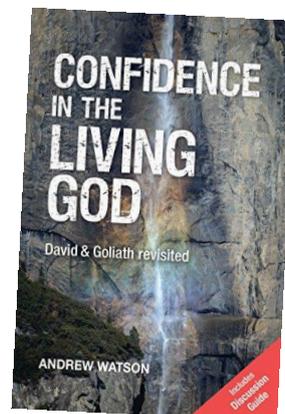


# Andrew Watson

## Confidence in the Living God: David & Goliath Revisited

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A helpful and encouraging book which weaves neatly between the story of David and Goliath, and the challenges faced by Christians today.

**Blurb:** Confidence lies at the heart of society, determining the success or failure of the economy, the government, companies, schools, churches and, of course, individuals. As Christians, we are called to proclaim our faith in God, but how can we build and maintain this confidence in an increasingly secularised culture where such faith is often seen as marginal, embarrassing or even downright dangerous? Using the story of David and Goliath, Andrew Watson takes a narrative theology approach to show how the Lord can indeed be our confidence, whatever the odds. He explores how God can develop a proper self-confidence within individuals and his Church, revealing the gospel through transforming words and transformed lives. He considers, too, how we can confidently tackle the challenges of day-to-day living, whether a difficult work situation or family relationship, or simply anxiety about the future.

### **Forward: Richard Chartres**

Our culture changed in the 60s. 'The church felt perhaps too much at home in the old world and has been wandering amazed and bewildered during the near 50 years since 1868. With honourable exceptions like the Faith in the City campaign, the church at a national level has spent its time fussing with in-house preoccupations and elaborating defensive bureaucracy. During those years, however, the Holy Spirit has been at work in the most surprising places, rebuilding confidence in a church that has lost its Goliath-like pretensions and may now, in consequence, be prepared to listen to the example of the young David.'

### **Introduction: The call to confidence**

Recognising Bishop Festo Kivengere of Uganda on a train in the UK. 'It's no wonder that the church is in decline in your country if Christians sit next to Christians in train compartments'!

### **1. Building confident foundations – introducing the Philistines**

The Philistines had come from the Aegean in the C13th BC; their heritage was Greek, and their practices in war more like those of the Iliad than those of the Israelites. Hence the challenge from a beautifully armoured champion. History would have taught the Israelites that they were formidable opponents, but not invincible; that the Israelites had tended to win when they played to their God-given strengths, and that they were there to keep them sharp both militarily and spiritually. Spiritual reflection brings benefits to each one of us too, enabling us to learn from the past and to grow in wisdom and godly confidence.

The Jesuit prayer of examen is a good model. Each evening:

1. Enter into the presence of God
2. Reflect on the blessings of the day
3. Allow the Spirit to speak to us about our own actions, attitudes and motives
4. Review the day
5. Talk to Jesus: thanks, confession, intercession

A 'quiet time', a spiritual journal – lots of methods, but reflection in the presence of God has always been a key component of Christian discipleship.

### **2. Confidence, faith and wishful thinking – introducing Goliath**

#### **The Stockdale Paradox**

'In his bestseller *Good to Great*, management guru Jim Collins tells of a meeting he held with Admiral Jim Stockdale, where the two men discussed the Admiral's imprisonment in a Vietnamese prisoner-of-war camp. Stockdale was showered with 26 personal combat decorations on his release in recognition of the extraordinary courage that he demonstrated over eight years of incarceration. 'How on earth did you do it?' was the question Collins put to him as they walked side by side, Stockdale limping on his stiff leg that was the result of repeated torture.

'I never lost faith in the end of the story,' was Stockdale's response: 'I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life.'

As the walk continued, another question occurred to Collins: 'Who didn't make it out?' he asked. 'Oh, that's easy,' replied Stockdale. 'The optimists. They were the ones who said, "We're going to be out by Christmas." And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, "We're going to be out by Easter." And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.'

'This is a very important lesson,' concluded Stockdale: 'You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end which you cannot afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.' – Jim Collins, *Good to Great*, Random House 2001, pp83-85.

