

CONFIDENCE IN THE  
LIVING  
GOD

David and Goliath revisited

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— Introduction —

## The Call to Confidence

In the summer of 1985 I was on a train travelling up to York, and as I stepped into the carriage I saw an African bishop sitting there reading a book. I guessed he was African by the colour of his skin. I guessed he was a bishop by the colour of his shirt. So I promptly sat down on the seat beside him and greeted him, at which point he introduced himself as Festo Kivengere.

I knew the name of Festo Kivengere even then—a man of outstanding courage and integrity who'd lived through the most brutal years of Uganda's recent history and had responded by writing a remarkable book entitled *I Love Idi Amin*. An evangelist, a close friend of Billy Graham, someone whose ministry was founded on three great gospel cornerstones—forgiveness, reconciliation and proclamation—there were few people in the world whom I would rather have met than Bishop Festo. And as the conversation continued, so I was quietly praising God for engineering this three-hour meeting with one of the spiritual greats.

Then the Bishop started to share the gospel. I don't remember his opening gambit, but there was no question that *he* was looking forward to a three-hour meeting, at the end of which his travelling companion—that was me—would be giving his life to Christ in repentance and faith, perhaps followed by a chilly baptism in the River Ouse on arrival in York. It was at that point that I thought I'd better come clean, and tell him that I was already a Christian and training for ordination. It was such a delight and a privilege, I continued, to meet a man whom I'd heard so much about.

'You're already a Christian?' said Bishop Festo.

'Yes,' I replied.

## Confidence in the Living God

‘Well, what are you doing sitting next to a Bishop?’ he responded sharply. ‘It’s no wonder that the church is in decline in your country if Christians sit next to Christians in train compartments. Find someone who isn’t a Christian, and tell them about Jesus!’ And so (rather shamefacedly) I left my place beside the Bishop, found a different seat, and, much to my surprise, struck up a conversation with a lapsed Catholic which was remarkably fruitful and honest!

As I later reflected on that train journey, I felt suitably chastised, but also encouraged, challenged and freshly persuaded of the need for me personally, and much of the church of which I am a part, to rediscover a genuine, unabashed confidence in the living God and the gospel of Christ. Not a confidence in the schemes and strategies and evangelistic programmes which I would shortly be starting to implement; not some foolish, triumphalistic confidence which was blind to the fallenness of the world outside me (and still more blind to the fallenness of the world within), but a confidence in God himself, in his love, his power, his calling, and his ability to mould me (even me) into something useful for his kingdom purposes here on earth.

‘God did not give us a spirit of timidity’, as the mighty Paul wrote to Timothy his youthful protégé, ‘but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline’ (2 Timothy 1:7, NIV); and my rather abrupt encounter with the mighty Festo effectively communicated just the same message 2000 years on.

## Confidence unwrapped

It is not just courageous bishops or timid ordinands who might usefully reflect on the theme of confidence. In a very real sense it is confidence which lies at the very heart of the market economy, confidence which determines the success or failure of every human institution, and confidence which makes the lives of individuals either positive and resilient or painful and resigned. Confidence in

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the leadership and vision of a school, business or political party is a central factor in the rise or fall of the entire enterprise. Confidence in the FTSE index and the housing and money markets wholly dictates the monetary value of companies and property, and even the monetary value of money itself! Confidence in an interview plays a major, often decisive, part in the wording of the letter which arrives on the doormat a few days later. Confidence in the sporting arena separates the gold medallists from the also-rans.

What, though, does the word ‘confidence’ really mean, and how do we recognise it in an individual or an institution?

The Latin from which our English word is derived (*con fide*) means ‘with faith’, and suggests that confident people both have faith in themselves (or perhaps in their god) and inspire the faith of others: hence their frequent successes in the interview room and around the boardroom table. That faith may well be misplaced or misguided: it is quite possible for individuals or institutions to be confident and incompetent, or even confident and corrupt. That faith may be self-serving and off-putting. But where it is combined with ability, integrity and modesty, there is something about this gift of confidence which is both attractive and inspiring. Confident people have a sureness of step, whatever the complexities of modern-day living. Confident institutions know where they’re going, whatever the challenges they encounter along the way.

