

Food for Thought—Goliath, Pilate, and Fear



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When Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount not to worry but instead to seek first the Kingdom, I think He is telling us (really he is giving a command) not to be afraid because He knows that fear and worry bear bad fruit. (And His wisdom telling us that we can know whether something is good or bad by the fruit it bears is invaluable advice.) Not only does fear bring torment (1John), something God's compassionate heart doesn't want for us and which Satan's does, but it also bears other bad fruit as well.

The scripture is full of examples of fears large and small robbing people of good things and leading people into bad things--Saul's fear of man leading to his ruin; the fearful 10 (out of 12) Israelite spies and the decades spent in the wilderness because of them; Peter's temporary fear of man causing him to (very temporarily—Galatians 2) withdraw from Gentile believers, etc. There are more stories than I'd care to count, but I thought about two stories recently which made a special impression on me—one involving Goliath and the other Pontius Pilate.

The story of David and Goliath is usually examined as a story of courage (David's) that comes from trusting in the Lord. There is also, however, the story of the Israelite army and Goliath, and that is a study in the fruit of fear. When Goliath begins his daily display of his hugeness and his daily confident defiance, the army's response is that they immediately "feared greatly." And what is the result of this fear? For one thing—inaction, paralysis. The Israelites do nothing—for 40 days. There is no indication that anyone has checked on Goliath's combat stats. Yes, he's big, but is he skillful? Perhaps he was, but did anyone check? There is no indication that they did even the first standard practical thing to meet and deal with this situation. They did not gather their most experienced fighters and discuss with them what strategies seem to work best when fighting a really large man. They don't appear to be honing their combat skills in preparation for whatever action will at some point be taken. They seem to make no plans of possible alternative action (after all, they don't have to let this thing be settled by single combat)—no discussion of perhaps secretly sending troops under cover of darkness to flank the Philistines or to move in behind the Philistines, forcing them to have to fight in two directions at once. There is nobody calmly pointing out that if they engage in normal battle, while Goliath may kill the first dozen men that attack him, a group of 30 will eventually take him down, especially if they have a carefully thought-out plan. But nothing like these many

practical (not even spiritual, like David, but simply practical) steps are being taken. Fear, as in this example, tends to make us paralyzed and blind to any option but paralysis.

Let's next look at Pontius Pilate. In every gospel we see Pilate's inclination not to execute Jesus. Both Matthew and Mark tell us that Pilate knew the chief priests were motivated by envy. Luke and John both record Pilate saying three times that he finds no fault in Jesus. Luke says Pilate was "willing" to release Jesus, and John says Pilate "sought" to release Jesus. But Pilate ultimately didn't release Him. Clearly Pilate does not like the idea of crucifying an innocent man. But he is under pressure to pacify the Jewish leaders.

And there is more pressure here than there would be for the average ruler who is faced with a frenzied mob. Pilate is on extra thin ice because of his connection with Lucius Aelius Sejanus. Sejanus had been leader of the Praetorian Guard, a confidant of Emperor Tiberius, and for a time the most feared person in Rome. When Tiberius decided to retire from active service and go live on the island of Capri in pornographic leisure, Sejanus undertook most of the leadership duties of Rome. Sejanus increased in power for several years until he was suddenly denounced on suspicion of treason and was executed along with his top followers. Sejanus had been the man whose influence had landed Pilate his current job, and his downfall left Pilate in a very precarious position. To make things even more difficult, Sejanus had disliked Jews, and so after his execution, Tiberius commanded that Sejanus's policies be reversed and thus demanded that the Jews be treated with more tolerance. If Pilate angers the crowd too greatly, Rome's hand is likely to fall heavily upon him. You can imagine the how the pressure and fear increase when the Jewish leaders, as John tells us, shout at Pilate that if he doesn't execute Jesus, then he is "not Ceasar's friend!"

Pilate tries to distance himself from responsibility for the crucifixion, but of course he can't really separate himself entirely because he allows it to happen. He also misses out—because of his distracting fear—on an incredible opportunity. As John tells us, Pilate asks Jesus if he is the king of the Jews. Jesus tells him that his kingdom is not of this world and goes on to tell him that the reason He came into the world was to speak the truth, to which Pilate famously asks, "What is truth?" After asking this, however, Pilate doesn't stay to hear the answer. What a missed opportunity! Here he is in a room with Truth Himself who could answer this question like no other person ever could—but Pilate is so preoccupied with his pressures and fears that, instead of pausing to hear what Jesus might say to his question, he leaves the room and to go talk to the mob again. He has missed an incredible opportunity.

When God tells us not to fear, He is not telling us to act rashly (He tells us to count the cost, to be as wise as servants but harmless as doves, etc.). He is commanding us to do our best not to fear and worry because He wants us to be saved from the emotional trauma of fear as well from the other bad fruit it bears—like the irrational paralysis of the Israelite army and the astonishing missed opportunity to hear truth defined by Truth Himself.