

24 January 2021

Singer with a Sword
1 Samuel 16-17 (Psalm 23)

The poet T.S. Eliot reportedly called Psalm 23 the finest poetry in the English language. This is curious, given that it was written in Hebrew by a shepherd boy, but there is something timeless about the familiar lines. We read Psalm 23, as it is translated in the King James Version.

A Psalm of David

¹ *The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.*

² *He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

³ *He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

⁴ *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

⁵ *Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

⁶ *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

God spoke to Samuel. “Samuel, Samuel. How long will you mourn for Saul?”

Samuel hunched his shoulder impatiently. God was right. His heart was still sick about King Saul. Although Samuel had never wanted a king at all, he had gotten used to the tall, handsome Benjaminite. But the kingship had gone to Saul’s head; he had become arrogant. When he claimed God’s authority for himself, the Lord had said to Samuel, “I am sorry I chose Saul as king. Now I will have to choose someone else.”

“Can’t you give him another chance?” Samuel pleaded.

“You have no idea how many chances I’ve given him.”

“But you *chose* him. You can’t give up on him now!”

“I have never given up on Saul, and I never will,” God replied. “But I am still choosing someone else to be king. I want you to go to the tribe of Judah, to the clan of Ephrathah, to the family of Jesse. I have chosen one of Jesse’s sons to succeed Saul.”

Samuel cleared his throat. “Um, Lord?”

“Yes?”

“You know Saul’s been . . . edgy recently. If word gets to him that I’ve anointed someone else as king, he’ll . . . um . . .”

“He’ll kill you,” God agreed. “Still think I should keep him as king?”

“All right, I get it. Saul’s out-of-control.”

“So don’t tell Saul you’re going to anoint a new king. Go to Bethlehem for the annual sacrifice. While you’re there, visit Jesse and I’ll show you which of his sons I’ve picked.”

So Samuel went to the town where the clan of Ephrathah lived, a town called Bethlehem. When he arrived, the elders of the city came out to meet him, a little nervous. Everyone knew that Samuel and Saul were close, and nobody those days wanted to be on Saul's bad side. "Samuel," said the elders, "Is it shalom? Is all well?"

"It is shalom," Samuel replied. "I've come for the annual sacrifice. Gather all the families of Ephrathah."

So they gathered all the families of Bethlehem, including the family of Jesse. With Jesse were seven tall, strong sons. Samuel's eyes gleamed when he saw them. When the sacrifice was done, Samuel invited himself to Jesse's home, and once they were alone, Samuel got down to business. "I am here because God sent me to anoint one of your sons to become king after Saul. Bring your sons to me."

Well, what father would not be flattered? Immediately Jesse sent for his oldest son, Eliab. Eliab was tall and broad-shouldered, who had already served some time in Saul's army. Samuel reached for his flask of anointing oil.

"No, Samuel," said God.

"Are you kidding?" said Samuel. "This one's perfect!"

"You mean he's tall and handsome? Yeah, how has that been working so far?" Samuel said nothing, and the Lord continued, "You need to learn to look at people as I do. Look at their core, not their surface. This is not the one."

Samuel shook his head, and Jesse brought in his second son, Abinadab. No, God said, not that one either. Jesse's third son, Shammah. No. Jesse brought in all seven tall, imposing sons. No, not any of these.

"Don't you have anyone else?" Samuel asked.

"Just the youngest, but he's not here. We, um, we send him out to watch the sheep, where he can't do much damage."

That didn't sound promising. "Is there a problem with your youngest son?" Samuel asked. "I mean, is feeble-minded or something?"

Jesse sighed. "It's not that, not exactly. It just that he's . . . he's a musician."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to pry —"

"No, it's all right," Jesse said reassuringly. "I have seven other sons, after all."

"Well, look, could you send for him, anyway?"

