

MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE BIBLE #9

Not Just for Children

By David Carlson

There are some Bible stories that we tell children, which unfortunately become labeled from that point onward, as “children stories.” That is, when we hear these stories as adults, we are tempted to think, “Oh, I remember hearing this story as a child,” and assume that the meaning of the story is for children, not adults. This is unfortunate, as these so-called “children’s stories” have much to teach us as adult Christians.

One Old Testament story, which is often put into this “children story” category, is the story of David fighting the giant Goliath. Many children raised in Christian families know the story of David as a young boy having the courage to fight the Philistine giant, Goliath. Sure, children might find this story about another young person fascinating. The story may even remind them of European fairy tales where a young person, be that Hansel, Gretel, or Jack of Jack and the Beanstalk, outwits a more powerful adult.

But the story of David and Goliath in I Samuel 17 is not really a story of what a young person can do. The story is really about what God can do through a person who has faith.

The Philistines were a powerful opponent of the Israelites. They came from the east to settle in Canaan, much as the Israelites had settled in Canaan centuries earlier.

What made the Philistines dangerous was their ability to make iron weapons. The Israelites knew only how to make bronze weapons, and, in battle, iron weapons defeated bronze weapons every time. The Philistines certainly had a “gigantic” advantage, as symbolized by the giant Goliath whose bronze spears had iron points.

With the advanced technology of the Philistines, the bravest warriors of Israel cowered in fear. Goliath challenged any Israelite to battle, but day after day his insults brought no one forward to accept his challenge. That is, until the boy David volunteered.

To give David a fighting chance, the Israelites clad him in heavy bronze armor, but David felt limited by the weight and rejected that protection. Imagine the shock of the Israelites when David chose only one weapon, a slingshot and five smooth stones.

An underlying truth about faith is revealed in what David chooses as his weapon. Even before there was bronze, earlier warriors used stone implements. We still use the expression “the Stone Age” to refer to primitive life. The bronze javelin, spear, or shield that the Israelites had was superior in battle to the Stone Age weapon that David preferred. No wonder that Goliath with his iron-tipped weapons despised, and probably laughed, at the sight of the boy with a slingshot and five stones. It would be like someone going into battle today with a BB gun.

But David’s faith was not in the slingshot or the five stones. To the taunts of the giant, David calls back:

You come against me with sword, spear, and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will hand you over to me. . . All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord’s, and He will give all of you into our hands (I Samuel 17:45-47).

David’s confidence is in God, not in himself. American society is a culture that values self-confidence above almost everything. We have all kinds of seminars for adults and lesson plans for children to improve self-confidence. What is the children’s story “The Little Engine that Could” but a lesson in having confidence in oneself? “I think I can, I think I can ...” For many, self-confidence is the key to success.

But David does not defeat Goliath through self-confidence. David defeats Goliath through faith. Or maybe it would be even better to say that God defeats Goliath through the faithful David.

What this story of David can teach us, whatever our age, is that faith in God provides a different kind of confidence than self-confidence. We note in many of the stories of early Christian martyrs that they faced death with a kind of confident calm. I have recently been reading the account of the Christian martyr from Austria, Franz Jaggerstatter, who refused to fight for Hitler even when his priest and bishop told him that he had an obligation to fight for his country. Franz Jaggerstatter also faced death with calm confidence.

Obviously, the confidence of the early martyrs and Franz Jaggerstatter has nothing to do with self-confidence. They knew, as did the young David, that doing God’s will is the source of the deepest kind of confidence we can ever know.

As we face the challenges of our own lives, it is worth pondering that the Bible doesn't teach us to repeat "I think I can, I think I can" to ourselves, but rather "I believe in God who can and will fulfill His promises."



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