The biblical languages add something to this understanding. The root of the Hebrew word most often translated ‘confidence’ (*beTach*) has the sense of being open, of having nothing to hide (so stressing the integrity theme), while two Greek words *parrhesia* and *pepoithesis* convey a sense of assurance, trust and boldness. A third Greek word, *hupostasis*, means literally something ‘set under’ something else, hence a foundation. When the author of the letter to the Hebrews writes, ‘We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first’ (3:14, NIV), his use of the word *hupostasis* suggests that the Church’s original confidence in Christ is foundational, and is therefore able

to endure the toughest of challenges and temptations.

For the Christian believer, though, and for those from other religious backgrounds, this sense of faith and trust inevitably raises the issue of where that faith and trust are to be placed. We may not be too familiar with the unnamed field commander of Sennacherib, king of Assyria, but the question he asks of Hezekiah, king of Judah, remains both pertinent and searching: ‘On what are you basing this confidence of yours?’ (2 Kings 18:19).<sup>1</sup>

In response to the question, there is a common and apparently straightforward theme throughout the scriptures (and one with which Hezekiah most clearly concurred) that we are to place our confidence in God: ‘You have been my hope, O Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth’ (Psalm 71:5). In the New Testament this is combined with a sense of awe that through Christ we can ‘approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need’ (Hebrews 4:16). The curtain in the temple has been torn from top to bottom, and the writer to the Hebrews marvels at the ‘new and living way’ into God’s presence brought about through the death of Jesus who is both sacrifice and great high priest (see 10:19–22).

If the Lord is to be our confidence—and if the same Lord can be confidently approached—the foolishness of placing our confidence in anything (or anyone) else is self-evident, and this again forms a common and apparently straightforward biblical theme: ‘Egypt will no longer be a source of confidence for the people of Israel but will be a reminder of their sin in turning to her for help’ (Ezekiel 29:16). That doesn’t mean that we are called to mistrust all human beings, including our nearest and dearest: the husband of the exemplary wife in Proverbs 31 ‘has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value’ (v. 11), while Paul, writing to the troublesome church at Corinth, emphasises (perhaps a little too often!) how he has ‘complete confidence’ in them (2 Corinthians 7:16; see also 2:3; 3:4; 7:4; 8:22). But when it comes to the very foundations of our lives—our deepest security as human beings—there is no

question that God alone is to be trusted, and we are to accept no cheap imitations.

There are at least two issues which remain unresolved in such an approach, however, and the first and most obvious is the question of where it leaves *self*-confidence. Self-confidence, after all, is generally what most people mean whenever they use the ‘c’ word in relation to an acquaintance, friend or colleague. But is it a virtue or a vice when it comes to the Christian believer?

At first sight it would appear that confidence in God excludes a confidence in ourselves, that the two simply cannot coexist. In Philippians 3, after all, Paul writes of the dangers of putting ‘confidence in the flesh’, and emphatically considers all his worldly advantages as so much ‘garbage’ compared with the ‘surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord’ (v. 8). Christian doctrine relating to sin, humility and self-denial hardly sits easily with secular teaching on confidence and self-esteem; and as a result many Christians are reticent in response to this theme, regularly acknowledging the dangers of living ‘in my own strength’ and stressing (with the prophet Isaiah) that all their righteous acts are like ‘filthy rags’ (64:6).

There is another side to this argument, though—one that allows for the possibility that confidence in God and a proper self-confidence are much more closely related than we sometimes think. A useful analogy might perhaps be drawn with the question of whether our love for God diminishes or excludes all other loves: for while it’s true that Jesus uses a graphic Jewish idiom to emphasise that nothing should compete with our primary relationship with him (Luke 14:26), the call to ‘love one another’ (and even the assumption that we love ourselves: Matthew 22:38–39; compare Ephesians 5:29) could hardly be stronger in the Gospels or the New Testament as a whole. Might there, then, be a parallel situation when it comes to confidence, a sense in which our confidence in God (and in the gifts, abilities and life experiences with which he has entrusted us) can enhance, not eclipse, a proper confidence in ourselves? It is an intriguing question, and one to which we will return later in the book.