So Jesse sent for his youngest son. Samuel examined him. He wasn't as tall as Eliab, or really any of the others. He was red-cheeked and sweaty and smelled of sheep, but there was something about his eyes. They were deep and beautiful. "This one?" Samuel muttered.

"If you could see him as I do," God replied, "you wouldn't ask. This one is made of iron and music. He already knows my voice. Anoint him."

And so Samuel anointed the youngest and least promising son of Jesse, a shepherd boy, to be the next king of Israel. The boy's name was David.

Meanwhile, Saul was getting worse. His fits of gloom were growing more frequent and were lasting longer. His officers were worried. One said, "If only we could give his mind some diversion during these spells." Another said, "Maybe music would be soothing. I know a musician down in Bethlehem of Judah; he's just a kid, but he's really good. We could bring him to play for Saul." When doing nothing is scarier than doing anything, you're willing to try any random idea, so the next time Saul lapsed into his dark place, they brought David, son of Jesse, to court to play his harp. And it worked. When David played, Saul's tormented soul would relax. Soon he'd begin thinking again about his next campaign against the Philistines, and David would go back to his sheep. This happened several times.

As it happened, Saul's next campaign against the Philistines took place not far from David. The Philistines had crossed the border into the land of Judah, near Bethlehem. Saul sent messengers to the cities of Judah, calling out his soldiers. Among these were Jesse's three oldest sons: Eliab, Abinadab, and Shammah. Israel met the Philistines in the Valley of Elah, where the two armies camped on opposite sides of the valley and faced each other down, waiting for the other side to flinch. There was good reason to think that Israel would blink first. The Philistine army was just bigger. Individually bigger. Especially this one Philistine – a soldier named Goliath who towered over every man in either army. He was taller and more impressive than Saul himself. And every morning, this Goliath would stroll out between the two camps to taunt the Israelites.

"Hey, Saul! Come out and play! Or if you're afraid, send your best man! Aren't you here to fight Philistines? Well, here I am! How about one-on-one! If your best man kills me, you win the battle. If I kill him, we do. Anyone with a backbone in Israel?"

And the Israelites would look at the mountainous Goliath, at his iron sword and at his spear that looked like a tree trunk. Then they would look at their feet. This went on day after day.

After some time, David's father Jesse began to worry about his three oldest sons in Saul's army, so he put together a care package of bread and figs and told David to take it to the front lines. David arrived and began looking for his brothers, but as it happened he arrived during Goliath's morning taunt, when all the Israelites were lying low. Not finding his brothers, David listened to Goliath. "Who is this joker?" he asked indignantly.

An Israelite soldier peeked out from his hiding place. "That's Goliath," he said.

"Why does King Saul let him do that?" David demanded.

"The king's as helpless as the rest of us," the soldier replied. "Look at that guy!"

"Hmm," muttered David. "Is there a reward for killing Goliath? After all, why should he mock the armies of the living God?"

"The king says whoever kills the giant can marry his daughter."

"She pretty? . . . No, never mind. It's not about a reward. This man makes God look weak, taunting us like that."

“David!” came a shout. It was his oldest brother Eliab. “What are you doing here! Who’s watching the sheep, little boy? I know your lazy heart. Come to watch the big boys in the war, haven’t you?”

“Now what have I done? Lighten up, big brother. I brought you some food from Dad.” Then he turned away from Eliab, back to the soldier. “So has anybody accepted the challenge?”

“No. Who would be that crazy?”

David grinned. “Where’s the king’s tent?”

A few minutes later, David stood before King Saul. Saul sat alone in the darkest corner of his tent, muttering. The guard who led David in stiffened, then spoke, using a quiet, soothing voice. “O king?”

Saul said nothing. Impatient, David said, “King Saul, it’s me, David. I don’t have my harp with me . . .”

“Who?” said Saul.

“David, the musician. My lord, I was just bringing some supplies to my brothers and I heard this uncircumcised Philistine Goliath taunting your armies.”

Saul growled, and the guard stepped back, hissing, “Shut up!”

