

(Devotional #7) Psalm 8:1-9 – Part 1
DEATH OF THE CHAMPION: Psalm 8 in Historical Context

OPENING SCRIPTURE– *“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” – Genesis 3:15.*

John Phillips wrote in his book, EXPLORING PSALMS: *“The Psalms touch all the notes on the keyboard of human emotion.” In the Psalms we have love and hate, joy and sorrow, hope and fear, peace and strife, faith and despair.* The Psalms contain and preserve ‘all the stuff of life.’

On One Level: This collection of poems is a storehouse of human experience ... while on another, the Psalms provide us with a wealth of divine instruction. We especially turn to the Psalms in times of trouble as men throughout ages have done; for example:

When Jonah found himself in what he called, ‘the belly of hell,’ he prayed a prayer that is rife with citations from the Psalms: When Jonah said, *“I called out of my distress to the Lord,”* he was quoting – **Psalm 18:6**. Then when he said: *“I cried for help from the depths of Sheol and you heard my voice,”* his words echoed – **Psalm 86:13**. Again, as Jonah lamented, *“You have cast me into the heart of the seas, and the waters encompassed me to the point of death,”* he was quoting **Psalm 69:1-2, 14**. *“While I was fainting away, I remembered the Lord and my prayer came to you,”* reflects **Psalm 142:3**: (which reads) *“When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, you knew my path,”* ... and finally Jonah prays from the belly of the great fish ... *“I shall remember the deeds of the Lord – Surely I will remember your wonders of old” – Psalm 77:11.*

The Upper Room Narrative also contains quotations from the Psalms; in Matthew 26:21-30 – when Jesus revealed to His disciples that there was a traitor among them, we cannot help but recall the words of **Psalm 41**: *“Even my close friend in whom I trusted – who ate my bread – has lifted up his heel against me” – Psalm 41:9.*

And the agony of the Crucifixion is recounted for us in excruciating detail in **Psalm 22**, written a thousand years before it happened.

All of the Psalms have historical contexts. We may not know every occasion that led David and the others to write them – but each Psalm has a story to tell that is tied to an event in history or to a theological truth that was important to the Psalmist.

Psalm 51 clearly states in the superscript, *“For the Choirmaster, a Psalm of David, when Nathan the Prophet came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba”* (referencing 2 Samuel 11 & 12). That is the historical context of Psalm 51 – and knowing the story behind the Psalm gives the interpreter great insight into the depth of emotion and meaning of that Psalm.

Psalm 32 is ‘the Psalm of David’s Anguish,’ that time during the year between his sin with Bathsheba and his confession after Nathan confronted him. The words *“when I kept silent, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long; for day and night your hand was heavy upon me,”* reflect the conviction of sin David experienced as he tried to make sense of his life after committing adultery with Bathsheba, and then murdering her husband, Uriah the Hittite.

In John 16, Jesus instructed his disciples about the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In verse 8 Jesus told them: *“When He (the Holy Spirit) comes, He will convict the world concerning Sin, and Righteousness, and Justice” – John 16:8-11.* Psalm 32, in the context of what we know about David’s life, is a convincing example of the convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit, designed to bring God’s people to their knees in confession.

We just completed a study of Psalm 23, a psalm we decided was written near the end of David's life. For the next few weeks, we are going to examine Psalm 8. The exact historical context of this psalm is not clearly stated ... at least not as explicitly as that of Psalm 51 ... but there is a powerful hint that may help us associate Psalm 8 with a specific event in David's life.

I believe Psalm 8 was written when David was a young man ... so in these two psalms, we have two perspectives: In Psalm 8, we see a young David in the prime of his life, while in Psalm 23, we see a mature David, a man who has seen and proven the enduring faithfulness of God throughout his life.

