

## Standout: The Underdog

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This may come as something of a surprise to you, but I've never been that good at sport. Somehow the combination of a weedy frame, sub-par hand-eye co-ordination and a complete lack of discernible skill has meant that I've never really stood out in the field of sporting prowess. The only time I'd stand out was when others were picking teams. I'd be a stand out then = standing out at the end, once everyone else had been picked, while the opposing captains argued about which one of them had to take me! I certainly wasn't a natural born winner when it came to sport growing up. I was something of an underdog.

My most striking underdog experience didn't come on a sporting field though but in a pub car park. It was between my first and second year of uni. I was home for the summer. We'd been out to the pub with a few friends. As three of us walked over to our car, we were approached by a gang of lads. They asked if we had a light. We didn't. We said as much. They asked again. And before we could answer, all hell broke loose. They attacked us. Unexpectedly, unprovoked. We were older, I think, but not much bigger, and entirely unprepared for an impromptu brawl. The numbers were against us – especially as one of my mates ran off! Two of us, six or eight of them. We got a proper pasting. I remember seeing my other friend kicked in the head, in between getting punched myself. After what felt like an eternity, we did the brave thing – we ran. Like Jon Snow chased by white walkers.

I can joke about it now, but at the time it was pretty rough. I remember feeling entirely powerless. Overwhelmed. Full of fear, angry, but unable to make any difference. I couldn't help my friend. I couldn't help myself even. Couldn't even get away at first. That was probably my ultimate underdog experience – losing a fight I hadn't even expected – numbers stacked against me – no prospect of winning.

I wonder if you've ever felt like an underdog. Not in that kind of situation, perhaps. Maybe in other ways. An underdog is defined as "a competitor thought to have little chance of winning a fight or contest". Maybe that's how you've felt at times - not on the sporting field, but in life. Maybe you feel like you have little chance of being successful, or of achieving of your goals. Maybe your career feels like a competition where the odds are stacked against you. Maybe in education it feels like you try and try and try – but never quite succeed. Maybe in your finances, you feel like you're fighting a losing battle against debt. Maybe you run a business and there's a constant fight to break even. Maybe your relationships they feel like a fight sometimes – and a fight you always seem to lose. Maybe in those areas or others you've felt the same hopelessness I felt in that pub car park. "The numbers are against me. I lack the skills or opportunities I need to succeed. I can't even get away from this. I don't know if I can escape, let alone win".

These underdog experiences can leave us feeling overwhelmed in some circumstances. But they can also leave us feeling resigned too. If we've been in that position too long or too often, we perhaps don't so much feel like we're losing necessarily, but maybe like there's no point trying to win. We've spent so long fighting a losing battle that we've learn there's no point fighting at all. Little point trying, because success is out of reach. No value dreaming,

because disappointment's all we get. We feel like extra effort won't get us where. We just close up and close in instead.

There's this phrase I've noticed myself using, that I worry might be a bit defeatist – "it is what it is". I started using it at work, when I felt like there was stuff that wasn't quite the way it could be but I couldn't quite change. Maybe you've said it too, or thought it. "It is what it is". Meaning "it isn't what it should be or could be, but I'm not sure I've got the energy or power to make it any difference, so I'll leave it how it is".

Maybe too though you've felt like the other kind of underdog. The dictionary also defines an underdog as "a person who has little status in society". Maybe you've felt that way, if you're honest. A bit ignored. A bit side-lined. A bit of a second thought. It isn't a nice feeling. But it is a common feeling. Isolation is an ever-growing problem in our society. The irony is that we live in a world more technologically connected than at any point in history, yet feel less socially connected than ever before.

We're partway through this series called Standout. The dictionary defines that as "someone of exceptional quality or ability". But how can we be a standout if we feel like an underdog?

I want to suggest today there is something uniquely powerful about an underdog experience – something that actually sets us up for unprecedented success. Whether you'd call yourself a Christian today or not, I think there is something that happens when we embrace an underdog position that can be hugely powerful, so long as we approach that experience in the right way.

This is a lesson which is wedded to the concept of the church. The early church, the first century church, is a prime example of the effectiveness of the underdog. It was a minority group in the vastness of the Roman Empire – persecuted on all sides – yet it grew in numbers exponentially; going from being seen as a tiny, weird off-shoot sect to becoming the religion of Rome in just a few short centuries.

Through-out the scope of time, God has a habit of catapulting the unlikely, ill-equipped and unexpected into unprecedented standout success. Today we're going to focus on perhaps the ultimate underdog, as outlined in 1 Samuel 17. This is the name used to this day whenever an underdog contest is on. In this account, there are key lessons for our underdog experience – whether we feel overwhelmed, up against it, fighting a losing battle or just resigned to how things are. We're going to look at the example of David against Goliath.

