

## UNIQUE TRAINING... FOR A SPECIAL MAN

Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them. (1 Sam. 17:36)

During my stay in South Africa I preached in a town close to the Kruger National Park. The church people arranged that I should stay on a farm near to the reserve. One day my host spoke of a pride of lions that had been raiding his cattle, and described how he hoped to shoot the invaders. My enthusiasm ran away with my brain when I volunteered to emulate his example. That morning the lions were either sleeping or hunting elsewhere and I have always been thankful for their absence. I was not a good marksman. Had I encountered that band of marauders I might have received an early welcome to heaven. Eventually I hope to speak with David about the time when he fought with a lion. It will be an interesting conversation.

The lad from Bethlehem was a shepherd who spent most of his time among sheep and goats. The fields and hills around his home provided excellent pasture, and while his animals grazed, the boy composed and sang his lyrics. One day a lion tried to steal one of the lambs or kids and without hesitation David took his spear, staff, or whatever was available and ran toward the enemy. He took the victim from the jaws of the thief and then killed the ferocious beast. Later he did the same to a bear, and he never forgot those encounters. Just before his battle with Goliath he said to King Saul, "Thy servant kept his father's sheep, and there came a lion, and a bear, and took a lamb out of the flock: And I went out after him, and smote him, and delivered it out of his mouth: and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him, and slew him. Thy servant slew both the lion and the bear: and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be as one of them, seeing he bath defied the armies of the living God" (1 Sam. 17:34-36). That episode in David's life is worthy of consideration.

## God's Careful Control ... Planning

David was young when he slew the lion and knew nothing of his forthcoming conflict with Goliath. The courage exhibited when he met the beasts was remarkable. How a boy could be so fearless remains a mystery. Most men would have hurriedly climbed the nearest tree. Perhaps this was the fulfillment of a plan made in heaven. Did God deliberately bring the lion and bear into David's life to prepare him for future emergencies? There is no record that the lad boasted about his achievements. Perhaps the incident remained unmentioned; he might have been reluctant to speak about the exploit.

The lion has always been considered the king of the forest and it was surprising when a boy slew one. The Lord could have prevented the predator from attacking David's flock; that He permitted the incident to happen suggests it was prearranged in heaven.

Not much was written about the early life of Jesse's youngest son, but in all probability his encounter with Samuel, the prophet, had been momentous. The ancient author wrote,

And Samuel said unto Jesse, Are here all thy children? And he said, There remaineth yet the youngest, and, behold, he keepeth the sheep. And Samuel said unto Jesse, Send and fetch him: for we will not sit down till he come hither. And he sent, and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and withal of a beautiful countenance, and goodly to look to. And the LORD said, Arise, anoint

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him: for this is he. Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brethren: and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward. (1 Sam. 16:11-13, emphasis mine)

Doubtless, the lad became increasingly aware that something remarkable had taken place; he was not alone! A new confidence replaced timidity and explained the fearless attack upon the marauding lion. The boy was swiftly becoming a man.

He quickly learned that undesirable and dangerous problems of life could be overcome; that even impossible tasks became easy when God was present to help. This is a lesson all people need to learn. As mountains were made to be climbed and oceans crossed, so the most formidable difficulties of life can be turned into blessings. Paul said, "And we know that all things [even lions and bears] work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to

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his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). David joined that select company when the Spirit of God came upon him.

#### David's Courageous Conduct... Pleasing

When David spoke of his encounter with a lion and a bear he was evidently referring to two separate incidents, for lions and bears do not hunt together. During the Old Testament era the land was covered by dense forests, and the animals mentioned were common. When civilization destroyed the woodlands, lions became extinct in the land. Bears are still believed to roam in the higher elevations of the Middle East. David's statement, "I caught him by the beard," is interesting. Dr. R. Payne Smith said,

Neither the lion nor the bear has a beard. The word really means "the chin" - the place where the beard grows. The Chaldee Version translates "the lower jaw" and the Septuagint says "the throat." It is plain from the description that David slew the beast with his staff. The statement "he rose against me" shows that the combat thus particularly described was with the bear, which arises on its hind legs to grapple with its foe. The lion crouches and then springs. Pliny also says that the weakest part of a bear is its head, and it can be killed by a sharp blow there. The manner in which David killed the lion is not described. (The Pulpit Commentary, vol. 4 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950], 324.)

