

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Stones for Comfort and Help”

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1 Samuel 17

June 21, 2009

Many years ago, I was at a picnic. Hamburgers, hot dogs, potato salad, paper plates. A picnic. You get the idea. Oh, did I mention it was at Roger Staubach's house in Dallas? How could I have forgotten that little detail? True story—part of something I was involved in in high school. And several pro athletes were there including a few Dallas Mavericks and Dallas Cowboys. The young guys played basketball in Roger's backyard court, where there was a list of rules that was only one long—no blood, no foul. We saw Roger's trophy case, which was actually a trophy room. And Tom Landry was there too. So anticipating this, I bought a football and brought it with me and asked Roger Staubach and Tom Landry to sign it. Then I placed it in a display case and gave it to dad for Father's Day that year. He's still got it displayed in the den. If you look carefully on the backside of the case, there's a little note that designates this as mine when my sister and I have to divide up the house someday.

So at this picnic with the paper plates and burgers and such, I finished my meal and went to throw my trash in the can. As I tossed my plate in the can, another hand appeared above the can also throwing trash away. That hand was much larger and much darker than mine. I followed it up past a thick forearm and bulging bicep, past a thick neck, all the way up to the distant head of Ed Jones, the famous defensive end for the Cowboys back then. I said, man Ed Jones, you are too tall. And the rest for him is history. I've never seen anyone bigger that close before or since. I mean Charlie is tall, but, you know, look at him. String bean. Too tall Jones would use Charlie to pick his teeth. So you can imagine how small I felt there standing next to him or kind of under him as he loomed over me. Fortunately, he smiled and we were friendly. I'd hate to be on the opposite side from him. It seemed like he was 10 feet tall.

The tallest, most imposing human I've ever seen. And I've never forgotten it. Now that's who Goliath is in the Bible. He's huge. Ten feet tall, a champion, wearing hundreds of pounds of chain mail, a bronze helmet, a spear like a weaver's beam. A cross between Andre the Giant from Princess Bride and the giant from Jack and the Beanstalk. And ill tempered and itching for a fight with the Israelites. He thunders his way down to the valley, scornfully looks on his trembling opponents and declares: “I am a philistine and you are servants of Saul. Let's have this out!”

But he underestimated his opponent. And they had misread themselves, and misremembered who they really were, and underestimated even here on the field of battle who they were. They weren't just servants of their King Saul. Had they been just servants of a human power, just like their opponents with an equal but differently aligned allegiance and trust in human power, they didn't stand a chance. Their power and strength were not up to the challenge that lay before them. They were no match for this force allied against them and they knew it. But they were supposed to be different. These people had a power and strength beyond calculation and comparison. Later it would be put like this, “Some trust in chariot and horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God” (Psalm 20:7). And much later like this, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human

strength. . . . God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Corinthians 1:25, 27-29).

This Goliath, this human champion of destruction, so clearly the strongest, incontrovertibly the most powerful, obviously the uber bully on the playground, miscalculated who these people are. They are not servants of Saul. They, along with Saul, were servants of God. But in the presence of such obvious danger, they had forgotten what that meant. They were terrified of this Goliath because they looked at him and looked at their resources and quickly calculated that they didn't stand a chance against this formidable opponent. They forgot that the calculation of the faithful is a different sort of calculus. When we forget that, we lose our courage.

But one remembered. The most unlikely. The smallest. The youngest. Is the bravest. He's had some experience with fighting formidable opponents—the lions and bears of his youth—but while his confidence comes from his success, his trust is in his identity. He remembers who he is and whom he serves. “The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will save me from the hand of this uncircumcised Philistine.”

David goes down to the dry riverbed and selects five smooth stones, perfect for his little slingshot. Smooth stones. Stones don't come smooth. They are made smooth by the passing of time, the rushing of waters over them as the water wears down the rough edges. These aren't new stones, some new solution to an old problem. These are old stones. These aren't made with human hands. It is the elements of creation that have made them what they are.

In some other place and time, young boys might pick them up to skip them across a smooth lake. Those are easy times, good times. They are carefree, when stones are just toys to look at and play with. But here, in this kind of moment, staring up at giants that may crush you, the stones are life and hope.

David selects the stones, places them in his satchel. Goes to meet Goliath. Pulls one of them out, sets it in his slingshot and fells the mighty giant. What a great story. It's a quintessential Bible story. When something completely unlikely happens from someone completely unexpected and it changes everything.

An impotent old man becomes the father of many nations.

A stutterer is the mouthpiece of God to Pharaoh.

A harlot heroically hides the spies at Canaan.

A shepherd delivers his nation's army from certain defeat.

A carpenter on a fishing boat silences the wind and waves with a word, “Peace. Be still.”

Abraham, Moses, The Canaanite woman, David, Jesus. And then there's Peter—the foolish denier of Jesus who becomes the rock on which the church is built. Paul—the murderer of Christians who becomes the Apostle.