Let's set the scene. God's chosen people the Israelites are facing their old enemies the Philistines. The Philistines have a giant champion, who challenges the Israelites each morning to send a champion to face him one-to-one. The Israelites are cowering – and have been for 40 days. David is sent to deliver lunch to his brothers. But overhearing Goliath's rudeness, David volunteers to get involved. Word of this gets to the king.

Let's pick it up from 1 Samuel 17:32.

**1 Samuel 17:32-54** - 32 David said to Saul, "Let no one lose heart on account of this Philistine; your servant will go and fight him." 33 Saul replied, "You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a young man, and he has been a warrior from his youth." 34 But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, 35 I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it. 36 Your servant has killed both the lion and the bear; this uncircumcised Philistine will be like one of them, because he has defied the armies of the living God. 37 The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine." Saul said to David, "Go, and the Lord be with you." 38 Then Saul dressed David in his own tunic. He put a coat of armour on him and a bronze helmet on his head. 39 David fastened on his sword over the tunic and tried walking around, because he was not used to them. "I cannot go in these," he said to Saul, "because I am not used to them." So he took them off. 40 Then he took his staff in his hand, chose five smooth stones from the stream, put them in the pouch of his shepherd's bag and, with his sling in his hand, approached the Philistine.

41 Meanwhile, the Philistine, with his shield bearer in front of him, kept coming closer to David. 42 He looked David over and saw that he was little more than a boy, glowing with health and handsome, and he despised him. 43 He said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come at me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. 44 "Come here," he said, "and I'll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals!" 45 David said to the Philistine, "You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. 46 This day the Lord will deliver you into my hands, and I'll strike you down and cut off your head. This very day I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds and the wild animals, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. 47 All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands."

48 As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. 49 Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground. 50 So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him. 51 David ran and stood over him. He took hold of the Philistine's sword and drew it from the sheath. After he killed him, he cut off his head with the sword. When the Philistines saw that their hero was dead, they turned and ran.

The teenager defeats the giant. The shepherd boy overcomes the seasoned warrior. The seemingly unstoppable enemy is defeated. The underdog triumphs unexpectedly – and leads his people into freedom too.

This is perhaps the finest example of an underdog victory that we can find in Biblical history – and there are three key characteristics we see in David here that will help us find success in our underdog situations too.

## 1) Positive

One of the first things I notice about David is how positive he is. While everyone else is cowering in fear, David is frankly upbeat about the prospect of facing Goliath. His first recorded words to the king on the topic? “Let no-one lose heart”. Or as another translation puts it, “Don’t worry”. Can you imagine? “Oh, the massive enemy warrior? The guy who’s been terrorising your troops and making you all look like cowards for forty days? Don’t worry about him mate. I’ll soon sort him out”.

Yet there must have been something attractive about David’s positivity – something engaging – something that drew attention. Because it is comments like that which get him in front of the king in the first place – and somehow convince the king to stake his success on David’s skills. There is something infectious about that kind of positivity, isn’t there? Something compelling. Something energising.

if we are to succeed as the underdog, we need a bit of that kind of can do spirit; and those around us need it too. We all benefit from someone who encourages us; who picks us up when we’re down. Who reminds us that things aren’t so bad. That tomorrow can be better than yesterday. We see this after the end of the passage we just read actually – as the whole Israelite army rallies to rout the Philistines.

Often, it is this positivity that erodes when we feel like we’ve been fighting a losing battle for too long. We see this in the Israelites in this passage. They’re fed up with the constant insults – feeling disempowered and inadequate in the face of Goliath’s constant taunts. There were probably better warriors than David in that army. Certainly more seasoned soldiers. Yet David is the one who brings the positivity that puts the fight back into them. In part, he perhaps has that fresh positivity because he is fresh on the scene. He hasn’t been there the whole time. He has a new perspective. That’s why we benefit from living open lives – being prepared to make new friends and meet new people; to embrace new experiences and accept new opportunities. The new can galvanise the positive in us.

But David’s positivity is not blind optimism. It is not purely Positive Mental Attitude. It is not just good vibes. There is a basis for it, found in those verses we read:

### a) Past faithfulness

When asked by the king why he thinks he will success, David reels off past victories. He’s fought lions and bears, he gladly tells the king, while defending sheep. “The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.” (v38) David knows that God has been faithful to him in the past – so he is positive about the future.

For many of us, if we’re lacking positivity, we need to remind ourselves of what God has done before. We need to remind ourselves of the times he has come through. Of the times He’s helped us, rescued us or been with us. When we remember past faithfulness, we find positive future.

### b) Personal friendship

As David runs toward Goliath, he cries ““You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.” (v45). David knows who is on his side. He has a relationship with God, forged in worship and work on the mountainside tending sheep, but very much alive in the moment too.

