

1 Samuel 17:1-18:5

Power, Might, and Majesty

The world we live in

The world we live in is a world where power matters.

The ideology of power.

Where are we?

Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2)

Tonight we are beginning a series on 1 Samuel.

This series will consist of about eleven talks between now and October.

However, we are beginning in the middle of 1 Samuel and so it is important that we get our bearings.

So, let me tell you about the story so far.

The book of Samuel opens with a story of a barren woman.

Her name is Hannah.

And in her culture, barrenness was a terrible affliction.

You see, a woman's place in the world was largely determined by whether or not she could bear children for her husband.

And Hannah's situation was complicated by the fact that her husband had another wife who was productive.

She was taunted by this other wife.

Hannah was deeply distressed.

And in her distress she turns to the one who made her barren.

She turns to God.

She asks God for help.

And God hears her prayer.

He gives her a son whose name is Samuel.

Samuel becomes a prophet who brings God's word to all Israel.

The Ark Narrative (1 Samuel 4-6)

In 1 Samuel 1 it is Hannah who is distressed.

In 1 Samuel 4 it is Israel who is distressed.

They are distressed because of their neighbours, the Philistines.

The Philistines are a technologically advanced nation.

They are more powerful than the simple agrarian nation of Israel.

And in chapter 4 the Philistines inflict their first victory over Israel.

Israel is humiliated.

The Ark of the Covenant is captured.

But in chapters 5 and 6 God acts.

Without the help of the armies of Israel he humiliates the Philistines.

In chapter 7 they call upon God to help them and they defeat the Philistines in battle.

The Request for a king (1 Samuel 8)

But it is clear that they are still worried about the Philistines.

And so they wonder about how they might strengthen themselves.

They decide that the way ahead politically and militarily is to have a king.

And so even though God had demonstrated that he was able to care for them, they ask him for a king.

God warns them that kings are not the answer.

Nevertheless, he grants them their request.

King Saul (1 Samuel 9-12)

In the succeeding chapters the first king of Israel is appointed by God.

He is tall and impressive.

He is the sort of king that Israel thought they needed to counter the Philistine threat.

Saul's decline and Jonathan's rise (1 Samuel 13-14)

But by chapter 13 he is looking a bit shaky in his kingship.

He is fearful in the face of the Philistine threat.

He does not follow the directions of God's prophet Samuel.

And he is shown up by his son, Jonathan.

Like Hannah before him, Jonathan sees the distress of God's people.

In 1 Samuel 14 he puts simple faith in the Lord.

And the Lord acts.

Before Jonathan he defeats the far superior forces of the Philistines.

The Philistines are routed but Saul stuffs things up again with foolish oaths.

Rejection (1 Samuel 15)

In 1 Samuel 15 Saul makes yet another blunder.

Samuel clearly instructs him to carry out holy war on the Amalekites.

But Saul disobeys.

And Samuel responds by telling Saul that God has rejected him as king.

He has rejected the word of the Lord.

And the Lord has rejected him from being king.

He has torn the kingship away from Saul and will give it to another.

The election of David (1 Samuel 16)

In 1 Samuel 16 we hear of this other appointee.

Samuel is sent to the house of Jesse to anoint a new king.

He looks at the sons of Jesse.

He looks for the sorts of things we'd look for in a king.

But God rebukes Samuel.

After all, God does not look as humans look.

And so eventually Samuel finds a small shepherd boy called David.

And God makes it clear that this is the future king of Israel.

1 Samuel 17:1-18:5

A quick overview

This brings us to 1 Samuel 17.

Let's take a quick run through the chapter.

- **Back against the Philistines (1-3)**

In verses 1-3 we are back on the battlefield.

The armies of Israel are facing off against the Philistines again.

- **An infantryman/champion (4-11)**

But the Philistines have engaged in a different strategy this time.

They have chosen one of their number, an infantryman.

He is their champion, Goliath of Gath.

Now Goliath is impressive in every way.

Like Saul, he is tall.

Where Philistines often wore light headgear, this man wears a helmet of bronze.

He is cloaked in heavy and impressive armour.

He has a javelin or scimitar of bronze strung across his shoulder.

