



Worthy of Confidence

1 Samuel 17:32-49; Ps 9:9-20; Mark 4:35-41; 2 Cor 6:1-13

Why does David's confrontation with Goliath stand out in our minds as a supreme example of faith, yet Paul's ministry among the Corinthians does not? It would seem that physical threat and danger speaks louder to us than other kinds of threat and danger. We seem much more attuned to critical moments of crisis than to ongoing issues that threaten our lives or quality of living. We easily identify a heart attack as a problem. Indulging in poor habits known to lead to heart attacks, on the other hand, is a practice we actually encourage.

Events of this past week among the population of Iran are a good case in point. The world is now aware of brutality visited upon a people protesting results of an election they believe to have gone awry. Many of us have seen clandestine images that speak to a perception of the misuse of force upon a people rising to stake a claim to rights of free expression. We recognize the threat of physical injury and death to keep a population under the control of the current regime of power. Years of oppression, however, do not often deliver the same message to us as a critical moment as this.

It is, however, in the course of long term oppression that confidence speaks loudest and with greatest difficulty, than in moments of crisis. In times of crisis, issues are spelled out more clearly. We know and can easily identify an enemy and the direction of a threat. In critical times of crisis, we may be able to distinguish more clearly those things which threaten and to gauge their severity.

That is not to say that crisis always identifies the enemy for us clearly. Goliath was obviously an enemy of the people of Israel. Perhaps not as clearly highlighted, however, is that Saul had become just as much an enemy as Goliath. Saul was shirking his duties as king. Responsibility to face the Philistine champion was ultimately his. Upon his appointment as king, the major qualifier was that he stood head and shoulders above the rest of Israel. He was king because he was Israel's champion. Instead of taking up his responsibility, however, he offered to reward someone else to face the enemy in his stead.

In the short run, Goliath was the obvious enemy. In the long haul, however, Saul's shirking of responsibility was a much graver problem for the nation. While Saul lived in fear, timidity, and desire to cling to security, David had a greater security in trusting *Yahweh* in the practice of living. The moment of critical danger was one he could face because of an ongoing confidence in daily living.

Public demonstrations in Iran have begun, not simply because of a critical moment, but because of individuals who have been standing up and speaking out regarding their grievances. They have often been repressed for their speech and positions that run contrary to the aims of the establishment. The difference in the groundswell demonstrations, however, is that now others have joined the few in defying power. It takes courage for a people to respond in such a manner. It takes greater courage, however, to live against the flow on the earlier side of a groundswell of opposition—to stand when others are as yet unwilling to stand with you.

Such was the context of Paul's ministry among the Corinthians. Paul stood against the tide. At times, the enemy was a visible force arrayed against him, as certain Jews incited riots and had him thrown in prison. On a daily basis, however, Paul stood against lesser known forces of opposition. The greatest danger to Paul and the gospel was not so much from the outside as from the very believers in

Corinth. Too many there wanted the gospel only in so far as it was pleasing and comforting in relation to their established way of life. They wanted the gospel to support their personal issues and concerns, not to direct the focus of their lives. They did not want Jesus to interfere with their social standing, their entertainment patters, and their private pleasures. It was, after all, to address eternity, not daily life.

Paul had brought them the gospel with its message of freedom and reconciliation with God. They had taken Christ as a source of blessing, grace as license to live as they pleased, and God as unwilling to hold them to any standards of conduct and faithful service. They did not want the gospel to interfere with their finances. They did not want to allow love to dictate meeting the needs of believers elsewhere. They did not want to assume responsibility to care for those who served them. They wanted to be served, but refused their responsibility to serve.

It is easy to sink into the comfort of our known circumstances, patterns of living, and routines of habit. It is a simple thing to get caught up in the habitual patterns of life and assume God's blessing, care, and support for our choices. It is quite another thing for the shallow patterns of our existence to come face to face with the full identity of Christ Jesus.

David faced Goliath, not as a teenager with a sling, but as a representative of *Yahweh*, God of Israel facing one who blasphemed the name of *Yahweh*. It was a question of confidence in *Yahweh* as worthy of all his confidence. Paul addressed the Corinthians not as one who had worked for them and with them, but as representative of the Jesus Christ to whom he had called them in faith. The disciples entered the boat in confidence of knowing the ropes, the winds, and the ways of crafting over the water. It was a surprise when they came face to face with the reality of who was in the boat with them.

They had become comfortable with Jesus—or as comfortable as you can be with Jesus in your midst. They were adjusting to Jesus as healer, miracle-worker, and teacher. They were getting settled into the routines of hearing Jesus preach, then explaining the parables to them privately. They were now comfortable with crowd control and the need to get away from the masses. Life was not as comfortable when Jesus interrupted them with a reminder of God's tangible presence in their midst.

It is one thing to follow a teacher around, learning his parables, sayings, and appreciating his craft with words and people. It is one thing to look upon Jesus as a good man, teacher, and a means to learn about God the way we might learn about the moon or some distant star. It is quite another to find Jesus next to you in the boat commanding both wind and waves that obey his voice. It calls for a fresh approach in relating to Jesus. At such times of crisis like that we are forced to confront the patterns of our living and assess how we will proceed toward the future.

We are not in physical danger from God's presence. We need not be in fear. Neither is being in God's presence something to ignore or treat as unimportant. It should rather be a call to recognize the One worthy of our confidence.

The disciples were confident on the hillside with the crowd. They were confident on the boat in the water. It was only when they came face to face with the reality of God's presence in Jesus that fear and uncertainty sucked the wind out of their sails. They weren't ready to face the reality of Jesus' identity and the presence of God. Are we ready to face the giants of our responsibility before the presence of Christ Jesus? Are we prepared to trust the One worthy of our confidence?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*