

# **Whose Son is He?**

*The victory of David over Goliath*

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## Whose Son is He?

Let's read from 1 Samuel 17:

And when Saul saw David go forth against the Philistine, he said unto Abner, the captain of the host, 'Abner, whose son is this youth?' And Abner said, 'As your soul lives, O king, I cannot tell.' And the king said, 'Inquire whose son the stripling is.' And as David returned from the slaughter of the Philistine, Abner took him, and brought him before Saul with the head of the Philistine in his hand. And Saul said to him, 'Whose son are you, thou young man?' And David answered, 'I am the son of your servant Jesse, the Bethlehemite.' (vv. 55–58)

And now, if you please, turn to the gospel by Matthew and chapter 22:

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, 'What think you of the Christ? Whose son is he?' They said unto him, 'The son of David.' He said unto them, 'How then does David in the Spirit call him Lord, saying, "The Lord said unto my Lord, sit thou at my right hand until I put thine enemies under thy feet"? If David then calls him Lord, how is he his son?' And no one was able to answer him a word, neither any man dared from that day forth to ask him any more questions. (vv. 41–46)

And, finally, Galatians 2:

But I through the law died unto the law, that I might live unto God. I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live; and yet no longer I, but Christ lives in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me. (vv. 19–20)

### The kind of king Saul was

It was surely a very tense moment when Saul, the son of Kish and reigning king of Israel, saw the stripling youth, David, go forth to meet the Philistine, taking with him such apparently absurd, weak weapons as a staff and a sling. For the very sight of it undermined the whole philosophy of Saul and his whole philosophy of kingship, and it undermined the very basis upon which he depended for his mastery over the people.

### What the people wanted

You will, I'm sure, remember the sorry story of Saul's appointment to be king of Israel. God had decided long since that one day Israel should have a king, but certainly not on the terms upon which Israel eventually demanded a king. So that, when they made their demand for a king, it not only upset Samuel but angered the Lord himself who read it as a direct rejection

of his own kingship. And Samuel subsequently made it abundantly clear to the Israelites the high iniquity which their demand had represented.

He said, 'Israel, you know, in olden days, when your enemies came against you, then you cried to the Lord and, consistently, the Lord answered your cries and raised up for you a deliverer who saved you from your enemies and brought you peace. But when subsequently you saw the king of Ammon come against you, you said, "This cliff-hanging, nail-biting dependence upon God will not do. When the enemy is already coming at you, and you see his devices and you stand there shaking in your shoes, to have to wait on God and to depend on God is such a nerve-wracking experience, and we've had enough of it! Samuel, make us a king. Make us a monarch like all the other nations have so that, when the enemy comes against us, we shall have a monarchy installed, an institution permanently arranged that will be ready to deliver us from our enemies.'" And they didn't dare say it, but what they were thinking was, 'So that then we shall no longer have to depend on this nerve-wracking exercise of waiting on God, to raise us up a deliverer' (see 1 Sam 12).

Now, organisation is good in its place, but any organisation or institution that relieves us of the necessity of waiting on God is a slippery slope to disaster. Of course, God is merciful to his people, and so he was then. And yet, if he cannot teach us by kindly methods, then he has to teach us by letting us have our own way and proving its remarkable unwisdom. And so it was then.

When the people asked for a king in independence of God, God himself chose out a king for them and presented them with Saul. 'Now,' says the historian as he explains the situation, 'Saul was a tremendous man. He stood head and shoulders above the people' (9:2). God, through Samuel, offered the people Saul as king and said, 'Now, is this the kind of king you would like?' They said, 'Yes, Lord; that's wonderful, Lord. Now you've got the point! Marvellous—a big man who shall fight our battles for us.' And so he did, for Saul was a big man.

### **Big men: tactics and deficits**

When the enemy came against them, the king of Ammon made a covenant with the people of Jabesh-Gilead that he would allow them to escape with their lives on the condition that the Jabesh-Gileadites allowed him to put out their right eyes so that they could no longer sight their weapons or draw their bows properly. And Saul heard of it. Then big man Saul showed his big man-ship for he took a bullock and he cut it in pieces, and with the gore and the blood streaming out of the bits of beef, he sent the joints all around Israel to speak their silent message. Anybody who didn't come after Saul, he might know what he could expect: he would be taken apart like the bullock had been taken apart and, 'The fear of God,' says the historian, 'came upon the people' (11:7). No wonder. That's big man-ship, isn't it? It was big man methods to compel the loyalty of the people. But if your hope for salvation is in a big man, whatever do you do when your enemy confronts you with a bigger man?