And he wields a massive spear with an immense spearhead of iron.

And with a loud voice he challenges Israel to put forward their own champion.

The war will be sorted out in combat between him and Israel's champion.

And verse 11 tells us the reaction of Saul and Israel.

God's king and God's people are dismayed.

They are greatly afraid.

They cannot see a way out of their distress.

- The lad from Bethlehem (12-22)

In verses 12 to 22 we are introduced to a massive contrast with the Philistine champion.

Instead of a warrior we have a young man, a shepherd boy.

Verse 14 of our versions call him the youngest.

The Hebrew word used is the same word you'd use for little or small.

He runs to an errand with youthful enthusiasm—an little errand boy in a big man's world.

- 'Who is this uncircumcised Philistine?' (23-31)

And in verses 23 to 31 this lad overhears the Philistine infantryman.

He is curious.

But he is also affronted.

After all, who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?

David is rebuked by his bigger brother.

But his insistent questioning persists.

And eventually Saul hears of them and sends for him.

- David in the presence of Saul (32-40)

In verses 32 to 40, David comes into the presence of King Saul.

Twice now we have heard of the fear of the Israelites.

Once we have heard of the fear of Saul.

But David rebukes such fear.

The heart of Saul should not fail.

For he, David, will be Israel's champion.

He will fight the Philistine.

Saul is incredulous.

After all, David is just a lad.

And lads do not belong in the company of men and warriors.

But David counters with stories of his exploits as a shepherd against lions and bears.

And for the first time in the story, David mentions Yahweh, the Lord.

It is the Lord who saved him from the hand of the lion and the hand of the bear who will save him from the hand of this Philistine.

Emboldened by David's courage, Saul now mentions the Lord himself.

'Go, and may the Lord be with you!'

But Saul is not that confident that the Lord is enough.

And so he attempts to put his armour on David.

But David rejects it and arms himself with the tools of a shepherd rather than the tools of a warrior.

He takes tools crafted by God rather than weapons crafted by men.

Armed with a stick and some stones he draws near to the Philistine.

- The fall of the Philistine (41-53)

In verses 41 to 53 the Philistine comes near.

He taps into David's earlier language about beasts of the fields by talking about dogs.

He also taps into David's armoury by talking about sticks.

And he curses David in the name of his gods.

It is an ominous note.

After all, David is the descendant of Abraham.

And the Lord promised Abraham that kings would come from him.

And he also promised that he would bless those who blessed him, and the one who curses him will be cursed.

What's more, it is Dagon, the god of the Philistines who fell on his face before the Ark of the Covenant in chapter 5.

And it is the gods of the Philistines who were unable to protect their people from humiliation before the Lord in chapter 6.

This is the Lord in whose name David has come.

He comes not with weapons of war.

No.

He comes with a name.

The name of Yahweh, the Lord of hosts.

And Goliath has defied this Yahweh like many before him.

And Yahweh will deal with Goliath like he has dealt with many before him.

God dealt with Pharaoh so that he might know Yahweh and that Israel may know Yahweh.

Now he will deal with Goliath so that the earth will know that there is a God in Israel.

And he will deal with Goliath so that Israel may know that Yahweh is Israel's warrior and champion.

And so the Philistine drew nearer.

And the battle was over before it began.

The punishment for blasphemy in Israel was stoning.

And so this blasphemer who defied God is struck by stone.

And as the god Dagon once fell on his face before the Ark of the Covenant, so his representative falls on his face before God's anointed.

As Hannah had prophesied in chapter 2,

The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered;

The Most High will thunder in heaven.

The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;

He will give strength to his king,

And exalt the power of his anointed.

In verses 51 to 54 the Philistines are routed.

- Identity and relationship (17:55-18:5)

And in the closing verse of the chapter Saul makes enquiry as to who the young man is.

The opening verses of chapter 18 tell us about Jonathan, Saul's son.

Jonathan is the heir to Saul's throne.

And Jonathan has been watching his father.

He has been watching David.

He does not like what he sees in his father.

But he loves what he sees in David.

Jonathan clearly looks at the heart as God does.

Jonathan has shown himself to be a man with a passion for Yahweh.