Self-confidence is one issue, but another is the practical question of how our confidence in God equips us for the challenges of our day-to-day living. We have already referred to the Greek word *hupostasis*, which in the letter to the Hebrews has the sense of something foundational; but while there is real value in viewing our lives as a building, a more natural metaphor is arguably that of a journey—a ‘pilgrim’s progress’ from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City via the Wicket Gate, the King’s Highway, the Hill of Difficulty and Doubting Castle.<sup>2</sup> The steady erection of a building, brick by brick, has something ordered and predictable about it, but the journey throws up challenges that are frequently unasked for and unexpected. For the recipients of the letter to the Hebrews, the largest cloud on the horizon was the growing threat of persecution; for us it may be the demands of a seemingly intractable work situation, the strains of a difficult marriage relationship, the stresses of parenting a stubborn toddler or teenager, or a host of anxieties relating to unemployment, money, health or the future. Against such a backdrop we need the foundations, but we also need the capacity to improvise, to think on our feet, to be ‘life confident’—the ability, figuratively not literally, to treat confidence as a verb (something we do) as much as a noun (something we have). ‘Do not throw away your confidence’, in the words of the writer to the Hebrews; ‘it will be richly rewarded’ (10:35).

It is perhaps that sense of confidence as a verb which leads many to be drawn more to the story of courageous individuals than to the abstract reflections of the philosopher or theologian: for if our lives are a spiritual journey (charting a particular ‘pilgrim’s progress’), it is instructive to look at the progress of others and to draw parallels between their experiences and our own. There is a danger in this approach, of course: if we are to search for the *foundations* of our confidence as Christian believers, we are much more likely to find them in Paul’s letter to the Romans than in the story of a Moses or a Mother Teresa.<sup>3</sup> But there is also a freshness and immediacy about the accounts of men and women responding to God, often in the

toughest and most challenging of circumstances; and the growing influence of so-called ‘narrative theology’—a theology based on the narrative of scripture more than its great doctrinal formulations—is a constructive response to the human need for stories, as well as a positive attempt to do justice to a ‘living God’ whose story intersects with our own.<sup>4</sup>

Having explored our theme of confidence, then, it is time to introduce the narrative around which this book is to be centred: the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17.

### The giant and the shepherd boy

Of all the stories in the Old Testament there are few that are widely known and recognised. A cartoonist or sketch-writer might safely use the image of Adam and Eve in the garden (acknowledging that their story retains some cultural resonance), while Noah’s ark would be their next clear port of call. The history of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob would be entirely bypassed, while Joseph would probably get a look-in thanks to the efforts of Messrs Rice and Lloyd Webber, and the startling nature of his Technicolor Dreamcoat.<sup>5</sup> The parting of the Red Sea might just detain our cartoonist for a moment, but otherwise the accounts of Moses, Joshua, the judges and the kings would largely go unnoticed. Later in the Old Testament, only Daniel in the lions’ den and Jonah in his fish’s belly might figure briefly, though even their memory is probably fading from the public consciousness.

The one additional story we must add to the list is that of David and Goliath, for the description of their mismatched encounter in the first book of Samuel has remained something of a cultural icon through the ages, attracting painters, sculptors, musicians and poets, and acting as an almost clichéd metaphor for the hopes of the underdog in the context of political contests, business takeovers and football fixtures. In the days of the Renaissance, the city of Florence adopted young David as their patron saint, and Michelangelo’s

famous statue came to personify the spirit of the new republic which had successfully chased the Medici from the city ten years earlier. In more recent times the David and Goliath story has regularly been evoked to describe the heroic struggles against apartheid in South Africa and communism in the former Soviet Union, '[embodying] the hopes of all persons when they are faced with overwhelming and evil power that there is a way to overcome that power and win the future'.<sup>6</sup>

Children love the story of David and Goliath both for its spirit of courage and adventure, and, some would argue, 'because they also live in a world of oppressive giants'.<sup>7</sup> Orators love the story because of its potential to stiffen the sinews and stir the soul. Is the church embattled, taking the role of David against the well-armed forces of a secular fundamentalism? Or are the secularists themselves embattled, fighting for truth and freedom against the overweening power of superstition and *religious* fundamentalism? In many a debate the success of the final outcome will depend on the skill with which each side positions themselves as a David, and the clarity with which they personify their opponents as a Goliath.

It is possible, of course, to know the broad outlines of a story without having read it, but for those who choose to engage with 1 Samuel 17 itself there is a treat in store. The chapter is the most detailed of all the David stories, and, in the words of Bruce C. Birch, is 'as close as one can come in the Hebrew Bible to an epic style of storytelling—rich and explicit detail, extensive use of vivid dialogue, strong characterization and interaction of characters'.<sup>8</sup> The writer of the books of Samuel is particularly strong in communicating real people, not cardboard cut-outs, a gift which extends to the minor characters in the drama (Hannah, Elkanah, Eli, Jonathan) as much as to the essential trio of Samuel, Saul and David (or perhaps more accurately, the essential quartet of Samuel, Saul, David and God); and that strength is displayed in this chapter, with Saul, David and Eliab brilliantly portrayed, and only Goliath perhaps lacking something in psychological depth (if not in physical bulk!).