## **The bigger man and the unexpected source of salvation**

All went well for Saul and the people until there came a veritable nightmare of a man out of the camp of the Philistines. He was a mountain. His helmet was like a wheelie bin and his spear like a telegraph post. He was a colossal man with a mighty head and vast muscles and an exceedingly tall stature. And now the big man, Saul, was to be found skulking in his tent, in a yellow panic of fear.

The big man, Saul, had found a bigger man, and now how should Saul command the love and obedience of his people anymore when he lost so much face in not being prepared to go out to meet Goliath? Then came David, a mere stripling of a youth, brought by one of the officers into the tent. He was presented to his majesty with the officer saying, 'This man has volunteered to go forth and meet Goliath.' And Saul said to him, 'But, my dear good boy, you can't go against Goliath. You are but a youth, and Goliath a man of war from his youth. How can you go against Goliath?'

And David, in his charming simplicity and youthfulness said, 'But, oh, I can go against him. It doesn't worry me. You know your servant was keeping his father's sheep when there came a bear one day; and another day there came a lion, and I put my trust in the living God, and I went forth to meet the lion, and I went forth to meet the bear, and I ripped them in pieces. And the God who delivered me out of the hand of the lion and the bear will deliver me out of this mere pipsqueak of a giant.'

David had what Saul never did have, and that was personal experience of faith in God. That was why God eventually rejected him, wasn't it? It was because, when he was asked to wait for God's prophet to come, he hadn't the nerve to trust God and wait (ch. 15). And, trying to promote the battle before the battle was due, he nearly risked exterminating the whole of the army of Israel. God had rejected him—a man without any faith in God.

So Saul said to David, 'Well, if you will go then, take my armour,' for that's all Saul knew about fighting the enemies of God: his big armour. And David, in his inexperience, went to put it all on, but found it unwieldy and put it off again. And how glad I am he did, aren't you? For what an absurd suggestion it was to take Saul's armour to meet Goliath with. Why, if David had taken Saul's little tiny sword, and tried to approach Goliath to conquer him, Goliath would have stretched forth his spear and skewered David on the end of it long before David got within arms' reach of him. It was self-evident folly to take Saul's armour. So Saul had to stand there with his command-in-chief, Abner, as David went forth to meet Goliath, with the absurdly weak (so it appeared) and foolish weapons of a mere stick and a sling. Saul said to Abner: 'Whose son is this youth?'

## **Single-hero combat**

I must tell you what happened when Goliath caught sight of him. Because, according to the custom of that kind of warfare in those far off days, the two single heroes would have emerged each one from his own camp, and they would come towards each other, like Greek heroes would, and then they would have stood still when they had reached shouting distance. And one of them would have harangued the other, and when he had had his fill of it, the other

would have harangued the first one, and they would have called each other every evil name they could possibly think of. So it happened with David and Goliath.

They came out each one from his camp until they got within shouting distance, and then they stood. At first Goliath raised up his voice and called David every name he could think of; for when Goliath caught sight of David, his Philistine whiskers moved up and down and his face flushed red, and he felt insulted to his very core. Here was a Philistine, the leading single-combat hero in the whole Philistine army, armed like a veritable tank, and the Israelites were putting forth a mere youth, in his tunic, and armed with a little stick!

Well, Goliath felt it such a professional insult he nearly refused to fight. It would be like putting me in the ring with Cassius Clay, wouldn't it?<sup>1</sup> Cassius Clay wouldn't bother to punch me. 'Am I a dog?' said Goliath. 'You come to me with a little stick like a man would take to drive a dog out of his garden.' He felt positively insulted. And when the denunciation was over, David had his turn. And, in true epic style, he commented upon his choice of weapon, for in this kind of fight, whether among the Greeks or the Irish,<sup>2</sup> (or now here amongst the Hebrews and the Philistines), the choice of weapons was crucial. And David explained it: 'I come to you with a mere staff because the issue at stake in this battle is not who is the bigger man. The issue at stake in this conflict is not who is the more skilful warrior. The issue at stake in this conflict is not who has the better or more powerful weapons, or who has more cunning. The issue in this conflict is that you, Goliath, have defied the living God, and I come to you with these apparently weak and foolish weapons so that all Israel may know that it is not my skill nor wisdom that will win the battle, but that Israel might know that there is a God in heaven. This God will destroy you, Goliath, and feed your flesh to the very birds' (see 17:45–47).