### **Confronting the brutal facts today**

'The voices of the so-called 'new atheism' have been harsh and aggressive in recent years... Alongside these more extravagant attacks, thoughtful Christians note, too, a quieter shift in values, perceptions and social norms affecting the practice of their faith. The narrative of church decline is regularly trumpeted by the media, a story all too often supported by the experience of gently ageing congregations and finances that don't quite stretch like they used to. A church used to setting the rules—to the security of Christendom—now finds itself on the back foot in a way reminiscent of that small retreating triangular flag in the opening credits of *Dad's Army*. It's no wonder that Christian confidence can be in short supply.

What of our personal Goliaths? They may appear in many shapes and forms, although they are not perhaps as unique as we sometimes fear them to be: 'no temptation has overtaken you,' writes Paul, 'except what is common to us all' (1 Corinthians 10:13). In his later correspondence with the Corinthians, Paul could speak of 'great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure', of 'conflicts on the outside, fears within', and of his famous 'thorn in the flesh', which may have been a disability, an illness or an especially trying individual (see 2 Corinthians 1:8; 7:5; 12:7-8). In our own experience, too, particular fears, temptations, difficulties, discouragements, self-doubts, accusations or addictions may seem as intractable and menacing as the mighty Philistine himself, and shout at us with just the same tone of ridicule in their voices. In one recent pastoral encounter the 'Goliath' was a father whose perceived criticism was continuing to cause great damage to his son's career path, relationships and self-esteem long after the father himself had died.

It's easy to personalise the opposition; but ultimately the battles we face go far beyond individuals and are part of a bigger picture than we're generally aware of. This picture incorporates both the work of God within us (keeping us spiritually on the ball, as the Philistines were mandated to do for the Israelites in Judges 3) and the spiritual warfare which invariably accompanies the spread of God's kingdom. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul was writing from the context of a prison cell, which he inhabited courtesy of the Roman authorities. Even within that setting, with his enemy apparently sitting there in the form of a heavily armed Roman guard, Paul could recognise that 'our struggle is 'not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms' (Ephesians 6.12).' 43

### **The attractions of denial**

'Neville Chamberlain's famous promise of 'Peace for our time' is one of thousands of examples throughout history which point to both the attractions and the dangers of wishful thinking. In the Old Testament we are introduced to various false prophets—the men of Jeremiah's day, for example—who exhibited this tendency to an alarming degree. 'They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious,' complained the Lord through Jeremiah. "Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace' (6:14). In the New Testament, we witness Peter fluctuating between the roles of true and false prophet. At one moment he was proclaiming, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God', earning for himself praise because he had truly heard from the 'Father in heaven' (Matthew 16:16-17, NIV). At the next—perhaps buoyed by his success the first time round—he was reproving his master as Jesus began to spell out the tough nature of that calling: 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to you!', earning for himself the toughest of reprimands: 'Get behind me, Satan' (16:22-23).'

...

'Wishful thinking is a major problem within the church, too, for the sheer power of the forces of secularism and indifference has all too often been ignored at both a national and a grassroots level up until the point (at least) when the money runs out. The church in England is here indebted to the work of statistician Peter Brierley, who has charted the numerical progress of the church (in general, a downward progress) over the past 20 years or more; and the very titles of Brierley's books demonstrate both the strength of this particular Goliath and the author's unease, sometimes exasperation, at the church's tendency to stick her head in the sand in response: ... There's little question that the words of Admiral Stockdale should find a place on every church leader's desk, from the humblest of deacons to the most reverent of archbishops: 'You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you cannot afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.'

On a personal level, denial often seems an easier option than acknowledging 'the most brutal facts of our current reality', though the long-term effect of such an approach can be devastating. Couples come for marriage guidance when it's already too late; relatives conspire to prevent their terminally ill family members from facing the fact they are dying; many Christians completely fail to acknowledge the existence of the spiritual powers behind the struggles we face, when Peter tells us to be alert at all times.