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Walter Brueggemann, a scholar who has written extensively on the Samuel stories,<sup>9</sup> divides his treatment of 1 Samuel into three parts: the Rise of Samuel (chapters 1—7), the Rule of Saul (chapters 8—15), and the Rise of David (chapter 16 through to 2 Samuel 5:10); and clearly the defeat of Goliath (played out in front of a massive audience and culminating in a chart-topping song in David's honour: see 1 Samuel 18:7) was a key step in the shepherd boy's rise to the throne. David is as central to the books of Samuel as Jesus is to the Gospels, with even the early chapters of 1 Samuel simply providing the backdrop for David's arrival on the scene; and like the Gospel writers, the author of the books of Samuel is 'deeply and endlessly fascinated'<sup>10</sup> with the central character in the drama that unfolds.

There is just one major difficulty in choosing this story as the base camp for any exploration of the theme of confidence: it includes the account of a death and beheading, alongside a massacre which left Philistine bodies 'strewn along the Shaaraim road to Gath and Ekron' (1 Samuel 17:52). In the context of events in modern-day Israel—and set against the rise of a particularly ferocious brand of Islamic fundamentalism—it might be thought unwise to choose a text which is so uncompromising in its descriptions of physical violence, simply playing into the hands of a Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens.<sup>11</sup> Yet while ours is not to judge the justness of an ancient war between the Israelites and the Philistines, it is important to stress from the outset that the Christian gospel itself is not to be spread by anything other than peaceful means. Even David the shepherd boy might have dimly glimpsed that truth in his affirmation that 'it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves' (1 Samuel 17:47), but it would be 'great David's greater Son'<sup>12</sup> who would turn that rhetoric into reality, consistently rejecting the violent approach of the Zealots of his day and gloriously fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy (9:6) of the arrival of a 'Prince of Peace'.

## The way ahead

My approach in the following chapters is, I hope, an uncomplicated one: for as an amateur but enthusiastic birdwatcher, I plan to look at just one chapter of scripture through a pair of long-range binoculars.

The right eye<sup>13</sup> will constantly be focused on the storyline itself—on helping us to understand the narrative, to set it in context and to enjoy the brilliance of the storyteller's art. Although I will allude to various textual difficulties and to the odd apparent contradiction along the way, my priority will be to centre on the story as it is, rather than to speculate on how it came to be there.

Equally significant, though, will be the view of the left eye, with its focus on the theme of confidence, and the application and relevance of this story for today. In general the storyline will direct the shape of this book,<sup>14</sup> but that doesn't rule out some kind of structure in the confidence discussions. Indeed, the story itself explores so many confidence themes that it seems ideally suited to this kind of 'binocular' treatment.

It would be possible, of course, to study the narrative of David and Goliath as an academic text, with no thought to its application or ongoing relevance. It would equally be possible to write a book about 'confidence in the living God' with little or no reference to 1 Samuel at all. But to look through both lenses of a pair of binoculars (provided they are properly focused and in line with one another) brings greater depth and definition than to look through one alone; and my hope and prayer is that this book will draw new wisdom and insight from this most familiar of stories so as to release faith, zeal, passion and confidence within God's people, for the blessing of his world and the glory of his name.



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## Building Confident Foundations: Introducing the Philistines

*History repeats itself.  
Has to.  
Nobody listens.<sup>1</sup>*

It's one of Steve Turner's more succinct poems, but it still packs a real punch. For the reality is that humankind is often extraordinarily bad at learning from history, so consigning ourselves to a tedious repetition of the same mistakes time and time again. Individuals, families, churches, communities, whole nations fall prey to this tendency. Even in successful organisations, a laudable emphasis on vision for the future all too often replaces (rather than supplements) an accompanying emphasis on reflection on the past. And the result is this: that precisely those lessons that we should be squirrelling away, so developing a deposit of confidence within us, are instead strewn behind us like so much litter as we continue our headlong rush onwards and (all too rarely) upwards.