As we will see, like Psalm 23, Psalm 8 is appropriate as we face an invisible enemy that has held us somewhat captive, a foe that at times seems to be devastating, despite all the scientific and medical advancements of our age. Or perhaps, just the isolation of the quarantine itself has been the greater enemy. In whatever ways you may have been affected by the Coronavirus, Psalm 8 should provide both encouragement and perspective when dealing with unforeseen challenges.

I believe the event that led young David to write Psalm 8, was his encounter with the Champion of the Philistines: Goliath the Giant. Now Psalm 8 does not detail the battle with Goliath ... in fact, much of the Psalm contrasts the smallness of man with the majesty of God's creation. But it is that very thing ... *God's Majestic Greatness* ... in which David found the confidence to face a more powerful enemy and defeat him.

The story of David and Goliath is recorded in 1 Samuel Chapter 17. It is a story you have known from childhood. But it may be helpful to mention a few of the highpoints.

THE LOCATION:

The Philistine army and the army of Israel were facing each other on either side of the Valley of Elah, a valley located about 20-miles southwest of Jerusalem. The Philistines were on the west side of the valley looking east (*with Jerusalem in their crosshairs*), while the Israeli army was on the east side of the valley, looking west from a mountain located between the Philistine Army and Jerusalem (*1 Samuel 17:3*). In order to attack Jerusalem, the Philistines would have to get past the army of Israel. So, the Armies are encamped on two mountains with the Valley of Elah between them.

THE PROBLEM:

Goliath is from Gath, a Philistine city about 10-miles northwest of the Philistine camp. Goliath was, by all calculations, a giant; he was six cubits and one span tall (*1 Samuel 17:4*). A cubit is 18-inches and a span is 9-inches. So, Goliath's height was 9' 9"! He was a big guy. But more important than his size is how he is referred to in the text ... **GOLIATH IS 'THE CHAMPION'** (*1 Samuel 17:4*).

Everyday Goliath would come down from the Philistine camp, stand in the Valley of Elah below Israel's camp, and taunt the Israelites with this offer: "*Send out a representative from your army to fight against me. The loser will die, and his people will serve the winning side as their slaves*" – *1 Samuel 17:8-9*.

David's brothers were serving in Saul's army. He had come to bring supplies to them at the request of Jesse, their father. And David heard Goliath taunting the terrified Israelites. Now there was something unique about David that set him apart from the rest – David looked at the world from the divine viewpoint, while the rest – including Saul – looked at the world from a human viewpoint. This difference is made clear in verse 26, where David asks – "*Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should taunt the armies of the Living God*"?

Here is David's assessment of Goliath – 'Goliath is a Philistine; he is not a descendant of Abraham; and Goliath is uncircumcised, and therefore, he does not RECOGNIZE, nor is he UNDER the Everlasting Covenant God established with Israel' – 1 Samuel 17:26.

CONCLUSION: So, what's the big deal with this over-grown, loud-mouthed pagan?

David knew God always had fought for Israel. Any victory Israel won throughout her history was the result of God fighting for His people. And God could be counted on to do the same for David because God always is true to his covenants – So, “*if the living God of Israel is for us, who possibly can prevail against us*”? Certainly not this Philistine! (*Or a mere virus?*)

This is Divine Viewpoint: Looking at the situation from God's perspective, not man's.

Human viewpoint saw Goliath as ‘**TOO BIG TO FIGHT.**’ Divine viewpoint saw Goliath as ‘**TOO BIG TO MISS.**’ So, David took the challenge and Goliath took the bait –

Goliath had offered David a deal – ‘**Defeat me and the men of both armies shall live – only you or I will die.**’ Who knows if the Philistines would have been true to that deal – but it doesn't matter because David wasn't interested in a deal. David said to Goliath: ‘**Not only am I going to kill you; I also am going to kill the entire Philistine Army.**’

Well, we all know the story: David killed Goliath and as a result, Saul made David his ‘**Court Musician,**’ whose job it was to soothe the mood of the king, who was predisposed toward depression. I've always thought this was a bit odd: **David defeats the Philistine Champion and Saul hires him to play the harp ...** I would have put him in charge of the Department of Defense!

