

# A Sling and Five Stones: Risk, Courage and the Kingdom of God

by Rick Donlon



**D**ave and the Giant Pickle was my first exposure to the genius that is VeggieTales®. At the time my wife and I had two children just the right age to enjoy animated vegetables singing their way through character-building Bible stories. Truth told, Laurie and I loved the cartoons nearly as much as our kids.

In *Dave and the Giant Pickle*, a timid young asparagus sprout takes on an enormous menacing bully of a pickle. You can guess how the episode ends... the bully is put in his place and the sprout proves that “little guys can do big things, too” – probably not a bad interpretation for four year olds.

The biblical story of David facing Goliath in I Samuel 17, however, has decidedly more mature themes. Set during the reign of Israel’s first king, Saul, it’s a text about ancient combat, fear, jealousy, and, above all, the glory of God. In the end, the entire Philistine army is slaughtered and the boy-warrior carries his enemy’s head around as a trophy – definitely not kids’ stuff.

David’s weapons of war were a shepherd’s staff and “five smooth stones from the stream”. Through a careful reading of the story, I’d like to propose five smooth stones that all disciples of Jesus must possess if we hope to win victories against our modern-day Goliaths.

## STONE ONE: THE CENTRALITY OF GOD’S GLORY

Without question, this is the most important of the five, the one that all the others depend upon, and the stone that shatters the skulls of all spiritual enemies.

When David arrived at the battle lines, Goliath had been taunting the entire Israelite army twice a day for weeks. King Saul had offered an array of rewards to anyone who might defeat the Philistine champion, but his soldiers “all ran from Goliath in fear” (vs. 24). The Philistines were occupying land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, land that God had given, through Moses and



Joshua, to Israel. David understood that Goliath was not only defying Saul's army, but God, Himself. The central point of the story is in David's reply to Goliath's threats:

*45 David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and 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. 46 This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. 47 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."*

David knew that God's reputation and glory were at stake and that God never breaks a promise or gives His glory to another. Goliath and the Philistine army would be defeated because they foolishly stood in the way of the LORD and His purposes. As a result of their defeat, "the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel" (vs 46). David had eyes to see what Saul and the army couldn't — God is with the warrior who fights for His glory.

We face a host of daunting, modern-day giants. Tens of millions of Americans are without affordable healthcare, our inner cities are dangerous, and public education is failing too many of our neighbors. At home and around the world, disciples of Jesus face escalating opposition, even violence, as they seek to advance the Kingdom of God.

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Like David, we need to remember that nothing or no one can long resist God. He has promised to advance His glory and — here's the best part — to use us in that great effort. No giant, regardless of his apparent strength or size, can stand against the LORD and His servants. We've read the end of the story... Jesus Christ will subdue all His enemies and rule forever over a remnant of every tribe, people, tongue, and nation. Righteousness and justice will be the foundations of His throne. In time, the fullness of His Kingdom will come and His will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven.

## STONE TWO: THE CERTAINTY OF OPPOSITION

Goliath stepped forward "to offer his usual defiance" (vs. 23) just as David arrived to greet his brothers. David was the youngest of eight sons; the three eldest served as soldiers in Saul's army. Their father, Jesse, used David as a shuttle; he brought supplies to his brothers, then returned with information as to their well-being. While he was at home, David watched his father's sheep.

Upon hearing Goliath's challenge, and seeing the army's cowardly response, David began to openly ask questions. What will happen to the man who defeats this giant? Who does this uncircumcised Philistine think he is? Doesn't he know he's defying the God of Israel?

David's oldest brother, Eliab, reacted to David's questions with nothing less than rage. Seeking to both silence and humiliate David, Eliab asked, "With whom did you leave those few sheep in the desert?" Attacking both David's character and his motives, Eliab declared, "I know how conceited you are and how wicked your heart is; you came down only to watch the battle." (vs. 28).

David reacted wisely to his brother's anger and jealousy. "Can't I even speak?", he asked Eliab, then continued with his questions. Before long, the word spread through the entire camp, and to King Saul, that a boy was prepared to face the giant.