And so it happened. On that amazing day, the weapons that seemed weak and foolish proved to be the very power of God and the wisdom of God, and Israel were once again renewed in their faith, not in the big man syndrome, but in God.

### **Whose son is this?**

'Whose son is this?' said Saul, as he watched David go out to the battle. And now, with greater intensity and alarm in his voice as he saw David return victoriously from the battle, and as David stood before him with the grizzly head of the giant in his hand, he asked, 'Whose son are you, you stripling?' And now it became urgent for Saul to know. Saul had promised that if anyone beat the giant he would give him his daughter as his wife; and now this mere youth with his strange weapons had overcome the giant. Saul was promise bound to give him his daughter as his wife, and the man that had the king's daughter had a claim upon the throne, of course. Saul began to see that his power was ebbing away from him. How would the people respect Saul anymore when he dared not face the giant? And how would the people not love David for his wonderful victory?

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<sup>1</sup> The given name of the boxer better known as Muhammad Ali (1942–2016).

<sup>2</sup> For an example single-hero combat in Greek literature, see Homer's *Iliad*. For the same in Irish literature see *The Táin*.

### **Love for the conquering warrior**

There, as Saul stood with his crown prince, Jonathan, who was dressed in his royal gear, and David stood with the head of the giant in his hand, Jonathan's heart was knit with the heart of David, and Jonathan loved him (18:1). Crown prince though he was, he unbuckled his great baldric and gave it over to David with his bejewelled sword. For until now Jonathan was the greatest warrior in Israel, but he had met the greater warrior whom he admired and loved with all his heart. And here was the beginning of the end of Saul's dynasty as the crown prince fell in love with David and, in symbol, handed over his place to David.

If these were tense moments, there were even tenser moments some many centuries later, when our blessed Lord stood in the temple court. All week long he had been enduring the questions of Sadducees and Pharisees as they had tried to trip him up in his speech, to catch him by their tricks and demonstrate that he was not the Messiah he claimed to be. And when, for the second time in his life and in his ministry, he had cleansed the temple, driving out the robbers from it, the Sadducean high priest and temple chiefs were determined to kill him (see Matt 21 and 26). And the curious thing was that when they decided to kill him, this Jesus told a parable that indicated that he was expecting to be killed. In the parable of the Vineyard he told how the owner sent his son to collect the fruit, and the workmen in the vineyard saw the owner's son and put him to death, so that the vineyard might be theirs (21:33-46). And our Lord had told the parable that was telling the Pharisees and the people at large that he was expecting to be thrown out of Jerusalem and crucified and slain. And yet he had talked of himself as the stone that, if it should fall eventually on anyone, would crush them to powder (v. 44). How could it be? And what strange things were these?

### **Apparent weakness**

They crowded around him with their questions. The Sadducees came, and they said, 'Now, you Jesus, you believe in a resurrection, don't you? Now, what nonsense that is, the very idea of a resurrection. Take this instance . . .' And they made one up, didn't they? It was a made up instance of a woman who had had seven husbands successively, and they all died, and then the woman died. Then they said, 'In the resurrection (if there be such a thing as a resurrection) whose wife shall she be?' (see Matt 22:24-28). And they thought they'd won their argument. They thought they had proved the whole notion of a resurrection to be nonsense.

They were sad men, weren't they? Fancy thinking that you have proved there's no resurrection and that somehow that's a victory. Why, if there be no resurrection, we are, of all men, most miserable, aren't we? For if there be no resurrection, then death will make a final mockery of all human endeavour, and it will reduce our intellects, our aesthetic judgment, our moral sense and all our achievements to the meaningless dust of eternal oblivion (see 1 Cor 15). Fancy imagining they'd won a victory by proving there was no resurrection.

And our Lord answered them, and the Pharisees too. When they had no more questions to ask, he said, 'Now, tell me the answer to my question. What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?' And the words were dramatic. He stood within inches of Calvary. He stood within hours of the greatest battle that was ever fought on our planet. With all his enemies pressing around him, afraid that they were going to lose their grip on the people,

afraid that this Jesus of Nazareth would take the common people in their crowds to his obedience and unseat the Pharisees, and unseat the very chief priest in the temple; and with the great battle of the ages before him, he posed the question which Saul had long ages ago posed regarding David: 'What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?' We rightly ask the question still, don't we?