For a number of years I was privileged to live near a particularly beautiful stretch of the River Thames, and my morning walks beside the river were frequently punctuated with the sound of a cox bellowing orders to a boatful of rowers. The cox can see straight ahead, and guides the boat in the right direction, yet the power comes from the oarsmen who are facing the opposite way; and there's something of that interplay between cox and oarsmen—between the composite need for looking forwards and reflecting backwards—which seems fundamental to vigorous, purposeful Christian living.<sup>2</sup>

*No Future Without Forgiveness* is the title of Desmond Tutu's reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa,<sup>3</sup> and its second chapter movingly describes both the humiliation of apartheid and the complex discussions which led to the Commission's formation after the glorious elections of April 1994. On the one hand there were many who argued for the approach of the Nuremberg Trials, letting those who had perpetrated the worst atrocities of the apartheid era 'run the gauntlet of the normal judicial process'; on the other, there were some who suggested that the blanket amnesty secured by General Pinochet in Chile was the only practicable model, effectively whitewashing decades of human rights abuses. While the Nuremberg approach was quickly rejected, the notion that South Africa should embrace a kind of national amnesia was seen as still more repugnant, turning those who had been 'cruelly silenced for so long' into 'anonymous, marginalised victims'. The approach of the Commission—which granted an amnesty to individuals in exchange for a full disclosure of what they had done—proved both realistic and healing, facing up to the past while avoiding the danger of individual vendettas or a partial 'victor's justice'.

More personally, I was recently involved in a conversation with a newly engaged couple prior to their marriage. Both were Christians, both were in their late 40s, and one had been married before. At some point in the conversation I raised the issue of the previous marriage, and was greatly surprised at the reaction it provoked. 'We've never talked about that,' said the prospective husband. 'We really don't think it would be helpful.' 'No,' continued the prospective wife, 'it feels like it happened in a different life.' It's not that I was expecting a blow-by-blow account of the earlier relationship, but the idea that such a key event should somehow have become a no-go area between them, consigned to some fictitious 'different life', hardly inspired a sense of confidence in the stability of their future marriage.<sup>4</sup>

And so we turn to the first few verses in the story of David and Goliath, and to the question of what the Israelites might have learnt,

had they taken the time and trouble to reflect on their previous dealings with their Philistine opponents.

## Facing backwards

*Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Sokoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Sokoh and Azekah. Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines. The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them.*

1 SAMUEL 17:1–3

It's a prosaic start to an exciting story, locating the source of the future battle around ten miles west of the little town of Bethlehem. But it suggests a fairly leisurely process of assembling and setting up camp, with no immediate sense of hurry or panic: an ideal opportunity for Saul, we might think, to provide the kind of reflective and inspirational leadership required for the challenges that lay ahead.

Israel had encountered the Philistines on many previous occasions, and each of those meetings (the good, the bad and the disastrous) had provided considerable food for thought for all who were willing to 'read, mark, learn and inwardly digest' them.<sup>5</sup> The ground on which the battle was to be fought had its own memories too, memories of a stunning Israelite victory, as we will later discover. While they gathered their forces and sat around their campfires, then, Saul and his men might usefully have looked to the past and asked some searching questions about the Philistines and the history of their previous encounters. Unfortunately the paralysis of the Israelite army that we read of later in the chapter suggests that the opportunity was lost, and no such reflection took place.

## Who were the Philistines?

The Philistines generally receive a distinctly bad press. In the Bible they play the role of Israel's inveterate enemies, more famous and formidable than the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites put together;<sup>6</sup> while through history—and especially in the past 200 years—their name has been associated with all that is mercenary, banal and lowbrow. In the 1860s Matthew Arnold championed high culture as opposed to the popular tastes of the 'philistines' of his day. Some years before, the composer Robert Schumann had brought together his so-called 'League of David', whose defence of the classical tradition was being assaulted by the banality of Rossini and the 'downright amateurism' of Richard Wagner.<sup>7</sup> To Schumann, David was first and foremost a poet and musician, 'Israel's singer of songs' (2 Samuel 23:1, NIV), and his defeat of the Philistines more a cultural statement than a military victory.<sup>8</sup>

In reality, though, the Philistines of David's day were people of real discernment and sophistication. Four out of five of their major strongholds—Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron—have now been excavated,<sup>9</sup> revealing a formidable combination of superior technology, military might and artistic ingenuity. The painstaking studies of archaeologists like Neal Bierling,<sup>10</sup> who worked on the Ekron site, have established significant links between the Philistines and the worlds of Mycenae, Crete and Troy; and while the Philistine script has still to be fully deciphered, there is no question that the Philistines were considerably more advanced technologically (if not theologically) than their Israelite neighbours.

