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*Kerra Becker English*

*Courage or Stupidity*

*1 Samuel 17 – WHOLE CHAPTER*

*Courage is knowing it might hurt and doing it anyway.*

*Stupidity is the same.*

*And that's why life is hard. – Jeremy Goldberg (Historian)*

In the book aptly named “David and Goliath” written by Malcom Gladwell in 2013, he uses this ancient battle story to take his own research and thoughts deeper about what happens when ordinary people confront “giants.” And by giants, he says he means “powerful opponents of all kinds – from armies and mighty warriors to disability, misfortune, and oppression.” When we are up against such powerful foes, it can bring out bravery or fear, genius or stupidity. It can show us the advantages of disadvantages and the disadvantages of our advantages. It can teach us about desirable disabilities. It can show us the limits of power. But I don’t want to just give a book report here. You can read Gladwell on your own, and perhaps you will. Those are his main ideas and he expounds on them with multiple stories – as good writers are apt to do.

What I intend to do today is highlight some of the same things in my own words. Many of us probably think of “David and Goliath” as a children’s story. It’s a favorite for illustrated Bibles because it’s so easily depicted. David with his slingshot, Goliath in all his war armor. But with children, we leave out some of the gory details and the military knowledge that’s helpful to understanding this situation. We don’t show an “R-rated” David holding up Goliath’s bloody head. We probably gloss over how Saul dismissed David as just a boy. We might highlight the sibling rivalry with David’s big brother Eliab wanted him to go back to tending sheep. We don’t

say that the military leaders thought David asked stupid questions and that he was a complete joke. What we do emphasize is that it's an underdog story. I get that. I love that. I know that part of my early biblical formation was starting to realize that God likes the underdog story too.

Nevertheless, reading the entirety of the story as an adult tells us so much more about what was going on. Then, using an understanding of geography and military history, one can note, as Gladwell does, that the Philistines, a seafaring people were eager for the power grab of what the land of Israel had to offer, and they thought they could take advantage of playing off a weak King like Saul. But when it came time to go to battle on LAND, they could not easily attack because they stood off against each other on two mountainsides with a valley in between.

Whichever army was in attack mode, they would have to rush down into the valley and have a tough time getting back up to win the other side. Therefore, they deployed the military strategy of "mano a mano" – a hand to hand fight between the two toughest competitors. The assumption was that the victor would take all the spoils for "his side." The strongest person was supposed to win, almost guaranteed a win really. That is if you play of the rules of strength vs. strength.

The cunning of David is that he changes the script, the one that EVERYBODY knows. Everyone else in the story is sure that he is deluded, stupid, reckless, probably out of his mind, or at the very least, puffed up on his ego. He can't win against this uncircumcised giant. I also find that a strange detail to add – but that descriptor identifies him as the terrible outsider. Not only is Goliath David's opponent, but he is thereby opposed to all of God's people. David steps up to defend God's people. It is a moment.

This story is full of such emotionally packed moments – Goliath's incredulity that they might even send David his way, "Am I a dog that you should come to me with sticks?" Saul's dismissal. Eliab's brotherly frustration. Then the triumph of the win. It's gruesome, but it is also

intended to be a gruesomely satisfying end to the story. When the bad guy gets exactly what's coming to him.

I don't need to point it all out for you. What I hope you might go back and do is read 1 Samuel 17 on your own so you can catch all those nuances in the story. It is far more than what you remember from children's Sunday School!

What I see in this story for today is that we are called upon sometimes to courageously defend God's people against giants. And rightfully, it seems a foolhardy mission. To support those who are small, weak, and insignificant is to play a losing game. But for this battle, David actually did know what he was doing. Though others around him thought he was being stupid, he really was acting in courage from a place of knowledge. He knew that if he could fight lions and bears using the accuracy he had honed with his slingshot, he might be able to take on Goliath too. It wasn't a dumb risk; it was a calculated risk. Yes, it took courage for him to step up, but it also wasn't just running in and thinking he could win against Goliath strength to strength.

Back to my quote...“Courage is knowing it might hurt and doing it anyway. Stupidity is the same. That's why life is hard.” In defending God and God's people these days, my friends, you will see both courage and stupidity in play. There are those out taking the risks and vulnerably using the skills that they have to forge a new world that honors ALL of God's people, and there are those who think that in defense of God, they can risk anything, like pandemic level viruses, and national laws, and usual good sense. It's the old illustration that in a flood, the devout Christian keeps saying, God is going to save me, but then still misses the rescue truck, boat, and helicopter before it's too late. Testing God's loyalty is not the same as having courage to be led by God in a dangerous world. The story of David and Goliath helps us understand that. David isn't testing God foolishly by volunteering for his own death as others seem to believe. David is

using the valuable skills he's gained in the service of tending sheep to benefit the greater good in a new and inspired kind of way. "Go, and may the Lord be with you" is the charge Saul gives to David. It's the charge we all need to hear. Go. Do. Fight. As your own God-given skills will allow. And when you do, may the Lord be with you. Amen.