They said, 'He's David's son.'

'How then does David, speaking by the spirit, call him Lord?' said Jesus. He quoted from Psalm 110: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies the footstool of your feet."'

'The Lord said to my Lord . . .' Here is David talking about the Messiah, and he says, 'The Lord God says to the Messiah, who is my Lord . . .'

The Messiah is David's Lord. If David called the Messiah 'my Lord', how is he then his son?

I don't know how it is for you Australian gentlemen, but if you want your son to cut the lawn for you on Saturday, how do you address him? Do you say, 'Please, my Lord, would you cut the lawn?' Surely, not. No oriental would, anyway. No oriental addressed his son as 'my Lord'. But then David addressed the Messiah as 'my Lord'. Whose son is he?

With that challenge on his lips, our blessed Lord Jesus went to the battle and, oh, what a vindication there took place. 'Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious. | See the Man of Sorrows now, | From the fight, returned victorious [The very giant's head in his hand!] | Every knee to him shall bow.'<sup>3</sup>

And we ask it this morning, with awe in our hearts, as we have celebrated his resurrection, returned from the battle, victorious: 'Whose son is he?' He is 'declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead' (Rom 1:4). And the wonder of the success of his battle is this, that when 'the world by its wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of the message preached, to save them that believe, for the Jews seek after signs and the Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Jesus Christ and him crucified, Jesus Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God' (see 1 Cor 1:21–24). 'By weakness and defeat, | He won a glorious crown, | Trod all our foes beneath his feet, | By being trodden down.'<sup>4</sup> The risen Lord returned victorious from the fight.

And now we've got our question to ask for ourselves, as we see the blessed Lord Jesus risen: whose son is he? Paul answers the question: 'The Son of God,' he said, 'who loved me and gave himself up for me. From now on, I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me, and the life that I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God' (see Gal 2:19–20).

They were tense moments when Paul spoke that word at the conference at Antioch, for he spoke them in the context of having publicly to rebuke Peter. For Peter, at the conference, had come perilously near to doing what Achan did at Jericho, you know. God cursed Jericho and all its works and Achan, in a moment of folly, tried to salvage something out of the city that God had cursed (Josh 7). Peter, in a weak moment, had tried to do something very similar. For God had said that all they who take their stand on the law are under a curse (Gal 3:10) and that the only way of justification is by faith in Christ (vv. 13–14). And Peter, in his heart

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Kelly (1769–1855), 'Look, Ye Saints, the Sight is Glorious' (1809).

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Whitelock Gandy (1780–1851), 'His be the Victor's Name.'



of hearts, believed it, but in a moment of weakness at that conference Peter had withdrawn from the Gentile Christians and refused to eat with them and thus had denied, in behaviour, the very truth of the gospel (2:11–14). He was behaving now as if circumcision did count for something, as if the Gentile believers, who weren't circumcised, weren't truly believers and were not fit to have fellowship with.

Peter, by thus behaving, was trying to salvage an old ritual and its significance that had come under God's curse, and he had to be rebuked. 'Listen,' said Paul, 'if I build again the things that I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor, Peter. The only principle upon which we can live is this: I have been crucified with Christ. I at my best, I at my wisest, come in short of God's glory, and deserve nothing but a cross. And I've accepted it, Peter,' said Paul. 'I have been crucified with Christ, yet I live; and yet it's not I who live: it's Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me' (see vv. 15–21).

And the logic is simple: my salvation depends on the death of Christ; my life as a Christian depends upon the life of Christ, and I must hand over all to him as Jonathan did when David returned victorious from the fight.

Picture Jonathan, then, will you, as he saw David coming from the fight victorious and, conscious of what he was doing, with all the rights of the crown prince of Israel, he unbuckled his regal armour, and he handed it over to David.

Shall we not do the same thing this morning? As we say in our hearts of him whom we are celebrating: 'We have seen him returning from the fight, victorious, risen again!' And we ask our question: 'Whose son is he?'

The answer: he was 'declared to be the Son of God with power' (Rom 1:4).

Then is it true that it was *the Son of God* who loved me and gave himself for me?

Well, what shall I do? What can I do, but strip everything I have and hand it over to him? So that it may no longer be I who live, but Christ who lives in me.

May God bless his word for his name's sake. Amen.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.