Where did the Philistines come from? It seems that they were among the so-called Sea Peoples who were displaced during the political upheavals around the Aegean during the 13th century BC and who responded by launching two attacks on Egypt. The second of these was during the reign of the Pharaoh Ramesses III, with

contemporary Egyptian records apparently naming the Philistines among other groups involved in the planned invasion; and Ramesses later boasted of how he had defeated the People of the Sea and forced them to settle in citadels on Canaan's southern sea coast in what we call Palestine (itself a name derived from the word for 'Philistine') or Israel.

Artistically the Philistines specialised in a unique form of pottery, with a white background and red and black decorations in the forms of birds, fish and geometric shapes. Agriculturally they took full advantage of the excellent conditions for growing olive trees, with one excavation containing the remains of more than a hundred olive presses. In terms of religion they ignored the Greek gods and goddesses, and embraced instead the worship of Baal, Asherah, Dagon and Mot, the pantheon of the Canaanites among whom they lived. Technologically they mastered the art of ironwork, building kilns capable of reaching the metal's melting point of 1530°C. Iron weapons could be produced at lower temperatures, but only the hotter kilns would produce a metal which was stronger and more durable than the bronze weaponry of their neighbours.

Given what we now know of the Philistines, then, there is a sense in which the story of David and Goliath represents the collision of two worlds: the Greek world of Homer's *Iliad*<sup>11</sup> and the Hebrew world of the Bible, with a smattering of Canaanite mythology thrown in for good measure. The very idea of a duel between champions, alongside the vivid description of Goliath's armour and his blood-curdling taunts, has far more in common with the world of the *Iliad* than with that of ancient Israel. But the fierce faith of David in Yahweh, in the 'living God', is far removed from the scheming world of the gods and goddesses in Homer's epic. Indeed it is the clash of these cultures, not simply the details of the fight itself or its place in David's rise to kingship, which makes this story so gripping.

## Four lessons from history

What were the lessons that Saul and the Israelites might have learnt as they gathered for war and camped together in the Valley of Elah?

Lesson one was that the Philistines were formidable opponents. In terms of their ambitions, they already had parts of Israel's territory surrounded, and seemed intent on continued expansion into the very heart of the 'promised land'.<sup>12</sup> In terms of their numbers, they'd recently managed to assemble 3000 chariots, 6000 charioteers and (allowing for a little poetic licence) 'soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore' (1 Samuel 13:5). In terms of their firepower, the humiliating sight of the Israelites having to go to Philistine blacksmiths to have their ploughshares, mattocks, axes and sickles sharpened (13:20) acted as a stark reminder of the military impotence of the Israelite forces, especially when compared to the well-armed Philistine militia. On a day when Saul's son Jonathan remarkably triumphed at the battle of Michmash, we are told that only he and King Saul had a sword or spear in their hands (13:22). The rest of the Israelites were presumably fighting with axes and sickles—hardly an impressive sight when compared with the forged iron weaponry of their opponents.

Lesson two, though, was that the Philistines were not invincible. For one thing, several Israelite leaders had scored notable victories over them—the little-known judge Shamgah, for example, who 'struck down six hundred Philistines with an ox-goad' (Judges 3:31); the better-known judge Samson, whose call to 'begin the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the Philistines' (13:5, NIV) was fulfilled in a series of angry attacks, motivated in part by Samson's greatest weakness, an insatiable penchant for Philistine women<sup>13</sup>; the prophet Samuel (not otherwise known for his military prowess), Jonathan and Saul. For another, even the disastrous defeat at Aphek, which led to the deaths of 30,000 Israelite soldiers and the capture of the sacred ark of the covenant, had led to a surprisingly favourable turn of events—a lethal tour of the ark through Philistine territories,

bringing plague and panic wherever it went (1 Samuel 4—6).

