

1 Samuel 17:4-11

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/1sam/1sam-17/1-samuel-174-11/>

We are introduced to Goliath, the champion of the Philistines.

The *Philistines* have a secret weapon, so to speak. A *champion named Goliath* who came out from the armies of the *Philistines*. *Goliath* is from the city-state of *Gath* in *Philistia*. *Gath* is mentioned in *Joshua 13:3* as being one of five principal city-states of *Philistia*. The city-state of *Gath* is also confirmed by the *Amarna Letters* which are clay tablets discovered in *Egypt* and are believed to have been written between 1360–1332 BC.

Goliath was a massive individual whose height was six cubits and a span. A cubit was roughly 18 inches, which means that *Goliath's* height amounted to 9 feet 9 inches. Other ancient texts record different heights for *Goliath*. The *Dead Sea Scrolls* (200 BC), the *Septuagint* (300 BC), and *Josephus*, a 1st century Jewish historian differ here from the *Masoretic Text* (700 AD) stating *Goliath's* height to be “4 cubits and a span” or 6 feet 9 inches. Attempts to explain the differing heights include the possible embellishment of the story during transmission, or that a scribe may have been drawn to the number 6.

In verse 7, it says *the shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and the head of his spear weighed six hundred shekels of iron* (9.4 pounds). A *weaver's beam* was a huge plank of wood used as the main support for a weaving loom. The mass and weight of the spear would indicate that *Goliath* possessed immense physical strength. Together with the stout shaft, which was like a *weaver's beam*, *Goliath's* spear might have had a weight similar to that of the shot in modern shot put competitions, which weighs 16 pounds. To be able to wield a weapon this heavy shows great physical strength.

Goliath wore a bronze helmet, and he was clothed with scale-armor which weighed five

thousand shekels of bronze (approx. 78 pounds). *Scale-armor* is a metal robe-like armor made of single plates of metal or *scales* sewn to overlap one another like roofing shingles. *Goliath* lived at the very beginning of the *Iron Age*, so *bronze* would have been the more prevalent metal at the time. The point being made is to show how massive and awesome this warrior was. By way of comparison, the body armor of a US soldier weighs around thirty pounds, which means *Goliath's* body armor was about two and a half times heavier.

Goliath also wore *bronze greaves on his legs* and a *bronze javelin slung between his shoulders*. *Greaves* were important pieces of *armor* that protected each shin. The *bronze javelin* (“*kîḏôn*”) is a different weapon than the *spear* (“*ḥānîṭ*”) which had a spear head that weighed over nine pounds. Beyond all this, *Goliath's shield* was carried by a *shield-carrier* who walked in front of *Goliath* when he went out to taunt the *ranks of Israel*. Having an assigned *shield-carrier* shows a position of importance and strength. Though not mentioned here, *Goliath* also carried a sword (“*ḥereḇ*”) which *David* will use to cut off *Goliath's* head (1 Samuel 17:51).

Goliath now challenges the *servants of Saul* to single combat with a *man* of their choosing. He *stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel* from across the Valley of Elah, which would have carried his voice quite well, saying, *Why do you come out to draw up in battle array?* The Philistines wished to avoid all-out war through a single combat of chosen champions. Portraying himself as equal with the ranks of soldiers, *Goliath* says, *Am I not the Philistine and you servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves and let him come down to me.* In saying this, *Goliath* is proposing a champion-on-champion, winner-take-all competition.

Goliath proposes that *if he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will become your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall become our servants and serve us.* This champion-on-champion approach was common in the era.

Goliath continues, *I defy the ranks of Israel this day; give me a man that we may fight together.* The Hebrew word for *defy* is “*hāraḇ*” and can be translated “reproach,” “taunt,” or “blaspheme.” *Goliath* is taunting, ridiculing, and demoralizing the *ranks* of the Hebrews.

At the sight of this massive *Philistine* and the sound of his disheartening words, *Saul and Israel were dismayed and greatly afraid.* Fear is a byproduct of concentrating on circumstances rather than trusting God in them. If *Saul and Israel* were trusting God in this moment, they would understand He loves them and led them to this moment for a reason. Perfect love, God’s love, casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Many times in the Bible when Israel needed deliverance, most of the people were afraid. Often, in these times God performed the deliverance largely through one person, a deliverer. The deliverance in this story is no different. God’s deliverance will come through an unlikely champion, David.

Biblical Text

⁴Then a champion came out from the armies of the Philistines named Goliath, from Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span. ⁵He had a bronze helmet on his head, and he was clothed with scale-armor which weighed five thousand shekels of bronze. ⁶He also had bronze greaves on his legs and a bronze javelin slung between his shoulders. ⁷The shaft of his spear was like a weaver’s beam, and the head of his spear weighed six hundred shekels of iron; his shield-carrier also walked before him. ⁸He stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel and said to them, “Why do you come out to draw up in battle array? Am I not the Philistine and you servants of Saul? Choose a man for yourselves and let him come down to me. ⁹If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will become your servants; but if I prevail against him and kill him, then you shall become our servants and serve us.” ¹⁰Again the Philistine said, “I defy the ranks of Israel this day; give me a man that we may fight together.” ¹¹When Saul and all Israel heard these words of the Philistine, they were dismayed and greatly afraid.