David went on. “No man should speak like that of the armies of the living God,” he said bluntly. “Is there no man in your army who will defend the honor of the Lord?”

The direct question seem to clear Saul’s head. He frowned, “Would you?”

David shrugged. “If no one else will, yes. I will.”

“Don’t be a fool, child,” Saul said irritably. “You don’t even look like soldier. Where’s your armor?”

“I have no armor,” David replied. “But this won’t be the first time I’ve fought enemies stronger than I am. When I was keeping the sheep, a lion came out of the hills and snatched one of the lambs. So I chased it down, all the way to its lair, where I killed it.”

“You killed a lion?”

“It took my lamb. And then, when a bear came down to steal a sheep—”

“You’re not going to tell me you killed a bear by yourself.”

“Why shouldn’t I? It was my job to protect the sheep.”

“Step closer!” commanded Saul. He peered through the gloom at David. “I’ve seen those eyes before.”

“Yes, my lord,” said David. “I’m David, son of Jesse. You remember me. I haven’t been here with my harp in a while, but —”

“And you think you can take on Goliath?”

“I don’t think I can do anything,” David said. “But remember. We fight as the people of God. God brought us up from slavery in Egypt. God can defeat one Philistine.”

“You’re right!” Saul said. “Bring my armor!” Servants hustled in with Saul’s bronze armor. “Help this boy put it on!”

Nobody questioned Saul those days. The servants put Saul’s armor on David, buckling it as tight as it could go. “My lord?” David said.

“Yes, young man?”

“It isn’t right for me to wear the king’s armor,” David said. “I’m nobody. I’m a shepherd boy.” Saul frowned, and David added, “Besides, I can’t walk. Let me go out as myself, not a king or soldier or hero. Just me.”

Saul nodded slowly. David stripped off Saul’s armor and went out. He climbed past the Israelite front lines, and walked out into the No Man’s Land of the Valley of Elah. There was a dry watercourse there, where he found several hefty round stones the right size for his sling. Seeing someone emerge from the Israelite camp, Goliath of Gath came out with his sword and spear. But when he saw David, he laughed.

“What is this?” he roared.

“I’ve come out to accept your challenge,” David said.

“Saul! Is this a joke? Or is this really the best you’ve got? Do you think I’m a dog, that you send nurslings with sticks to chase me away? Go home, sonny, or I’ll chew you up and spit out the bones. You don’t even have any armor!”

“What is this obsession with armor that you all have? Victory doesn’t come from armor, but from God. You come at me with your armor and iron weapons. I come at you with the power of the Lord.” David fit a stone into his sling. “You still have time to surrender, if you wish.”

Again Goliath roared with laughter. David swung his sling around his head. Once. Twice. He was good with a sling; lots of practice. There’s not much to do when watching sheep, and you can only practice the harp for so long. Three times. Four. Then he let the stone go. It was a perfect shot. The heavy stone sank into Goliath’s forehead. The roar of laughter broke off. For a second, the giant stood upright, his eyes empty. Then, like a tree, he crashed face first into the dust. David ran forward, took Goliath’s sword, lifted it, then swung it down and severed the Philistine’s head.

For a long moment, the watching armies on both sides of the valley were silent. Then the Israelites let out a shout, more of surprise than anything, and charged. For their part, the Philistines screamed, threw down their weapons, and fled. That day, Israel drove Philistia out of the land of Judah.

And after the battle was over, Saul strode over the field of victory with his Commander, Abner. “Who was that boy, anyway?” Saul asked.

Abner cocked one eyebrow and looked at his king. “That was David. He sometimes comes to play music for you when you’re not feeling well.”

Saul shook his head, as if trying to clear it. “That’s what he said,” Saul muttered. “You must be telling the truth. And he *does* seem familiar. I really feel as if I ought to know this boy.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Abner. “I too think you ought to get to know this boy. I think we all ought to get to know this boy.”