It was never revealed to what extent the young shepherd boy knew God, but even when he became the king of Israel the fight with the wild beasts had not been forgotten. The experience gained earlier had enriched the monarch's soul. He wrote in Psalm 91:11-14, "For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. Thou shalt tread upon the lion and adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet. Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him: I will set him on high, because he hath known my name." When David reminisced he believed God's guardian angels had assisted in the conquest of both the lion and bear. He compared his enemies to the animals and serpents mentioned, and expressed faith that if God were for him, no one could be against him.

Why did the Lord subject His servant to a double-test? The flocks could have been attacked on many occasions, for predators were a

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constant menace. David developed watchfulness and learned the truth

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behind a modern proverb: "It never rains but when it pours!" He could not afford to become complacent; indifference had to be avoided at all times. As a king he realized other enemies were waiting to attack his soul. A battle won did not mean the war had ended. God was training His servant to become the shepherd of an entire nation, when innumerable human sheep would need his protection and guidance.

#### Goliath's Complete Collapse ... Proving

Israel's fear of Goliath was devastating. Goliath was a giant "whose height was six cubits and a span" (1 Sam. 17:4). "The word cubit signifies the length from the cubitus, the elbow, to the top of the middle finger, a distance generally measured at eighteen inches. The span ordinarily nine inches is the distance from the top of the middle finger to the end of the thumb when they are extended as far as they can reach. The height of this Philistine would then be nine feet nine inches, which is a tremendous height for a man" (Adam Clark, The Bethany Parallel Commentary on the Old Testament, 542).

It was said Goliath's suit of armor weighed five thousand shekels of brass. This would mean copper: brass was unknown at that time. It is estimated that a shekel was equal to two-thirds of an ounce and therefore the corslet, or literally the shirt of scales would weigh at least two hundred pounds—a huge load for any man to carry. The description of his other equipment was truly awe inspiring, and through the youthful eyes of the shepherd boy, Goliath probably appeared to be a man-mountain (see the author's book, David: His Life and Times [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990], 42).

God had carefully trained His young servant so that the towering giant appeared no taller than the bear that had looked down upon the youthful attacker. The boy from Bethlehem could look over the shoulders of the giant to see the Almighty. David would have much in common with Paul who wrote, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (1 Cor. 10:13). Apparently it was impossible for a lad to slay the giant. David had no armor for his protection, no lance or spear to throw, no previous experience of this type of combat—but he was God's representative and that was sufficient.

God's people have always been confronted by giants of one sort or

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another, and sometimes even the best of men became weary and despondent. Elijah ran away from Jezebel to hide in a mountain cave (see 1 Kings 19:9). When Paul was imprisoned in Jerusalem it was necessary for the Lord to say, "Be of good cheer, Paul; for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome" (Acts 23:11). There was a period in the life of Martin Luther when he was overwhelmed by depression. He was shocked when his wife said, "Isn't the news terrible—God is dead!" Indignantly, the reformer replied, "Who told you such rubbish?" She answered, "You did! He must be dead—the way you are acting!"

Many years ago I stayed with a man in Monmouth, England, and one evening he spoke of a terrible experience through which he had passed. He said, "I suffered a nervous breakdown. Things had been getting progressively worse, and after eighteen months, I wanted to die. During the early hours of one morning, I lay awake in my bed wondering how best to end my tragedy. Suddenly I heard the local baker riding his bicycle to work. He was whistling the tune of a chorus I used to sing in Sunday school:

God is still on the throne,  
And He will remember His own.

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Though trials may press us,  
And burdens distress us,  
He never forsaketh His own,  
God is still on the throne  
And He will remember His own.  
His promise is true,  
He will not forget you:  
God is still on the throne.

"That whistling baker did not know he was bringing hope to a man filled with despair. After he had gone I knelt by my bed, and from that moment began to regain my health." His Goliath had been slain. The same thing can happen to our giants if we steadfastly rely upon our heavenly Father.

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