

God's Wins Victory with Clay Pots

Judges 7

First, let us pray.

In our study of the book of Judges we have come to chapter 7 and an episode where we will see a great victory in an impossible situation. In chapter 6 we saw that God's people had again forgotten the Lord, sinned against Him, and followed other gods. God sold them into the hand of the Midianites who oppressed them for seven years. When the people cried out to God, He sent a prophet to correct them and raised up Gideon to deliver them from their enemies.

Gideon was an unlikely hero. He was timid and fearful. He thought he was incapable of obeying God in rescuing Israel from the Midianites. He hid from the enemy. He questioned the Lord's word and he asked God for several signs - including two different signs with the fleece as a way of proving that God was really going to do what He said.

So now as we come to the battle scene in chapter 7, it's almost as if God is saying: "So you want proof beyond a shadow a doubt?" So God takes Gideon and his vast army, then proceeds to strip him of absolutely anything that could be considered confidence in order to show the only confidence we need is in God.

God wants Gideon to recognize his own inadequacy and to put his confidence in God's presence and power. God can only strengthen our faith as He weakens our self-confidence. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29:

26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.

27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty;

28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,

29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.

Paul later says in 2 Corinthians 12:9, "**My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.**" God often uses weak people so He can demonstrate His strength. And God frequently cuts down our resources in order that we may depend entirely upon Him.

By the time God finished preparing him for battle, Gideon had no other choice but to trust God. Man's extremity is always God's opportunity. He delights to reveal His power when men acknowledge their weaknesses. When odds are overwhelming, God overwhelms the odds!

Let's See how God does this. Judges 7:1:

1 Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the well of Harod, so that the camp of the Midianites was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley.

Gideon has gathered his army and they are preparing for war. Back in chapter 6 verse 33 we saw that Israel's enemies, "**the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the**

East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel." Gideon blew his trumpet and summoned the tribes of Israel to gather for war. We see in the next two verses of chapter 7 that Gideon had raised an army of 32,000 men. Good job! Right?

Well, not really. Israel is still outnumbered. Verse 12 says, "**Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude.**" And over in chapter 8 it tells us that the Midianites numbered 135,000. Gideon and his army are outnumbered four to one.

Which makes it all the more surprising what God says next, verse 2, "**And the Lord said to Gideon, 'The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands.'**"

Can't you just imagine what Gideon might have thought? "What! There are four of them for every one of us. Look at all their swords and camels." But God has a purpose. God has a reason. It's in the second half of verse 2, "**lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'**" God wants it to be clear to Israel and her enemies that it is not their army that saves them. It is the Lord who saves them.

So the Lord sets out to diminish Gideon's ranks. First, God goes back to His word in Deuteronomy 20. There God said through Moses:

- 1 "When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the Lord your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.**
- 2 So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people.**
- 3 And he shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel: Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies. Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them;**
- 4 for the Lord your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.'**
- 8 The officers shall speak further to the people, and say, 'What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart.'**

So the Lord tests Gideon's army by His word. Listen to verse 3,

- 3 Now therefore, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and afraid, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead.' " And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.**

Fear can have disastrous effects on an army and especially if over 2/3's of the army is fearful as in this case! So 22,000 left and went home. Gideon's army is now outnumbered 13 to 1.

Put yourself for a moment in Gideon's sandals...imagine his heart sink as he watched his numbers dwindle by 2/3's. Most of his would-be soldiers had greater fear of man than trust in God and so they ran from what appeared to be a humanly impossible situation. How could 32,000 untrained & unqualified Israelis hope to defeat a heavily armed force of 135,000?

The answer is, they can't. But God can. God wanted the victory in battle to teach Israel to trust Him and give Him the glory. In the Christian life if our victories make us self-reliant, they ultimately work against us and they dishonor the God we serve.

So Gideon is left with 10,000. He doubtless knew the tales of Barak's army of 10,000 and how God had used them to route Sisera's invincible forces. So Gideon may have reasoned 'If 10,000 are good enough for Barak, then its good enough for me.' But he was unprepared for the next command of God (v4).

4 But the Lord said to Gideon, "The people are still too many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. Then it will be, that of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' the same shall go with you; and of whomever I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' the same shall not go."

5 So he brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gideon, "Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink."

6 And the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water.

God put Gideon's surviving 10,000 men through a second test by asking them all to take a drink down at the river. We never know when God is testing us in some ordinary experience of life.