The second source of positivity then is a personal friendship. It is a living, active relationship with God. The startling truth is that we can know that – we can all know that. Even if you wouldn’t say you were a Christian today, a relationship with God is available to you. It is made possible by Jesus Christ. Who gave up the glory of heaven to walk this earth in frail human form; who lived a sinless, perfect life. Who offered that life in our place, to clear away the imperfections that should separate us from God; and who was raised to life three days later, to create a new way – a way for each of us into God’s presence, into relationship with Him. Through Jesus, we can know God. Through Jesus, we can make our peace with God. Through Jesus, God comes into our life. Through Jesus, we can both follow God and walk closely with Him.

It is just that kind of personal relationship that marks out David here. He knows God – he really, really knows God. And he knows that God is with him, even in the greatest fight of his life.

I think sometimes in life we can struggle to muster both of those aspects – we can struggle to remember what God has done or not feel Him near – but even if we can begin with one, we can start a process that inspires positivity within us. If we’re to stand out even as underdogs, we need the kind of positivity we see in David. If we want positivity about the future, we will find it in a conscious awareness of God’s past faithfulness and personal friendship.

But that’s only the first point! Is this helping? I feel like I need to come down to where you are, to check you’re really on-board!

That’s the second characteristic we see in David, as it happens. He’s on the front foot. He’s moving forward. He’s actively engaged. David is firstly positive. Secondly he’s...

## **2) Proactive**

We see this, as we’ve explored, in his willingness to take a crack at Goliath at all. But we see it all the more in the battle itself. In verse 48, we read “As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him.” This is the huge giant remember – and David runs to meet him?!

This proactive approach is a key characteristic of the successful underdog though – of the underdog that stands out. David doesn’t passively wait for trouble – the Israelites have been doing that for over a month – he proactively faces the problem head on.

What if our attitude to our difficulties was as decisive? What if we were prepared to nip a problem in the bud, instead of letting it grow and fester in our life? What if we made

positive, front-foot change, instead of waiting until we had no option but to accept that life was no longer the same? How many opportunities do we miss because we won't take a chance every now and again?

In their book *The Way Back*, Phil Cook and Jonathan Bock outline many examples of the proactive nature of the early Church. Like their approach to plague... "When the plague hit, the average Roman saw his or her leaders run for their lives to their country estates because it was every man for himself. But Christians loved each other. They helped those in need. Even at the risk of their own lives, they went to the places where disease was at its worst --- so much so that historian Rodney Stark says "Disease helped Christianity conquer Rome." "

What a statement – "Disease helped Christianity conquer Rome". Why? Because they didn't run from the trouble, they ran towards it. Our Western world has inclined us to do the opposite. As Ande shared a couple of weeks ago, we have come to measure our lives by how comfortable they are – but, to quote: "A comfortable life rarely sets you up for greatness."

Perhaps we, like David, like the early church, need to be more proactive if we're to achieve underdog success – if we're to stand out. Maybe it is time to make a change ahead of time – to act proactively, instead of reacting when it is too late. I've tried to phrase this as a question which might just galvanise us; might just help us apply this: What's one change I'm waiting for that I could make right now?

David, the ultimate underdog, is a standout success – finding personal glory and sparking freedom for his people. He achieves this by being firstly positive, secondly proactive. What's the change you're waiting for that you need to make right now?

That's two down, I promised three. Positive, proactive. The third characteristic we see in David is, he's...

### **3) Innovative**

For those of us that have grown up with account, we have this misplaced picture of David with his slingshot. We think of this little toy almost – a catapult of sorts. Like this: [PHOTO]. But David's slingshot was not like that. As Ande so inspiringly told us a few months back, David's sling would've looked more like this [IMAGE]. David wasn't taking a toy to this fight – he was actually taking a cutting edge weapon.

For those of us raised on English medieval history, our image of long range weapons tend to just be of bows and arrows. But amongst the ranged weapons of David's day were the slingers – guys who used these impressive slings to shoot stones at their enemies with huge force and at great speed. These would've taken much time and effort to master, but were deadly – allowing you to take out enemies before they even got close. Which is exactly what we see with David. He takes down Goliath before the giant can even get close. One stone, carefully aimed, and BOOM – down goes the big man.

Far from taking a toy into battle with a giant, this was more like David taking a gun to a knife fight. We think this was a one-sided battle. That's the way it always portrayed. Even the way

I've spoken of it today. We think that poor David had the odds stacked against him – faced with a far bigger opponent, a seasoned warrior, a huge hulk of a man. And we're right that this fight was far from fair. But not in Goliath's favour. David's willingness to embrace a new weapon – to train with it, practice it and master it in the hills – meant Goliath never stood a chance. He was yesterday's man, fighting against progress – stuck with a sword and shield while the new hero picked him off from afar.

