



A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

The True Shepherd...

1 Samuel 17

Father, we come to you this morning confessing to you our great need. Father we need and we desire that your Spirit will come now and take the things of Christ and make them real to our hearts. Therefore we ask you to send your blessed Holy Spirit to come and take the written word and as its true author and therefore its infallible teacher to instruct us in the truth of your Son. Open the book we pray to see what you have accomplished on our behalf, in Christ, in whose name, we pray, Amen.

They were not very good parents.

In fact, it is hard to imagine that any little girl would ever purposely or with affection call them “**Mom**” or “**Dad**.” They didn’t do what moms and dads do. Normally, a person expects a mom or a dad to take care of their children...especially when they are precious little girls. One expects a mom and dad to bind up wounds and to patch scraped knees. One expects a mom and a dad to read bedtime stories, to set up swimming lessons, to play hide-n-seek, to help sell Girl Scout cookies and to buy frilly dresses for Easter Sunday mornings.

But that is not what Lauren’s parents did.

What Barbara and Kenneth Atkinson did was to lock their little girl Lauren in a closet in their mobile home for somewhere between three and five years¹. Authorities still don't know why they treated her the way they did. Now it wasn't that they treated their four other children all that great...but compared to the way they treated Lauren...they treated the other kids like royalty.

When the police finally found Lauren, she only weighed twenty-five pounds. She was eight years old and weighed twenty-five pounds. She was gaunt and emaciated and covered with sores, urine and fecal material. She was stunted physically, emotionally and intellectually. She had been repeatedly abused. But that was not the saddest part of Lauren's case. When they asked Lauren how old she was she told them two. They showed her a book and asked her to identify a picture of the sun but she couldn't remember what it was called. It had been a long time since she had seen the real thing. Lauren had lived five of her eight years in almost total isolation. Her brothers and sisters told authorities that whenever they traveled or took vacations the family left the little girl locked up in the closet. The police were astonished to find out that most of her brothers and sisters didn't even know Lauren's name; instead they called her **"that little girl in the closet."**

Like I said, **"Lauren's parents were not very good parents."**

Now, that is a terrible story. As a father and a grandfather, it is about the worse kind of story I can imagine. But having said that, I have to tell you that in many ways it parallels the story we find here this morning in 1 Samuel 17.

You see, you could call the Atkinson's "**parents**"...but they weren't really. They didn't do what parents do...in fact you could say that they did the opposite of what "**parents**" do.

And you know, the same sort of thing comes out in the text here in 1 Samuel 17...Saul was the rightful shepherd of the nation of Israel...only Saul didn't do what shepherds do...he didn't protect or nurture or defend his people...really, he did the just the opposite...instead of caring for God's flock...he abused it...instead of protecting God's name he dishonored it...

I am making the point because what we see in the passage is that it is not Saul but rather it is David who is the true shepherd of the flock of Israel. He is the one that defends God's people...he is the one that honor's God's name...he that one that represents his people before their great enemy...he is the one that stands in danger in their sted.

Now, I want to make that point as clear as I can. I want to make it clear because, usually, when someone thinks of 1 Samuel 17...they tend to think almost exclusively of David and Goliath...usually, the passage is taught or preached from the perspective that we ought to try to emulate David...to be like him...to be courageous and go after whatever "**giants**" we face in our lives. That is, the passage is usually taught from the perspective that the "**bigger our enemies are...the harder they'll fall**" and that all we have to do is muster up our courage and face our fears and go out alone and face our demons and somehow with God's help we'll be victorious. And you can see why that sort of interpretation would be so popular...everyone loves an underdog...everyone feels like and underdog...and when David succeeds against Goliath's overwhelming strength

and might it plants the thought in our own ambitious little hearts that we too might gain preeminence...besides that, it really is a wonderful story for kids and they readily identify with David...both because he is but a lad...and because he is overlooked...and left out.

But that is not the point that the Holy Spirit is trying to make in the passage...at least not the principal point. You see, 1 Samuel 17 is not a paradigm or example of what happens when we muster up our faith and gird up our loins and look our deepest darkest fears in the eye...in hopes of backing them down.

That is not what it is about...even though that is the way it is usually preached.

When I graduated from seminary, we had as our commencement speaker one of the most famous and successful preachers in America...he was a wonderful preacher and speaker but he too succumbed to the temptation to make David a model to try to copy.

In his sermon, he focused on the five smooth stones David gathered up as he rushed down to meet the Goliath. He said that he wanted on the occasion of our graduation to consider the five smooth stones in David's shepherd pouch as weapons in our arsenal for future ministry.

He said the first smooth stone was the weapon of faith.

The second smooth stone was the weapon of prayer.

The third smooth stone was the weapon of careful bible study.

And on he went thinking of the stones in terms of spiritual disciplines or graces.

