers. Go and hurry to their camp. See if your brothers are well and bring back some assurance from them." Very early in the morning, David put the flock in the care of a shepherd, loaded up, and set out. And he ran to the camp and greeted his brothers. And as he talked with them, look, the champion, the Philistine from Gath, came out and spoke, saying the same words. And David heard them. And the men of Israel said, "Have you seen this man who comes out? He comes up to defy Israel, and the king will give great wealth to the man who kills him. And he will give him his daughter in marriage and he will make his father's household free from taxes in Israel."

And David said, "What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and takes away this scorn from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?" And they told him in the same way. "So it will be done for the man who kills him." Now, Eliab, David's oldest brother, heard him talking with the men, and his anger burned against David. And he said to him, "Why have you come out? And with whom did you leave those few sheep in the wilderness? I know how conceited you are, and the evil in your heart. You've come down to see the battle." And David said, "What have I done now? Was it not just a word?" And David's words were heard, and they were repeated in the presence of Saul, the king. Saul sent for David, and David said to Saul, "Do not let anyone lose heart because of this uncircumcised Philistine. Your servant will go and fight him."

And Saul said to David, "You cannot go against him and fight him because you are just a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth." But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been tending his father's flock. And whenever a lion or a bear came and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him down and delivered it from his mouth. Your servant has struck down lions and bears. And this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them because he has defied the armies of the living God. 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."

And Saul said, "Go, and the Lord be with you." So Saul clothed David in his own armor. He put a bronze helmet on his head and a coat of armor, and David strapped the sword around his armor and he tried walking around because he had not tested them. And he said to Saul, "I cannot go in these because I have not tested them." And he took them off. And he took in his hand his staff and chose five smooth stones from the river and put them in his shepherd's pouch. And he went out to the Philistine with his sling in his hand. And the Philistine looked and saw David. And he despised him because he was just a youth, red cheeks and handsome. And he said to him, "Am I a dog that you come against me with sticks? And the Philistine cursed David by his own gods. He said, "Come to me and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the beast of the field."

And David said to the Philistine, "You come against 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 this day. The Lord will give you into my hand, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. This day, I will give the corpses of the Philistine army to the

birds of the heavens and the beasts of the earth so that all the earth will know that there is a God in Israel, and that all those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves because the battle is the Lord's, and He will give you all into our hand."

And then it happened. The Philistine came up, walking, moving forward to meet David. And David ran quickly to the battle line to meet him. He reached into his pouch and took hold of a stone and slung it and struck the Philistine on his forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and the Philistine fell on his face to the earth. And David ran and stood over him, and he took hold of his sword and pulled it out of its sheath and killed him and cut off his head. And when the Philistines saw that their champion was dead, they fled. And the men of Israel and Judah rose up with a shout and pursued the Philistines as far as Gath. The Word of the Lord, 1 Samuel 17. excerpts.

According to Malcolm Gladwell, these are the lessons of David and Goliath. There are real limits to what evil and misfortune can do to us. And the powerful are not as powerful as they look nor are the weak as weak as they look. It's a compelling argument. But as far as the story of David and Goliath goes, it's a little deflating. Maybe David wasn't the underdog. Maybe Goliath had about as much chance as a man in bronze age armor has against a guy with a Colt 45 pistol.

So what do we do with this story now? The first thing to see is that it's a story within a larger story. Goliath was only the first obstacle David faced, and maybe he was the easiest. David becomes famous overnight. King Saul gets jealous, tries to murder David. David spends the next decade of his life being hunted and on the run. Now David's tricks aren't so effective, and the obstacles get more difficult. And it turns out David's older brother was right, but not in the way that he thought. There is evil and sin hidden in David's heart. And these become the seeds to David's own destruction.

And at the end, no more tricks in his pouch, no more slick moves to disrupt the system. David is buried under life's greatest obstacle, death. But for David, the author of the Psalms, some of the greatest love songs to God ever written, it was never about overcoming obstacles. It was about who was with him in spite of his giant sins and disabilities. And this God of David, He is the ultimate disruptor, the King of the unexpected, the Master of turned tables, the God who makes all things new. God made a promise to David. He said that one of David's descendants would be King forever, that He would strike down sin, that He would slay the boastful giant of death. And of course, we want to know how. How did He do it? And it's actually quite breathtaking. God changed the rules, so to speak. God Himself stepped onto the battlefield wearing human clothing.

God sent His eternal Son to become the promised Descendant of David. And Jesus, He set aside the sword and the sling. He conquered by serving. He prevailed over the powerful by surrendering His power. He silenced sin by suffering for sinners. He undid death by dying, and He rose from the dead to make a way for you. God's table-turning

performance is inspiring. Jesus did what no one else could. Jesus saw how, when all you and I could see were obstacles. But the most breathtaking thing is God is more interested in *who* than He is in *how*.

It's kind of like Rick's dad. Once when someone saw how great an athlete Rick's father was, they asked him, "Why don't you try competing on your own? In other words, you could really be a top contender without all that extra weight." And Rick's dad said, "I have no desire to run alone." You see, from the day he was born, people have been treating Rick like he was an obstacle. "Put him in an institution, forget about him. How can you possibly help him?" they said. But for his mom and his dad, it wasn't a question of how, but who. Who is he? He is their beloved son. And that's who you are to God, a beloved son, a beloved daughter in Jesus.

God turned the tables. God disrupted the system. God did something new for you. It wasn't about overcoming obstacles for him. It was about being with you. Jesus lives to make a way for you in spite of your sins and disabilities. He lives to be your arms and your legs. And at the finish line, you'll see what Rick saw about his father. Rick wrote with his computer, one letter at a time, "He's not just my arms and my legs. He's my inspiration, the person who allows me to live life to the fullest and inspire others to do the same." In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

"Not How, but Who"

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