This, I think, it perhaps the single most significant key to finding success as the underdog. This is how we stand out. When we're prepared to do something differently. To embrace new ideas. To grasp hold of new technology or thinking. To think of a new and better way.

To be innovative means to introduce new ideas; to be original and creative. It is fresh, novel, unconventional, unorthodox, unfamiliar, unusual, even unprecedented. It is experimental, off-centre, avant-guard. It is inventive and ingenious; advanced, modern or futuristic; ground-breaking and pioneering; new-fangled; radical; even disruptive or revolutionary.

I think one of the saddest things is that these are not often words people would associate with church – yet they are words associated with the people of God through-out the Bible; with the early church as it grew exponentially and spread uncontrollably; and they are words which undoubtedly define the character of God and Jesus Christ as we read about Him in the New Testament.

Indeed that song we sang earlier, *New Wine*, recalls the words of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 9, Mark 2 and Luke 5. In each, Jesus is warning the teachers of the law that change is coming, that God is doing something new, and that their old ways can't contain the fresh outpouring of what God is about to do.

If we're not careful, we can be so wedded to the way we have done things that we miss the opportunity to try something different. So stuck in our ways, that we miss the opportunities that'd open up if we just tried something new. We're aimlessly waving our old sword around, while the stone of change comes flying towards us – ready to smack us between the eyes as surely as the passage of time.

If we're to be standouts even when we feel like underdogs, we need to learn to innovate. We need to follow David's example – to be prepared to sacrifice the old to embrace the new. We see this first in David's proficiency with the slingshot – he has clearly practiced this a lot. Likewise, we need to be prepared to learn new technology or thinking, to embrace new ideas, to give time and effort to pick up something fresh. Secondly, we see it in the way David rejects Saul's armour. It does not fit him. It is not right. It is the tool of yesterday's trade – it will offer him no help and no protection in the fight to come. We need to be prepared to cast off some stuff we do now to embrace the opportunity of tomorrow. We need to innovate. To ask ourselves: What's that one thing that I could do differently?

We as a church are embracing this idea. Pastor Tom has always valued innovation. He has always pushed us forwards to find a fresh expression, fresh way of doing something, to take a risk and try something new. You see that in part in our plans for Summer Nights – as we give something a bit different a go to see if we can buck the trend of summer attendance

across August. But even more strikingly is the other new idea Pastor Tom outlined last week. Because this is our very last week of connect groups. As of this time next week, they will be no more. In September, instead of doing connect groups, we're doing dinner parties. With no set discussion and less formal structure – just dinner, friends old and new, and lots of fun. We're doing something different. Why? Because we think it'll make it easier for you to invite people. Because we haven't tried it this way. And because we think it will be fun!

Will it work? Who knows?! Maybe there's a good reason why pretty much everyone else does connect groups! Or maybe, just maybe, this is a key to our next step forward as a church. Maybe this is that innovation that will change the game for your friends and for our church.

We cannot keep doing the same thing and expecting different results. If we want to see a different outcome, we're going to have to do something different. Maybe for you, as for us, it is time to innovate. Maybe in your personal life, it is time to make a change. Maybe in your workplace or business, this is the moment to back that new idea. Maybe you need to learn to think differently again. I firmly believe we need to put down our sword and pick up our slingshot, to get ready for the new wine of the fresh, exciting thing that God will do.

David is a living, breathing, running, fighting example of God-given innovation. It is a key characteristic which turns the underdog into a standout success. Taken in conjunction with the other aspects, we find a roadmap forward, even in the face of great challenge or stress.

David then is positive. He is pro-active. He is innovative. I wanted this acronym on purpose. Positive, pro-active, innovative. PPI. That's a phrase we've all heard more than often enough, isn't it?! So I figured we could reframe what those three letters mean for us. Instead of payment protection insurance, this about a cast-iron assurance that there is a standout success waiting to be born from the underdog in us. PPI. Positive, proactive, innovative – what would happen if we were people like that?

As I conclude, I believe that you can make a difference – no matter how the odds may be stacked against you. However significant the challenge or big the giant in your way. God has a long and storied history of using underdogs – of changing their lives and working through them to change their world. I believe there is a world of difference on the other side of your underdog success – because your success won't just change you, it'll change many lives in your world.

You may feel like an underdog – beaten, forgotten, out of luck or out of energy – but there is a standout success waiting on the other side of whatever causes you most stress. There is a change that comes when you face down your challenge. A breakthrough on the other side of your giant the like of which you cannot even imagine yet.

But if we want to know that standout success, we need to follow the example of David. To be a PPI people. Positive, pro-active, innovative. Give it a go this week, and be ready – because there are giants to be toppled, lives to change – yours included - and people, a nation, to be set free.