He lost me...he lost me not because such spiritual disciplines and graces or not important to success in the ministry but rather because the story makes it fairly clear that David thought of the five smooth stones not as spiritual disciplines or graces but rather as **"bullets"**.

You see right from the start David intended to kill Goliath just like he had killed every other predator that had tried to prey upon his flock...he intended to kill him the same way he had killed the lions and the bears that had come after his father's sheep.

You can see that that was how he looked at things and that that was his intention right from the start in 1 Samuel 17:33...

NIV 1 Samuel 17:33...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." Saul said to David, "Go, and the LORD be with you."

Now the really interesting thing about that last verse is that the word for **"paw"** and the word for **"hand"** is the same word in Hebrew. It could have been translated, **"The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will deliver me from the paw of this Philistine."**

You see David did not think of Goliath as being any different than the lions or bears that had attacked his father's flock...he was simply another predator and the army of God was simply another flock...a bigger flock...a different flock...but a flock just the same.

Once a shepherd...always a shepherd.

David simply could not help himself...and as he watched Goliath mock Israel's God...as he watched the army of the Living God cower before this uncircumcised Philistine...his great shepherds heart grew indignant...indignant that no one seemed to want to stand up for God's people...that no one wanted to defend God's reputation and great name...that no one was willing or able to set things right.

David wondered why others were so hesitant...so afraid. Now it is not that Goliath was not an extraordinary figure...he was. He was terrifying...and he was enormous...the text says he was six cubits and a span tall. A cubit was the distance from the tip of a man's middle finger to the tip of his elbow...about eighteen inches...now in my case I have long arms and the distance is almost twenty-one inches but eighteen inches is a good average.

A span was the distance across an outstretched hand...from the end of the thumb to the end of the little finger...in my case about 10 inches.

Now what that means, if we are to take the biblical literally here and I think we are, is that Goliath would have been somewhere between nine and a half and ten feet tall.

We don't have any idea how much Goliath weighed but I take it from the text that he was not skinny...that he was not simply a tall sort of willowy beanpole. I take the text that way because it says that...

^{NIV} **1 Samuel 17:5**...He...wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels;

...that's somewhere between 175 and 220 pounds.

Now if his armor weighed 200 pounds and he was able to bear it, he must have been an extraordinarily huge man.

The text also says that...

^{NIV} **1 Samuel 17:7**...His spear shaft was like a weaver's beam, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels.

...that's somewhere between 15 and 16 pounds...about the size of a very heavy bowling ball. Imagine trying to throw a spear with a tip that weighed as much as a heavy bowling ball.

He was an enormous terrifying warrior.

Now there is one other thing I want to point out before we press on...when Goliath is first introduced in the story he is called the "**champion**" of the Philistines...look at verse 4.

NIV 1 Samuel 17:4...A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet tall.

Now the Hebrew word for translated **“champion”** here in our English Bible is the Hebrew phrase אִישׁ־הַבְּנַיִם (...and it means literally **“the man in the middle.”** The idea is that Goliath is that man that goes out between the two armies...he is the man in the middle...he is the official representative...the **“champion”** of his people. He was the **“go between”** between the army of Philistia and the Army of God.

And, of course, all of you know the story well enough to know that he issued a challenge to the men of Israel...and his challenge went like this...

NIV 1 Samuel 17:8...**“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.”**

Now his point was that he represented the Philistines...and that all the Israelites needed to do was to pick someone to represent them...and that they would fight and whoever won would determine the outcome of the battle...do you see what I mean...one representative against another.

And the idea made perfect sense to Goliath and the Philistines, of course, because they could not imagine any person on earth able to stand before Goliath.

But for that matter neither could the Israelites...or Saul.

If it had simply been a matter of size...the issue would have been easy to decide. Everyone knew who the biggest Philistine was...it was Goliath...but for that matter everyone knew who the biggest Israelite was as well. Everyone knew that the tallest man in Israel was King Saul himself.

You see the Hebrew word for “**height**,” the word גִּבּוֹר...is used four times in 1 Samuel to refer to height or to someone being tall. It is only the last time that it is used in 1 Samuel, here in chapter 17, that it refers to Goliath...the first two times it is used it refers to Saul.

The first time that happens occurs in 1 Samuel 9:2 when Saul is first introduced to the reader.

^{NIV} **1 Samuel 9:2**...He had a son named Saul, an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites— a head taller than any of the others.

The second time occurs in 1 Samuel 10:23 when Saul is presented to the nation as its king.

^{NIV} **1 Samuel 10:23**...They ran and brought him out, and as he stood among the people he was a head taller than any of the others.

The third time the word occurs is when God chides the Prophet Samuel for thinking that David’s brother Eliab was the one that God has chosen to replace Saul as king simply because of the way he looked...that is based upon his height and his appearance.

NIV 1 Samuel 16:6...When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD." 7 But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

And you can see, I think, that my point is that from a worldly view Saul should have gone out to face Goliath. He was the logical choice...he was the largest man in Israel...he was the king...he had been anointed...he had been given the special presence of the Holy Spirit to empower and to embolden him.