Perhaps he sees in David a man with the same passion for Yahweh.

Jonathan's robe is probably a symbol of his future rule.

But he takes it off and gives it to David.

And where David had refused the armour of Saul, he is now given the armour of Jonathan.

And Saul gives him authority over the army.

Some telltale signs

- Big is better

Well, there is the story.

It is a magnificent story.

It is one of the great pieces of world literature.

But it is also a profound piece of theological reflection.

So, let's see if we can see what the writer is telling us.

And my own view is that there are some significant telltale signs that he has put within the narrative that point us to what he wants to say.

The first sign has to do with big being better.

You see, both Israel and the Philistines in this story are agreed on one point.

They are agreed that what matters is bigness.

You can see this with the Philistines.

We know from earlier in 1 Samuel that they have access to the technology for processing iron and Israel does not.

We know that they are reliant on the display of might and power and its associated weapons.

We know that the Israelites are intimidated by outward display.

We can see this in their attitude to Goliath.

The description of him reeks of the external display of power.

He is big of stature.

He has powerful arms.

And he has might words.

And Israel shrinks away from him in fear and dismay.

For them, big is better.

And they are not big.

So they cannot be better.

Contrast this with David and his God.

Chapter 16 tells us that God does not look at outward things.

He looks inward.

He looks at the heart.

And he has found a man whose heart is stout and firm.

He is not a big man.

He is little in his family and little in stature.

Look at David in this chapter.

He comes on the scene as a mere pup.

He is tantalised by the honour on offer.

He seems so innocent.

He is unembarrassed to ask the spiritual question.

And he is the only person in Israel who is concerned with God rather than might and power.

David seems to be the only one who thinks that the God of Hannah might be on hand.

He doesn't need armour.

He doesn't need might and power.

All he needs is faith in a mighty and powerful God.

This is clear in verse 46 and 47.

It is the Lord who will deliver.

It is he who will fight.

For the battle is the Lord's.

- 'Defy'

This is the first hint of how this chapter should be interpreted.

There is a second hint.

The second hint comes in the constant use of words that have connotations of defying, mocking, and taunting.

Goliath mocks or defies the armies of Israel in verse 10.

Israel appears to simply just accept this.

But David will have nothing of this.

Look at him in verse 26.

To mock Israel is to mock the Lord.

David makes this clear to Saul in verse 36.

He makes it clear to Goliath in verse 45.

Here is the secret of David.

What David is saying is that Yahweh matters to him.

Yahweh matters.

Yahweh's reputation matters.

And he will put his life at risk for Yahweh and Yahweh's reputation.

His name will be hallowed at all cost.

I think that this is why David goes out against the Philistine.

He goes for God's glory and God's name.

He goes to stone this uncircumcised Philistine who has brought dishonour on the name of Yahweh.

- Beasts

This is the second hint in the chapter.

The third hint is found in the references to beasts.

When David is before Saul he makes the point that Goliath is just like a bear or a lion threatening his flock.

He is not a symbol of might and power.

He is simply a threat to sheep.

And shepherds have an answer for bears or lions.

And shepherds of God's people have an answer for beasts or lions as they threaten God's people.

Seeing things as God sees them

Can you see what is going on here?

David is a man of insight.

He is just like Hannah.

He is a believer in God.

He knows that God doesn't need kings or armies to raise up or to bring down.

Just as God could humiliate Dagon, the God of the Philistines, so God can humiliate this so called champion of the Philistines.

David is just like Jonathan.

Saul mucks about shaking in his boots because he trusts in armies and they are deserting.

But Jonathan trusts in the Lord.

He is bold.

He is courageous.

He is enthusiastic in his faith.

David looks at this giant and he doesn't see a giant.

He sees a bully.

He sees a beast harassing God's sheep.

He is not mighty.

He is not powerful.

He is simply an uncircumcised, ignorant, blasphemer of the living God.

And God has no time for such people.

God will deal with such people.

And David puts his trust in God that this is his will.

Just as God sees David properly, so David sees the world through God's eyes.

And in God's eyes human might and power is a nothing.

And so it is nothing in David's eyes.

David is not only a man after God's own heart.