Warren Wiersbe's assumption is that God chose this method of sifting the army because it was simple, unassuming (no soldier knew he was being tested), and easy to apply. It wasn't until after the event that the men discovered they had been tested.

Why did God choose the 300 that lapped with their hand and send home the 9700 that drank on their knees? I believe God just chose the smaller group. God's purpose was to cut down Gideon's army so much that there would be no question about who won the battle. God made it impossible for them to win without Him.

You cannot be too small for God to use but you can be too big. If you want the credit for what God is doing, God will not use you. He says that He alone is Lord and there is no other and that He will not give His glory to another. And so we often see God working powerfully in the lives of some very weak people. They are the ones who know that only He could get the glory and they are careful to give it to Him.

God reduced Gideon and his army to the point that their options were to trust God and His promise or perish. God graciously gave Gideon one more promise of victory, verse 7:

7 Then the Lord said to Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people go, every man to his place."

The Preacher's Commentary adds some practical thoughts commenting that...

Gideon's story proves that when we are at our least, God can be at His greatest. Like Gideon, we may think that we are proving God, but actually He is proving us. Yet all the while, in grace and mercy, He is giving us far more than we could legitimately ask for or expect, because He knows and understands our needs and because He sympathizes

with our weaknesses...we are to take seriously the words of Jesus when He said to His disciples, "**without Me you can do nothing.**" (John 15:5).

So Gideon prepares his 300 men for the battle, verse 8:

8 So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent, and retained those three hundred men. Now the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

The Lord wanted Gideon and his 300 men to attack the camp of Midian that night, verse 9:

9 It happened on the same night that the Lord said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand.

But first God had to deal with the fear that still persisted in Gideon's heart. God had already told Gideon four times that He would give Israel victory (6:14, 16; 7:7, 7:9), and He had reassured him by giving him three special signs: fire from the rock (6:19–21), the wet fleece (6:36–38), and the dry fleece (6:39–40). After all this divine help, Gideon should have been strong in his faith, but God knew Gideon was still afraid, verse 10

10 But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant,

The Lord knows the needs of His children and He met Gideon in his frailty by providing encouragement in a most remarkable way. How grateful we should be that God understands us and doesn't condemn us because we have doubts and fears! He keeps giving us wisdom and doesn't scold us when we keep asking (James 1:5). Our great High Priest in heaven sympathizes with our weaknesses (Heb. 4:14–16) and keeps giving us more grace (James 4:6). God remembers that we're only dust (Ps. 103:14) and flesh (78:39).

So God sends Gideon on a reconnaissance mission, verse 11,

11 and you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp." Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outpost of the armed men who were in the camp.

12 Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude.

13 And when Gideon had come, there was a man telling a dream to his companion. He said, "I have had a dream: To my surprise, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed."

14 Then his companion answered and said, "This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp."

Gideon had surely been feeling like his 300 men were as powerless to defeat the hordes of Midian as a barley loaf was powerless to destroy a tent. But as Gideon listened to the words of the enemy, he realized as he had never before, that it was not a battle between 300 Israelites and 135,000 Midianites. It was God Who was fighting Midian and the 300 of Gideon's band were just His channels. Look at verse 15,

15 And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, "Arise, for the Lord has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand."

Right there, beside a Midianite campsite, Gideon learned one of the greatest lessons of his life and so he bowed in worship before God. For the first time, Gideon had come to realize the absolute greatness of Jehovah God. In a real sense we are never really prepared for battle until we have bowed before God in worship.

Gideon was so overwhelmed by the Lord's goodness and mercy that he fell on his face in submission and gratitude. Joshua did the same thing before taking the city of Jericho (Joshua 5:13-15), and it's a good practice for us to follow today. Before we can be successful warriors, we must first become sincere worshipers.

As Vance Havner said, faith sees the invisible and does the impossible.

So Gideon calls his little band of men and arms them for battle. But look at their unconventional weapons, verse 16,

16 Then he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers.

Their weapons were trumpets, clay jars, and torches. No mention of swords or chariots. Gideon calls them to follow his example, verse 17

17 And he said to them, "Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do:

18 When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, 'The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!' "

Gideon had come a long way since the day God had found him hiding in the winepress! No longer do we hear him asking "If—why—where?" (6:13) No longer does he seek for a sign. Instead, he confidently gave orders to his men, knowing that the Lord would give them the victory.