Well that aside, it makes sense that David would write a psalm about the majesty of the God, who had given him victory over the Philistine Champion ... and he would write it close in time to the event itself – I believe Psalm 8 is that psalm and that David wrote it as a young man.

The clue that links Psalm 8 to the Goliath story is found in an obscure Hebrew phrase that occurs in what most English Bibles record as the superscript to Psalm 9, but really should be the postscript to Psalm 8. The phrase is: ‘*almuth-labben* – Now this phrase is positioned in different places in different Hebrew manuscripts. Some do place it as the superscript of Psalm 9, but others put it at the end of Psalm 8.

- The NIV translates it, “**For the Director of Music. To the Tune of ‘THE DEATH OF THE SON,’ a Psalm of David,**” (*This assumes the existence of a song entitled ‘MUTH-LABBEN’ (‘THE DEATH OF THE SON’) to which the words of Psalm 9 were to be sung).*
- The KJV and the NASB simply **transliterate** the two Hebrew words: “**To the Chief Musician on ‘MUTH-LABBEN’ – A Psalm of David**” – and both versions also seem to associate it with Psalm 9.

But if you research the history of this phrase, you will find:

- (1) **THE RABBIS** consistently associated the phrase ‘‘MUTH-LABBEN’ **NOT WITH PSALM 9 but with PSALM 8,** seeing it as a postscript to Psalm 8, and ... they translate the phrase, ‘UPON THE DEATH OF THE CHAMPION,’ (*SPECIFICALLY AS A REFERENCE TO GOLIATH THE GIANT*).
- (2) **THE TARGUMS** (*Aramaic, Rabbinical Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible*), date this specific understanding of the phrase, ‘‘MUTH-LABBEN’’ – at least to as early as the 1st Century B.C. – *i.e., even before the Time of Christ, Psalm 8 was associated with the Goliath Story.*

- (3) And the Targums *paraphrase* '**MUTH-LABBEN**' as: '*Concerning the death of the man who went forth between the two camps.*' And that is **exactly** how Goliath is described in **1 Samuel 17:4** –

The Hebrew phrase translated '**Champion**' (*in almost all English Translations of 1 Samuel 17:4*) literally means '**the man between the two camps.**' Which two camps? The two camps described in **1 Samuel 17**. This is a direct reference to Goliath, who stood between the Philistines and the Israelites and taunted the Lord of Hosts, the God of the Armies of Israel. So, there is at least a 2,000+ year history of seeing Psalm 8 as historically associated with David and Goliath ———

And why not? This story is one of the first stories we learn as children, because it presents us with the ultimate underdog – the little guy – David – fighting a giant. But it is far more than a children's tale, for it anticipates the events at the end of the Church Age.

Near the end of this dispensation, the world will have found another champion – another Goliath, if you will. And like the Old Testament Goliath, he will be a '*false champion.*' This false champion is known in Scripture as '*the Beast*¹' and by human standards, Israel will be as powerless before him as David *should have been* before Goliath. Like Goliath he will stand between the two camps (*i.e., between the Seed of the Woman, 'BELIEVERS,' and the Seed of the Serpent, 'UNBELIEVERS,'* and he will defy God and all those who believe in Him, just as Goliath taunted Israel. It will be the final chapter in the fulfilment of Genesis 3:15, when **the Seed of the Woman, Jesus Christ, will defeat the Seed of the Serpent, the Anti-Christ.** And in that Day, when all appears lost for Israel, '**the Greater Son of David**' will come and fight for Israel ... and He will defeat the false champion, who opposes God's people and the covenant He established with them through Abraham.

In the meantime, when we face any great foe – perhaps in a more personal sense, this virus or our concern for loved ones, or maybe just the loneliness of isolation – let's think like David, "**Who is this uncircumcised Philistine**"? Certainly, none of these things are a worthy foe when it is the Lord who fights for us.

¹ Revelation 13:1-10; 14:9-13