David has eyes like God's eyes.

He sees things as God sees things.

Another who saw things rightly

It is in this sense that David foreshadows his greater son, Jesus Christ.

For when Jesus came into the world, he came into a situation where Jews were tired of being under overlords.

They wanted a saviour.

They wanted a military son of David.

They wanted someone to conquer Romans and bring in God's kingdom.

But Jesus saw things as he Father saw them.

He saw that the great enemy was not beastly Roman rule.

The real enemy was human sinfulness.

The real enemy was the devil and all his cohorts.

And so Jesus went out to war against them with nothing but his word and the cross.

He allowed the enemies of God to take him.

He allowed himself to be crucified.

And in so doing he made a public spectacle of them.

In the words of Paul in Colossians 2:15, Jesus...

...disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it [i.e. in the cross].

Seeing things rightly ourselves

An example from the New Testament

Friends, the pattern we see in Jesus is the pattern we see time and time again in the New Testament.

For example, think about the Corinthian Christians.

They are overawed by the impressive rhetorical skills of some of their teachers.

They think that Paul is something of a weakling rhetorically.

But Paul sees things the way God sees things.

He knows that what matters is not how well you speak but what you say.

And he knows that the rhetorical skills of humans are a pathetic match for the power of the gospel.

And so he tells the Corinthians that he was determined to know nothing among them but Christ crucified, Christ the power of God and Christ the wisdom of God.

For the weapon that will demolish the strongholds of the enemy that really matters is not the words of man but the word of the gospel.

A personal example

Let me give you another example from my own life.

I want to tell you that leaving Perth and coming to Melbourne a year ago was one of the most difficult decisions of my life.

It wasn't difficult because I had doubts about the worth of the job at Ridley.

It was difficult because I was a father.

In my own mind my children would be vulnerable without my oversight.

And so in the months leading up to leaving I went for long walks to talk it out with God.

And I remember the place where God confronted me.

He brought me the words of a Psalm where the Psalmist says this:

I trust in you, O Lord.

I say you are my God.

My times are in your hands, O Lord.

God helped me to see spiritual reality, to see things as he saw them.

And spiritual reality was that God was calling me to a task.

And if he was calling me to a task, then I could trust him.

I could trust my sons to him.

He could look after them.

Now, I must say that I have only tentatively held on to this truth.

There have been numerous times when they have been in difficulty over the last 15 months.

But God has continually driven me back to this reality.

He can look after my sons.

He is their spiritual father.

He loves them more than I love them.

He has their good in mind and I can trust him with this.

Other examples

There are countless other examples I could give you.

The youthful, bold, somewhat careless faith of David reminds me of so many missionaries throughout history who have gone to the missionfield confident that God would supply their needs.

I must admit that when I hear or read their stories, I look at their physical circumstances and think it is impossible.

But perhaps these people see reality as God sees it.

Perhaps they see that there is a world to be reached for Christ and they can line up with God.

Perhaps they see the evil one active in closing the minds of unbelievers and can't wait to engage in the fray.

Perhaps they are affronted by the lack of gospel preachers and must simply get out there.

And they put their confidence in God and get on with the task.

There is a place for caution and planning.

But caution and planning and counting the cost must not drive us away from trust in a God for whom all things are possible.

A word for us at Shac Community

Friends, we here at Shac Community live in a world of the privileged.

We live in a world where great people accomplish great things.

Well, let me tell you that I think we are in a dangerous position.

You see, God's mechanism for bringing in the kingdom is not the grand or the wise or the noble or the great.

God has chosen the foolish things of this world to shame the wise.

It is not grand programs or flashy advertising or great buildings that will bring people into the kingdom.

It is not having tomorrow's leaders in our congregations.

It is not having the most whisbang music or wonderful technology.

It is not having the support of politicians or the best clergy that will cause people to come to know Christ.

Let's not be like ancient Israel.

Let's not have a fetish with power and glamour.

Let's see things as God sees them.

And God sees the foolishness and ignobility of a cross as the means for saving the world.

He sees the message of the gospel as the power of God to salvation.

And he looks to simple people believing and proclaiming simple but profound truths
as the way he will wage war in this world.