Whenever disciples of Jesus begin to step out boldly in faith they will meet angry opposition. As in our story, that opposition often comes from sources close to home. Being the firstborn son of elderly Jesse, Eliab would soon be patriarch of the family. Given the difference in their ages, Eliab was likely as much a father as a brother to David. Other than Jesse, no one had more authority than Eliab to speak into David's life – or more power to discourage him.

Our opponents can be ruthless. Like Eliab, they will cut to the very heart of who we are – questioning our character and motives. Faithful disciples will have to face charges that they are proud and self-seeking, spiritual thrill seekers or show-offs. Their loyalty to family or culture will be questioned and submission to those forces will be demanded. They will even be accused of misunderstanding God's grace. It must be restated: these powerful attacks will not come from our enemies, but from those closest to us, the Eliabs in our lives.

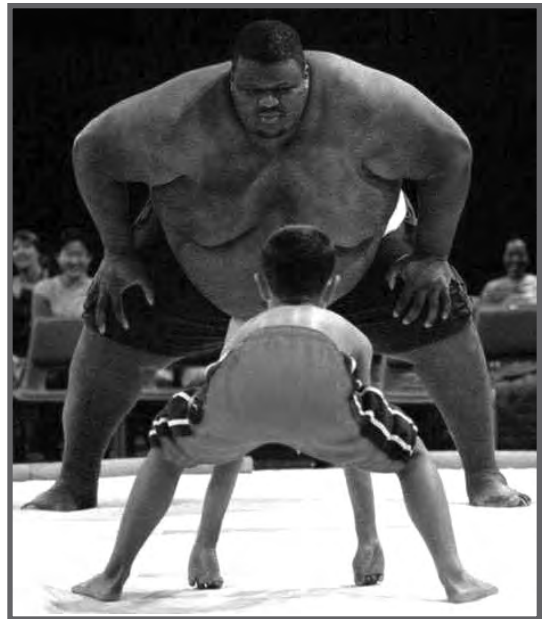
If you will wage war with the enemy, expect and prepare for close-to-home resistance. Though the opposition is painful, there is ample reason for hope; many a disciple has eventually won over their critics by persevering. In Memphis we've seen parents who adamantly opposed their twenty-something children moving into our urban community (or to difficult places overseas), but later become the proudest of advocates for their children's work.

This turnaround apparently happened even with Eliab. In 2 Chronicles 11 David's grandson, King Rehoboam, takes a wife, named Mahalath. We're told that Mahalath's father was a son of King David and her mother a daughter of Eliab. David and Eliab reconciled to the point of uniting their families in marriage.

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### STONE THREE: COURAGE

Even with a clear understanding of God's glory, and a willingness to push through opposition, David still faced a terrifying enemy. Apart from being nine feet tall, Goliath was protected head to toe with bronze armor. He had offensive weapons that could be used with deadly skill from varying distances: a javelin for far off, a spear for middle distances, and a sword for hand-to-hand combat. As Saul pointed out, Goliath had been killing men for many years (vs. 33). There was good reason none of Saul's experienced warriors were willing to face the Philistine champion.



As David stepped out of the Israelite line into the no-man's land between the armies, he must have been afraid. The text tells us that Goliath hated

the very sight of David and immediately began to breathe out deadly threats against him. Rather than hold his ground as the giant advanced, David ran forward to meet him. Both armies must have been amazed.

Courage, I tell my children, is not the absence of fear. If we're not afraid, there's nothing to be courageous about. Rather, courage is doing the right thing, even though we are very much afraid.

It is impossible to be a faithful disciple of Jesus without courage. If the Bible is true, all the universe is engaged in an immense, unseen struggle between the forces of God's Christ and the powers of Darkness. At stake are the glory of God and the souls of millions of men and women. Our spiritual enemies are powerful and deadly; we would be foolish not to fear them. If we are to engage in the battle, rather than stand on the sidelines like Saul and his army, we'll have to do things that scare us — things that others aren't willing to do.