The Good News of the Gospel is we don't have to stay the way we are. Through faith in Jesus Christ, anybody can be changed. **"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new"** (2 Cor. 5:17, NKJV). That's good news for anybody who wants a new start in life. Jesus said to Andrew's brother, **"You are Simon ["a hearer"]....You shall be called Cephas ["a stone"]"** (John 1:42, NKJV). God can take a weak piece of clay like Simon and make a rock out of him! God can take a doubter like Gideon and make a general out of him!

Now the battle begins. Verse 19,

19 So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that were in their hands.

20 Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers--they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing--and they cried, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!"

So they blow their trumpets, break their jars and shout **“The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!”** Given the superstitious nature of pagans, it is quite likely that the strange dream of a tumbling loaf of barley flattening a tent and it's even more unbelievable interpretation spread through the 135,000 Midianites like wildfire...they didn't know who this Gideon was but they knew his name was to be feared. And their fears were flamed to riot when they heard the war chant from the 300 men around their camp.

Imagine the chaos produced in this scene: Gideon and 300 men with earthen pitchers, jars of clay, that contained lights. First 100 shophars echoing all around your camp and then the cumulative crashing noise of 100 jars of clay followed by the encircling light that suddenly surrounded the Midianites. The Midianites must have reasoned they were under surprise attack and that they were surrounded by a vast army. See verse 21,

21 And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled.

22 When the three hundred blew the trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his companion throughout the whole camp; and the army fled to Beth Acacia, toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah, by Tabbath.

Three hundred people turned the Midianites to flight because the greatness of the power wasn't Gideon's but God's. It was all God's grace at work. Notice it was the Lord who set every man's sword of the Midianites against his companions. God won the victory that night. The rest was just the mop-up work, verse 23:

23 And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites.

24 Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the mountains of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites, and seize from them the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan." Then all the men of Ephraim gathered together and seized the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan.

25 And they captured two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side of the Jordan.

God loves to use ordinary, weak, human vessels to do extraordinary things. God loves to use our weakness to show His strength. I think Paul may have had this passage about Gideon in mind when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:

6 For it is God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

Did you notice the similarities? God made light shine out of darkness by shining the light of His glory in our hearts. But this light, this treasure, is in earthen vessels, jars of clay. Why? **“...that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.”** It's that the lesson God was trying to teach Gideon and Israel? Look back to verse 2, **“lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'”**

God put Gideon in an impossible situation so He could demonstrate His almighty power. God wanted Gideon to recognize his own inadequacy so that He would put his confidence in God's presence and power alone. The result should be that God gets all the glory for what He does through us.

You might think, "Sure, God did that with Gideon, but He couldn't do that kind of thing with me. You don't know my weaknesses and how broken I am." The truth is, earthen vessels show the light most clearly when they are broken. He loves to use broken pots as His means of grace.

C H Spurgeon wrote that...

Gideon ordered his men to do two things: covering up a torch in an earthen pitcher, he bade them, at an appointed signal, break the pitcher and let the light shine, and then sound with the trumpet, crying, "The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon!"

This is precisely what all Christians must do. First, you must shine; break the pitcher which conceals your light; throw aside the bushel which has been hiding your candle, and shine. Let your light shine before men; let your good works be such, that when men look upon you, they shall know that you have been with Jesus. Then there must be the sound, the blowing of the trumpet. ... Take the gospel to them; carry it to their door; put it in their way; do not suffer them to escape it; blow the trumpet right against their ears. ... We can do nothing of ourselves, but we can do everything by the help of our God.

Let me sum up the story this way,

1. It's not the size of our ranks that is important but the size of our God (7:1-8a)

God doesn't need large numbers to accomplish His purposes, nor does He need especially gifted leaders. Gideon and his 300 men were available for God to use, and He enabled them to conquer the enemy and bring peace to the land. When the church starts to depend on "big-ness"—big buildings, big crowds, big budgets—then faith becomes misplaced, and God can't give His blessing. When leaders depend on their education, skill, and experience rather than in God, then God abandons them and looks for a Gideon.

2. My weakness does not disqualify me from God doing great things in and through my life (7:8b-14)

The important thing is for us to be available for God to use just as He sees fit. We may not fully understand His plans, but we can fully trust His promises; and it's faith in Him that gives the victory.

3. My obedience is a result of my worship (7:15-18)

4. It is God who brings success, not me (7:19-25)

Faith means deliberately trusting God's power, rather than your own. Faith means depending on God's methods, not your own. It's the same way we must come to salvation in Jesus. We must stop depending on ourselves, put away our self-confidence. We repent and turn away from our sin. We trust in Jesus and His sacrifice to forgive our sin and make us right with God. I invite you to do that now.