### **3. Confidence within God's Church – Introducing Saul and the Israelites**

We tend to behave like rabbits caught in headlights, paralysed with defeatism. Corporately, the church fights to retain some fraction of its past influence, or busies itself with ever more defensive bureaucracy. Individually, millions of believers have learnt the best way to stay out of trouble is to keep your head down and shut up about your faith.

The Israelites were similarly terrified at the bluster of Goliath.

## **Confidence and the people of God**

'The people's request for a king in 1 Samuel 8 has some powerful parallels in the history of the church: for from the second century AD onwards the radical vision of the church as a 'chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (1 Peter 2:9, NW) has been subverted time and again by individualistic, even 'heroic', models of leadership—models which in their turn have created a kind of caste system, with clergy, missionaries, monks and nuns the top and (in some circles, at least) bankers, lawyers and stockbrokers somewhere near the bottom! As R. Paul Stevens puts it, 'Throughout almost all its history the church has been composed of two categories of people: those who "do" ministry and those to whom it is "done".' 59 He points out there is no such thing as laity in the NT, and that all Christians are described as clergy! The whole ethos of the church from Pentecost onwards was that God had poured out his Spirit on all people. Nowhere are any seen as 'over' others.

'It wasn't long, however, before the same motivation drove the Israelite elders to ask Samuel for a king found expression in the life of the early Church, primarily in response to the threat not of Philistines but of heretics. In the Greek city-state, the people (*laos*) were distinguished their leaders (*kleroi*), and the early Christians' desire to 'be like all the other nations' suggested that a similar approach should be adopted within the Church. This was combined with an increasing tendency to see the professional clergy in terms of a renewed Old Testament priesthood, set apart from the rest of the *laos*, especially when it came to the administration of the Lord's Supper. Clement of Rome was the first to use the word *laikos* (laity) its modern sense; and by the third century Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, was teaching that clergy were distinct lay people, and was quite consciously drawing parallels between bishops of the Christian Church and senators of Roman state. The Protestant Reformation should have radically reversed this clericalising tendency, but all too often ended simply replacing the divide between priest and laity with alternative divide between *preacher* and laity. And despite some hugely welcome theological developments over past decades—most especially a rediscovery of Paul's powerful image of the body of Christ—today's expression of the Church's desire to 'be like all the other nations' lies in her tendency to adopt secular management models, to centralise power, and to draw analogies with the professional–lay distinctions found in other walks of life.' 61

## **A new blueprint**

Church as living, breathing organism, a community of people with visions and passions, gifts and experience – not there to fulfil the vicar's vision or to construct some identikit church complete with the trimmings which their particular churchmanship requires of them.

## **4. Confidence in the providence of God – Introducing David**

For David, God was living. Not a wind-it-up and sit back God (deism), but one who directs, inspires, motivates and releases his people. Stockdale advocated facing the brutality of your current situation, but hanging on to the faith that you will prevail in the end. This requires thankfulness, recognising the presence of the living God in both the ordinary and the extraordinary.

## **5. Responding to godly confidence – Eliab, Saul and David**

The church tends to select 'safe' leaders. But as the founder of OM once said, it's easier to cool down a fanatic than to warm up a corpse'. We should be looking not for leaders who tick all the right boxes, but for ones with fire in their belly.

'Over the years this passionate confidence in the living God has not been highly valued in the denomination of which I am a part (the Church of England). In the middle of the 18th century Bishop Butler famously remarked to John Wesley, 'Sir, the pretending to extraordinary revelations and gifts of the Holy Spirit is a horrid thing, a very horrid thing'; and while few would use Bishop Butler's terminology today, far more would share his wariness of anything approaching religious enthusiasm. The people most likely to be turned down by clergy selection panels (up until the last few years, at least) have not, in my experience, been the mild-mannered or the dithering. They have rather been the confident and self-assured. The leaders most likely to have a tough time through the course of their ministry have not been the little people, with small and unassuming ambitions for the churches they lead. They have been the big people, the very scale of whose vision has inspired and alarmed in roughly equal measure.' 87. Only now is this beginning to change.

How do we respond to the fanatics, the big people, in our midst? Eliab, David's oldest brother, poured scorn on him. Saul saw more.