The only problem was...was that he was no shepherd...no...Saul loved himself more than he loved God's sheep...more even than he loved God.

We know that from the way he disobeyed God...

The first time he committed the sin of presumption...Samuel had told Saul to go to Gilgal and wait for him there until he came and could offer a sacrifice to the Lord...but Saul thought the people were going to abandon him and took it upon himself to make the sacrifice...in place of Samuel...that had resulted in his losing any future hope of a dynasty.

The second he committed the sin of greed...it happened after a battle with the Amalekites...God hated the Amalekites and told Saul to show them no mercy...to kill them all...to even kill their sheep and cattle...to kill everything. But Saul liked the way their sheep looked...and he decided to keep the best of the sheep...for himself...

It is a sad commentary on Saul's kingship to note that he was more concerned about protecting the sheep of the Amalekites...than he was about protecting the sheep he had been given by God.

I think that you can see from that that to Saul...sheep were for shearing and eating...they were for his pleasure and convenience...they were not for shepherding...and because of that God took away his kingship...and decided to give it to someone that looked at sheep the same way he did.

You can also see in the build up to the story here in chapter 17 one other illustration of how David is different than Saul.

In chapter 10, Samuel anoints Saul king of Israel and when he does the text says that he used a **"flask of oil."**

NIV 1 Samuel 10:1...Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, **"Has not the LORD anointed you leader over his inheritance?"**

The idea is that it was a small container of oil. And when Samuel anoints him, he tells him that after he is anointed the Spirit of God will come upon him and he will be changed into a different man...that is, that he will become something he was not...a shepherd of God's people.

And immediately after the Spirit of God came upon Saul, he led the nation to a great victory...and when the people cried out that they wanted to kill those fellow Israelites that had objected to Saul becoming king...Saul protects them and acts as their shepherd and says...

^{NIV} 1 Samuel 11:13...But Saul said, “No one shall be put to death today, for this day the LORD has rescued Israel.”

But Saul’s disobedience led to his downfall...to his removal from being king and God commanded Samuel to anoint David in his place.

Now the remarkable thing about that is that when Samuel anoints David, he anoints him with a horn of oil...probably a ram’s horn...not a small flask or vial...but a horn of oil and the idea is that David possesses the Spirit of God in a way that Saul never could. And David is not told that he will be changed into another man...why is that?

I think it was because David is already the kind of man God wanted for a king...David has a shepherd’s heart...a heart like God’s.

And as this story of David and Goliath unfolds, you can see, I think, that Saul realizes that David is indeed a different kind of man than he is.

David is not fearful.

David is unconcerned for his own safety...he is only concerned for the safety of God’s flock and for the honor of God’s name.

That is the reason, I think, that Saul wanted David to wear his armor. Most of the time, people read the passage and think that David rejects the idea of wearing his armor because it is too big...but the text doesn’t say that...what the text actually says is that chose not to use Saul’s armor because he was not used to it...

I suspect that David did not want to go into battle looking like Saul...looking like a great warrior...I suspect that he wanted to go into battle as what he actually was...a shepherd.

And he did with a shepherd's staff, with a simply shepherd's sling and with five smooth stones...and you know the rest of the story.

Now the question is...and it is an important question, I think, how does this story bear on our lives here today? Ought we to start comparing one pastor to another or one elder to another in the hope of finding a man who will adequately care for us and nurture us and protect us from harm? Ought we to start thinking about which of God's enemies we need to take down?

No. I don't think so. I don't think that that is really a proper application at all.

You see in the story none of us stands in the place of David...

A few of us may stand in the place of Saul...

But all of us stand in the place of Israel's terrified army...

You see we needed someone to go out in our stead...in our place. We needed a shepherd willing to defend God's honor and to face the mountainous judgment connected to our own sin and rebellion.

We needed a **"man in the middle"...** a representative to stand when we could **not.**

And the only able to do that was the Good Shepherd Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ.

He came down from heaven, from tending His creation, and took to himself a body that he might represent us before God...that he might face head on the eternal wrath of God...brought on by our first shepherd Adam...and by our own personal sin.

And Jesus took on that role...not with the weapons of this world...but with unrelenting obedience empowered by the Spirit of God without measure...and in doing so won for us the forgiveness of sin and the hope of heaven.

You see He is our champion...our Great Shepherd...our deliverer...our God and our King. That is why, I think, in John 10 Jesus uses the imagery of being a shepherd. I think he had this scene in 1 Samuel 17 in mind...listen to what He says...

NIV John 10:11... "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father— and I lay down my life for the sheep.

He is the Good Shepherd...a true shepherd indeed. Let's pray.

¹ This story was widely reported by AP and the Dallas-Ft. Worth newspapers. It is easy to find references to the story by looking either under the Atkinsons or under the little girl 's name, Lauren Calhoun