

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

David and Goliath

Presented by David Reay

Introduction

What do you think is the most common human fear? Spiders? Heights? Open spaces? In fact, the experts tell us that the greatest fear is that of speaking in public.

You may have heard the story of a lion in the Colosseum who had gobbled up quite a few Christians for the amusement of the Roman spectators. He was doing very well for himself until one of the Christians stepped forward and whispered in his ear. The lion immediately took fright and ran from the stadium, leaving the Romans bewildered and the victim mightily relieved. The authorities demanded the man explain what had happened to cause the lion to do such a thing. Easy, the man replied. I just told him that if he ate me he would have to make an after dinner speech.

We all have our fears. For some, fear actually determines the shape of their life. And it may be one fear, or a complex of fears. Fear can in fact be the difference between sheer existence and real living. We can suffer from arachnophobia, ichtophobia, hydrophobia, gynophobia. But we meet some people today who suffered from giantophobia, or more accurately, Goliathophobia. We hear the familiar story of David and Goliath.

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Let's look at how an ordinary young man conquered a big bully with a slingshot. Out of this story, we might come to see how faith and not fear can shape our life.

The Philistines were attacking the people of Israel. There was a bit of a stand off. It came down to a challenge to single combat. The Philistines put forward their biggest and best, Goliath. He stood well over six foot tall. His armour alone weighed almost 60 kg. He probably descended from giant people who were around the place at that time. He threw out a challenge to the Israelite army to send out their own champion. This single combat would thus take the place of an all-out battle.

The Israelites were afraid. Even Saul their king was afraid. And together with that fear there was perhaps some guilt. If we are God's people, then why are we cowering like this in our tents? Shouldn't we be out there doing battle with him? This is the added burden of fear for a Christian. We are not only afraid but guilty. We feel ashamed for being so frightened. If we had any sort of faith we would not be so timid. And so we may despise ourselves for lacking faith.

True, faith can displace fear. But we are not living in a perfect world where faith just automatically kicks in. We are crazy mixed up people who are sometimes faithful, sometimes fearful. Best to just bring the mess and mixture to God and ask him to deal with our fears and ignite our faith. Feeling guilty won't do any good at all.

David is meanwhile running errands for his big brothers who are part of Saul's army. He gets to hear of Goliath. He wonders out loud what would be done for the man who actually dared to challenge Goliath. His brothers didn't like this line of questioning at all. He was meddling in affairs that were not his business. He may also have been showing up their own timidity.

Saul gets to hear of David's questioning. When David tells Saul he will challenge Goliath, Saul warns him off. It would be a gross mismatch. David replies that he has seen off lions and bears while minding the sheep, so Goliath won't be too great a problem. And David mentions the fact that Goliath is not just challenging an enemy army, he is challenging the army of the living God. At least David seems to have things in perspective.

Saul relents. He offers David his armour. David tries it on, but finds it too awkward to wear and so discards it. If David is going to fight Goliath, he will do it on his own terms. He won't fight as Saul or as his brothers. An important reminder that when God equips us to fight our fears and overcome them, he will use the raw material he has in us. Some may tell us that they handle their fears by praising God loudly in song. Others may tell us that they handle their fears by long periods of silence before God. Some will handle them by being counselled on how to think correctly about them. Others by being counselled on how to feel appropriately about them.

David went back to his own experience, the sorts of things God had enabled him to do. To the slingshot and the pebbles. To fight the fearsome Goliath, David had to be true to himself, not to try to grapple with things Saul's way. Let God equip us to fight our fears his way, a way consistent with how he has shaped us. Not in a way that other voices may demand.

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So David challenges Goliath. The giant mocks David. He sees it as an insult. David gives the answer. True, Goliath is well armed and looks intimidating. But David has an even greater weapon, not just the slingshot and the pebbles, but he is fighting on behalf of the living God. He is fighting not for himself to prove how tough he is, but fighting to show the world that there is a God in Israel, and it isn't one of Goliath's assembly of substitutes.

When the two champions of the armies came closer, David took a smooth stone from his pouch and put it in a slingshot. David swung the cords around and with well practised timing, released one cord and the stone unerringly hit Goliath in the temple and he dropped to the ground, either dead, or more likely, stunned. David finished the job by beheading Goliath with his own sword.

The Philistines fled. Saul wanted to find out more about David, which he did. Saul's fear of Goliath would lead to envy of David who was not so afraid of Goliath. This is another thing fear does. It distorts our reactions and our attitudes. David's courage in God's name has shown up Saul and Saul doesn't like it one bit.

Perhaps we can say just one extra thing about fear. It has to do with the power of negative suggestion. For example, if I said, "Don't think of the colour red for the next minute", it is likely the colour red would be just what you thought about. If I instead said think of the colour blue, then you would most likely not think of the colour red. I have replaced a negative suggestion with a positive suggestion. It is better to focus on the

positive behaviour desired rather than on the negative behaviour we want to avoid. This is certainly true whether we are disciplining our children, or encouraging others to follow Jesus.