## **6. A right self-confidence – David and the armour of Saul**

The sharing of armour was common in the *Iliad*. But David wasn't used to it. He chose to rely on the strengths and experience he did have instead. It's easy to project our own strengths onto others; 'it's easy'. But it may not be – and we each need to identify and use what we have been given. For David, this was experience and confidence in killing wild animals from a distance with a stone...

## 7. Confidence in our faith-sharing – David and Goliath

What are the weapons in our armoury? Not by sword or spear, David says.

For us, it's firstly our willingness to embrace suffering – 2 Cor 6.4-10.

And the second weapon is the Holy Spirit, who can bring healing, revelation and freedom. St Augustine was initially sceptical about the continuing availability of the power to heal – but changed his mind: "I realised how many miracles were occurring in my own day, and how wrong it would be to allow the memory of these marvels to perish from among our people. It is only two years ago that the keeping of records began here in Hippo, and already we have nearly seventy attested miracles." *City of God* ch 22.8-10.

And our third weapon is the simple, heartfelt sharing of the gospel through words and a transformed life. There is a famous passage in the first Apology of Justin Martyr (100-165) where he writes:

*We who formerly delighted in fornication now embrace chastity alone., we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions now bring all that we have into a common stock and share it out according to their need; we who hated and destroyed one another... now pray for our enemies and endeavour to persuade those who hate us unjustly to conform their lives to the good precepts of Christ."*

'By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another,' taught Jesus in John 13:35, and the fourth weapon at the Christian's disposal lies in the power of Christian loving, both within and outside the fellowship: the 'patience, kindness and... sincere love' which Paul refers to in his defence before his Corinthian detractors.

Tertullian's description of the *agape* love which characterised the Christian community of his day is particularly striking, especially the practical care given:

*to supply the wants of boys and girls who are destitute of means and parents, and of old people now confined to the house, such as have suffered shipwreck... or any who happen to be in the mines or banished to the islands or shut up in prison for their fidelity to God's Church.'* Apologeticus 39.

The fourth weapon is what Paul called truthful speech – the power of the Word to connect with people's hearts and minds as it is spoken.

## 8. Confidence-imparting leadership – two Gods, two destinies

The most effective leaders are those who keep out of the limelight; Collins finds that personal humility and an intense professional will are the shared characteristics. These leaders are more concerned about the success of the enterprise than about themselves; they surround themselves with gifted individuals, rather than regarding them as a threat. They embody Harry Truman's dictum 'You can accomplish anything in life, provided that you do not mind who gets the credit'. They work hard to ensure the success of their successors.

Perhaps David was this kind of leader. He was confident but not arrogant; once he'd done the deed, he drew back. Later, he surrounded himself with champions. He had both humility and determination.

## 9. Confidence at the coal face – David and Saul

The ability to improvise.

A continuing commitment to God

The ability to hold on to God in the wilderness: 'For some, that will require a new discipline in their spiritual lives—perhaps a move towards a structured form of praying rooted in the scriptures and the traditions of the church, rather than something more piecemeal and subjective. For others, it will require regular trips to spiritual directors and Christian communities, much as David sought out Samuel and the priests at Nob to 'enquire of the Lord' on his behalf (see 1 Samuel 22:10, 15). Christian couples and prayer partners should make the most of every opportunity to pray together, to seek the Spirit's guidance and to read the scriptures—especially drawing on the (often embattled) spirituality of the Psalms, of Paul's epistles and of the letter to the Hebrews. Personal prayer should include times of worship and thanksgiving alongside honest and heartfelt cries for help.' 165

Living with integrity – for David, even when Saul turned against him.

Drawing on friendship – a continued commitment to Jonathan

## Conclusion: The confident Christian

Resurrection confidence; the faith that you will prevail in the end. The events of Good Friday and Easter Day enable Paul to write that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. This is the most comprehensive statement of the providence of God in the whole of scripture.

What when you face opposition? Perhaps it was Paul's dual experience as persecutor and persecuted that gave him a unique insight: 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse' (Rom 12.14). 'Do not take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath' (v19); 'do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (v21).