## STONE FOUR: MEANINGFUL PREPARATION

Word of David's courage made its way to King Saul. When brought before the king, David confidently asserted, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him" (vs. 32).

Saul was appropriately skeptical. David was little more than a boy, perhaps fourteen or fifteen years old. He had no formal military training and was unarmed, except for a staff and a slingshot. Despite those realities, David persuaded Saul that he was prepared to fight and defeat the giant. He convinced the king by reviewing his fighting resume: "Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them... 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." (vs. 36-7).

God had prepared David for his encounter with Goliath by bringing smaller challenges that incrementally tested his faith and obedience. By successfully facing and defeating smaller enemies, in the power of God, David grew in courage and skill. His habit of faithful obedience moved him to a place where he could be used for a great, God-glorifying task.

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The principle is still true today. God moves disciples through progressive experiences, many of them uncomfortable or frightening, to prepare them for increasing degrees of fruitfulness. Too often I meet students or residents who want to immediately alter public policy, eliminate poverty, save an unreached people group, or otherwise change the world without ever stepping out of their cultural or religious comfort zones. Even more tragic are older healthcare workers who, after years of self-directed decision making, want to make a late course correction. Without a track record of faithfulness and risk, good intentions are unlikely to yield lasting fruit.

Having said that, I've been impressed by the growing number of young disciples who are embracing risk and difficult obedience. On recent trips to Tulsa and Wichita I've met small groups of medical residents who want to move into poor neighborhoods where they can establish missional Christian communities. Here in Memphis we've seen a growing number of medical and dental students, nurses, and young physicians become part of our community-based clinics and house churches. It's not sur-

prising that many of those young people later go on to be courageous medical missionaries in some of the world's most difficult places. Their progressive obedience prepares them for bigger tasks.

## **STONE FIVE: UNCONVENTIONAL WEAPONS**

In perhaps the only amusing part of this deadly story, a well-meaning Saul tried to equip David for the battle by dressing him in a full set of military armor, including an oversized bronze helmet and a weighty sword. After stumbling around in the unfamiliar and heavy suit, David declared, "I cannot go in these, because I am not used to them" (vs. 39). After shedding the weapons of conventional warfare, he picked up those that had given him victory in the past: a shepherd's staff, a slingshot, and five smooth stones.

What David gave up in defensive protection, he gained in flexibility and speed. Had he fought with Saul's weapons, he could not have run at Goliath, seen his target clearly, or skillfully launched the fatal stone. Dressed in Saul's heavy armor, David would have been easy prey for the battle-tested giant.

Risk-taking disciples will likewise choose spiritual weapons different from their elders. Traditional missionary and ministry assumptions that led to victories in earlier fields must be reexamined and, in some cases, abandoned. Given the difficulties of reaching our inner cities and rural communities, not to mention the closed nations of the world, our churches, ministries, and sending agencies must be willing to fundamentally alter strategies and tactics. All our presuppositions must be honestly scrutinized: the way we view medicine, our philosophy of urban or rural ministry, even the way we make disciples and plant churches. The younger generation's methods will perhaps seem unnecessarily dangerous or reckless to their parents and church leaders — just as David appeared foolish to the veteran warriors of his time.

## **HOW MANY STONES ARE IN YOUR SHEPHERD'S POUCH?**

The Bible is timeless, of course, and the story of David and Goliath gives us insights into the reality of spiritual warfare. If we're to successfully face our own giants, we'll need all five smooth stones. How do you and your organization measure up? Are you motivated primarily by a desire to advance God's glory and reputation, rather than your own? Do you possess a willingness to endure opposition, even from those close to you? Do you have the courage to move out of your comfort zone, in the power of God, by doing what frightens you? Is there objective evidence of that sort of courage in your past? Have you welcomed God's smaller challenges and used them to develop a habit of progressive obedience that will prepare you for bigger tasks in the future? Lastly, are you willing to carefully examine older assumptions, knowing that our present day giants may require innovative strategies and tactics?

May God give us the grace to delight in His reputation, take up His weapons, and run to the battle.

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