The Philistines seemed completely unimpressed by the Israelites and their leaders, yet they were consistently on edge when it came to Israel's God. This was a God who had brought the Israelites out of Egypt following a series of plagues and disasters.<sup>14</sup> This was a God whose presence inhabited the strange box that they'd captured in battle. This was a God who brought thunderstorms and hailstones and irrational fear and confusion wherever he went. It's not that the Philistines were unthinking in their acknowledgment of Israel's deity: in 1 Samuel 6:8–9 we see them conducting a scientific experiment to determine whether the epidemics across the Philistine cities were caused by the ark of the covenant or were just a coincidence. But the sight of the statue of Dagon lying headless and handless before the sacred box (5:1–4) was symbolic of the Philistines' deep-rooted unease in respect to the God of their enemies. Indeed, there are times in 1 Samuel when the Philistines could have taught the Israelites a thing or two about the 'fear of the Lord'.

Lesson three was that the leaders of the Israelites were generally victorious when they played to their God-given strengths. For Shamgar and Samson, that meant their physical prowess, which they combined with an ability to make the most of cattle prods and foxes' tails to cause mayhem among their opponents (Judges 3:31, 15:4–5). For Samuel it meant his gift of intercession, as he prayed his way to victory (1 Samuel 7:5–6). For Jonathan it meant using his head, as he recognised the psychological value of a small, local triumph on the way to achieving a larger national one (1 Samuel 14). In the virtual absence of conventional weaponry, a level of improvisation was called for, a creative inventiveness based on what each leader did best. The worst possible policy (as the defeat at Aphek demonstrated) was to try to match might with might, to enter some kind of unthinking arms race with their Philistine opponents.

And lesson four (the earliest of the lessons recorded in the Bible, but perhaps the hardest one for the Israelites to remember) was that the Philistines were there for two purposes, one practical and one

spiritual. On a practical level, the book of Judges speaks of how the Philistines and their neighbours helped to 'teach warfare to the descendants of the Israelites who had not had previous battle experience' (3:2). On a spiritual level, the same chapter informs us of the Philistines' role to 'test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the Lord's commands, which he had given their ancestors through Moses' (v. 4). The ongoing threat from Philistia kept Israel alert, revealing what was in her heart, reminding her of her dependence on God. A land flowing with milk and honey sounds a most enticing prospect, but a little roughage in the diet would enable Israel to keep fit and maintain her spiritual figure.

### The significance of Azekah

As the Israelites and the Philistines gathered again for war, then, there was plenty of history between the two nations. On balance, perhaps, the Israelites were winning on points; yet few families can have remained unaffected by the devastating defeat at Aphek, with its tens of thousands of casualties among the fighting men of Israel.

The territory where this latest battle was to take place, though, had other, more positive memories for the Israelite army: for the Philistines' latest incursion was near the lowland towns of Sokoh and Azekah, and Azekah had been the setting of a memorable victory (years before the Philistines became quite so troublesome) recorded for us in Joshua 10. The enemy on that occasion consisted of an alliance between five Amorite kings, including the king of Jerusalem, a name which makes its canonical debut in this chapter;<sup>15</sup> and Joshua's surprise attack on this powerful confederation was aided by massive hailstones and even, it was said, by the sun standing still. 'There has never been a day like it, before or since,' enthused the writer. 'Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!' (v. 14).

Accordingly, as Saul and the Israelites faced the Philistines near Azekah, the very place of their encounter might have been expected

to give them a psychological boost. A skilful leader would have ensured that the phrase from Joshua's day, 'Surely the Lord was fighting for Israel!' was resounding around the camp. It was a little like the English navy taking on new opponents off Cape Trafalgar, or the Scottish army fighting afresh at Bannockburn.

Centuries earlier, Joshua had been appointed by the Lord as Moses' successor, 'so that the Lord's people will not be like sheep without a shepherd' (Numbers 27:17). Under his leadership, this region had been wrested from the grip of those five Amorite kings and included within the inheritance of the tribe of Judah. And now Israel was looking for another shepherd to lead God's people and defeat this new confederation of five Philistine kings. What better setting than Azekah, where Joshua's memory remained fresh and inspirational, and where a hailstorm and the very length of the day had been governed by the sovereign Yahweh, the all-powerful God of Israel?

## Confidence and the call to reflection

Taking time out to reflect on Israel's history with her inveterate foes would have proved useful to Saul and his army; and there is something about the discipline of spiritual reflection—regularly re-viewing our lives in the presence of a God who is both grace and truth—which is equally helpful, enabling us to learn from our victories and our defeats, and to grow in wisdom and godly confidence.