We also increase fear by focusing on the negative in our self-talk. “I’ll bet that doesn’t work out” “I can’t possibly do ...” “Oh boy, we have a big problem here.” “If only....” “I’ll never be able to do that.” All this spills over from honest realism to fear. We need to take ourselves by the scruff of the neck and start rephrasing how we speak to ourselves. “I’ll give it a go.” “That’s a challenge and I’ll lean on God to get me through.” “What opportunities for growth or ministry are here right now?” This may sound like pie in the sky optimism, but is in fact biblical realism. We are not left to our own devices. Life throws a lot of stuff at us, much of which can throw us off guard if we let it. We can walk around fearful most of the time, and our bodies will eventually let us know this. But God hasn’t abandoned us. Goliath was a challenge. But David was able to meet it. The Israelites were focused on Goliath. David seemed focused on God who would enable him to meet the challenge.

If we talk like victims that is what we will be. If we talk and think defeat, it increases the likelihood of it. If we feed our fears with negative self-talk then we will be handcuffed to those fears. We do have a choice, and that is to talk to ourselves from the Scriptures. Fear not. Cast your cares on him. God is our strength and refuge. This doesn’t change our circumstances, but it does change the way we approach them. David’s faith didn’t make Goliath go away. It just meant he approached him differently. And the difference was not his age or his stature. It was his bottom-line trust that God was with him.

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King Saul was very envious of David because David had succeeded in an area where Saul himself was supposed to be strong. We rarely get envious about others who succeed in areas foreign to us. Envy becomes a problem when someone does what I am trying to do better than I am doing.

That will bring out all my insecurities, all my self-doubts. The good and proper thing to do is to applaud the good that others do. To acknowledge we have much to learn from them. To be willing to take second place and let someone else get the plaudits. Too often, our insecurities, our sinful preoccupation with how we look and how we impress others get in the way. So we hit out at that person who may well have done nothing wrong to us. We hit out openly or hit out privately. We whisper, we undermine, we discredit, we whine and complain. They aren’t as good as they think. They are headed for trouble. I taught them all they know. It’s not fair: if only people knew what they were really like.

Saul took a more direct approach with David. He interrupted a harp-playing episode in which David was trying to soothe a very troubled Saul by hurling a spear at David.

Envy can become murderous. We grow so resentful of another person’s popularity, wealth, success, or reputation that we want to get rid of them. We feel so inferior compared to them we want them out of the way so we can feel better about ourselves. Their presence is a living reminder of our own inadequacies. So away with them! And if that doesn’t lead to throwing spears, it certainly extends to throwing rumours and whispers, to simmering resentment.

Envy will poison relationships. Envy of another person can lead to adultery, covetousness, lying, murder. So fragile can be our own sense of worth that we are threatened by another’s success. We utterly lose the capacity to rejoice with those who rejoice. We ourselves then become diminished. Instead of moving forward

using these others as an incentive, we may succumb to bitterness. We can end up shrivelled up, a shell of our former self. Someone once said that every time someone else succeeds, a little part of me dies.

David has had more than one opportunity to take revenge on Saul who has made his life a misery. He has declined to take it. He will let God take care of that. In time, Saul does die in battle and David becomes king. But he hasn't used assassination or revenge to achieve kingship. David had been severely tested by Saul but he was not going to repay evil for evil.

We've noted how we can better handle the Goliaths of our life, but we also have people like Saul in our lives. Those who make life hard for us, who make life a misery for us. Those who seem to pursue us and never let us out of our sights. Those who make fine speeches of friendship and reconciliation but who sharpen their knives for us in the meantime. Those whose envy and personal insecurity drive them to take out their inadequacies on us. Those who are missing out on God's blessings by their own folly trying to drag down those enjoying God's blessings.

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How do we respond to those who wish us ill? Do we outwardly and obviously hit back? Do we do it more subtly, by whispers and suggestions? Do we do it by passivity, not actually doing anything wrong, but failing to do right to them? Do we adopt an air of studied neutrality, and pat ourselves on the back for it? None of these measures up to the standard of David, nor to the New Testament example of Jesus, who tells us to positively bless those who seek to harm us.

In our life, there will always be someone pursuing us into the caves and desert of our loneliness and feelings of rejection. Always someone who works out their own insecurities on us. We have no choice in that. We do have a choice in how to react. We can choose to allow God to execute justice in his own good time while we dispense mercy. We can choose to do good and not evil, thus breaking the cycle of hatred and misunderstanding. We can choose to be like Jesus who, when pursued to the bitter end of the cross by those who hated him for his goodness, offered mercy to them. And who thus offers mercy to each one of us.