Unscalable crises reveal unlikely faith and uncommon courage. Sometimes they announce themselves like the Philistine and make us quake in our shoes. Sometimes it's more like we see just a bit and then a bit more and it dawns on us how small we really are in the face of that which we face.

Like David kneeling in the dry river bed surely had hundreds, if not thousands of stones to choose from, each verse of scripture in the Bible is a stone to be carried close to our hearts, breathed out by God, useful for teaching, reproof, correction, training in righteousness, that you may be equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16). And there are some stones that are especially smooth, that have been especially encouraging and strengthening when Christians have faced their own Goliaths. There are some that are very special.

Recently, I was watching some TV show and a commercial came on advertising a summer Christian-themed adrenaline festival with Christian rock bands, motorcycle jumping, funnel cakes, volleyball tournaments. I think Chuck Norris is supposed to make an appearance. Sounded kind of like teenage summer fun with a Christian theme and also pretty silly. I was getting geared up to offer some profound, smug, devastatingly-witty critique of how obnoxious and self-promoting contemporary Christian culture has become, when the camera focused on a young woman sitting alone about halfway up a metal staircase. She was holding a cardboard sign, like you see in the medians of highway underpasses. It read, "anorexia." My attitude changed a bit. That's serious business of the body and soul and they were treating it seriously. She flipped over the sign. She smiled. It read, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." That's **Psalm 139:14**. And that's a smooth stone of identity in Christ when faced with the Goliath of gnawing self-doubt and even self-loathing. "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." That's one to memorize.

The Bible is a rich valley of smooth stones of comfort and help in times of distress and challenge. You may already have your pockets full and at the ready. Here are a few of mine.

Jeremiah 29:11, "I know the plans I have for you says the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." For me, this is a smooth stone of purpose. It's another one to memorize. The passage goes on to say, "Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me. When you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you." This passage has been a source of encouragement that God has a purpose for my life even when it seemed elusive at best and questionable at worse. Life is not always simple and it's not always a straight line, but God's work in our lives is toward the future, toward hope and toward the possibility of deep intimacy with God. I still love that passage.

Another smooth stone for me is **Philippians 1:6, "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."** This is a smooth stone of trust. Serving as a lonely summer missionary one summer in college, a friend overseas stitched me a bookmark with this passage on it. I found it when we unpacked a few weeks ago in a prayer book of the Psalms by Eugene Peterson. I didn't remember that she had stitched a small hook 'em in the back of it, so I'm a little uncertain of its spiritual value. But the passage is still powerful. What happens in each of us is not simply a product of our own decisions, work, and effort. It's God's work in us.

A fourth smooth stone, **Romans 8:37**, “**In all these things, we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.**” What shall separate us from the love of Christ? Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, sword . . . Goliath? No, we are more than conquerors. Being more than conquerors means more than we are just really good conquerors. It means that our higher calling as followers of Jesus is not just to conquer. We aren’t called to be bigger and stronger champions than Goliath. We are different from Goliath. The way of Jesus is a different way of life. It’s a way of perfect love casting out fear. It’s the way of taking up your cross. It’s the way of nothing separating us from God not anything in life, not even death. This is the smooth stone of perseverance for me. It’s a reminder that God has not withdrawn and will not. No matter the situation, the challenge. God is always here.

I really have come to appreciate the song that Paul and Jen sang earlier. It’s one of the few songs I can bring to mind that gets right at the heart of the reality of life. Sometimes life is grand. Sometimes it’s peaches and cream, sunshine and puppies. Sometimes life is pretty dark and pretty hard. The words of their song are one of those reminders and encouragements that faith, prayer, and worship are our response irrespective of the circumstances of life.

Blessed be your name/ in the land that is plentiful/ when the streams of abundance flow. Blessed be your name.

Blessed be your name/ when I’m found in the desert place/ though I walk through the wilderness. Blessed be your name.

When the sun’s shining down on me/ when the world’s all as it should be. Blessed be your name.

On the road marked with suffering/ though there’s pain in the offering. Blessed be your name.

A DaySpringer recently said in the fires of their challenges and fear, “Our faith has never been stronger. It’s been changed now. It will never be the same again. But it’s never been stronger.”

Psalm 139:14, Jeremiah 29:11, Philippians 1:6, Romans 8:37.

These are just four smooth stones. David selected five. There are countless. I’ll leave the fifth for you to add. What is yours? What scripture has seen you through the tears, strengthened you in the heat of battle? Which one has felled the immovable force in your life?

Reading and memorizing scripture can be one of the best ways to have God’s assuring, comforting, life-giving word at the ready when Goliath comes thundering into your valley. Lest we forget that Goliath, by whatever name he goes by in your life, is big. God is bigger. Goliath is strong. God is stronger. Goliath is against you. God is for you.