The Jesuits call this discipline the prayer of *examen*,<sup>16</sup> and helpfully teach a five-stage approach to such a practice.<sup>17</sup> First we recall that we are in the presence of God. Next we spend time reflecting on the blessings of the day. A period of silence follows, where we invite God's Spirit to help us look at our actions, attitudes and motives with honesty and patience. Then we review the day, responding to Paul's challenge to 'examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith' (2 Corinthians 13:5). And finally we have a heart-to-heart talk

with Jesus, where thanksgiving, confession and intercession combine to strengthen us and set us back on track. It's just one approach to such a discipline. Others have so-called 'quiet times' to read the scriptures, reflect and pray, or include a period of reflection in their praying of the Daily Office, or keep a spiritual journal on a regular or occasional basis. Some commitment to personal reflection in the presence of God has always been a key component of Christian discipleship, and one which sorts out the spiritually fruitful from the spiritually barren.

There are many pressures and distractions, of course, which militate against the prayer of *examen* or its equivalents, and our natural tendency is to focus on the pressures of the present and the immediate future rather than to attend either to the past or to our long-term destiny. So (as we've seen) we rush into each new situation with fresh anxiety, fresh confusion, even fresh despair, and without having properly banked the insight and godly confidence which our previous experiences should have developed within us. How many heresies, excesses and disappointments in the life of the church might have been prevented if only we'd known our church history a little better? It's an important and sobering question. And how much fear and muddle—how many foolish decisions and moral lapses—might have been avoided, had we built a greater discipline of personal reflection into our lives?

It's not simply individuals who should engage in a regular prayer of *examen*. Families, congregations, communities, even nations, may sometimes be called to a period of soul-searching, an honest review of the past conducted in the presence of a God who reveals, restores and forgives. We have already mentioned the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a brave attempt to heal the wounds of South Africa's history by listening to the stories of oppressed and oppressor in the context of both grace and truth. We might also refer to the significant work of marriage counselling and family mediation, which seek to provide a similar kind of listening space on a personal level.

It takes a brave church leader to encourage his congregation

to enter into the prayer of *examen* on behalf of the church, but many Christian communities would benefit from the experience. To bring the history of the church into the light—to acknowledge the good, the bad and the ugly that lies within the community of which we are a part—can be a deeply revealing experience as we seek to understand both the spiritual dynamics within the church and our relationship with those outside it. Such a process needs to be handled sensitively, but at best it enables the church to move onwards and upwards, rather than repeating the same old mistakes time and again. In one of the churches with which I am connected, there was a history of broken marriages among its leadership, of abusive relationships within its membership and of total non-engagement with the community it was called upon to serve. On one occasion the practice of *examen* was followed by a service of confession, prayer, and a spiritual ‘cleansing’ of the church building and its surroundings; and how encouraging it is to see that a church from which the risen Christ had apparently removed the ‘lampstand’ of his presence (see Revelation 2:5) is now vibrant, healthy and drawing in new members almost every week.

What do we learn as we take the call to reflection seriously, whether as individuals or in families or church communities? And how can this call help us to grow in godly confidence? The lessons may be many and varied, but my hunch is that some, at least, will bear more than a passing resemblance to those gleaned from the history of the Israelites and Philistines in general and the story of David and Goliath in particular.

*The Philistines were formidable opponents*—and part of our growth in confidence relates to an ability to face up to the enemies outside and within, rather than giving way to a superficial optimism on the one hand or a debilitating pessimism on the other. This will be the theme of Chapter 2 as we join the Israelites in facing up to the sheer physicality of Goliath the Philistine giant.

*The Philistines were not invincible*—and equally essential to our confidence is the need to maintain the conviction that the living God

is bigger than any problems we might face. The varying responses of the Israelites to the Philistine threat (and David's call to a renewed faith in God's providence and power) will be examined in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

*The leaders of the Israelites were victorious when they played to their God-given strengths*—and playing to *our* God-given strengths (as individuals and as a church) is another of the secrets of sure-footed Christian living, the godly self-confidence which provides the focus for Chapter 6 and a confidence in the gospel which we look at in Chapter 7.

Finally, *the Philistines were there for a purpose*—and the same can be true of the problems and challenges which assail us. Chapter 8 examines how it was the threatening presence of Goliath, together with the dazzling response of David, that transformed the situation; while Chapter 9 focuses on the aftermath of the battle, and the dangers of division once the external threat is passed.

And so the Israelites and the Philistines face one another across the valley. The swords and javelins are sharpened on one side, the mattocks and axes on the other. The worlds of the *Iliad* and of the Bible prepare to collide. Let battle commence!