

Judges 7:1-8, 7:15-23

Gideon: A Coward's Efforts

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! Do you guys know the kids cartoon, Doraemon? Doraemon is a robot cat from the 22nd century, and on his belly he has a four-dimensional pocket. From that pocket, he pulls out all sorts of fantastical, secret tools. Most famous are the 'anywhere door,' which lets you instantly travel anywhere in the universe, and the 'hopter,' which gives you the ability to fly about freely through the air. Wouldn't it be amazing if those things were real?

Doraemon has a cowardly buddy named Nobita Nobi, and Doraemon's secret tools often come to his rescue. Nobita is a bad student, he's bad at sports, and just an all around below average kid. Whenever he gets into trouble, he begs Doraemon for a secret tool to help him out. Of course, Nobita often gets carried away and things end up worse than when he started. However, every once in a while, Nobita is brave and acts like a real hero.

Today, we're going to look at a character who has a lot in common with Nobita, and that's Gideon in the book of Judges. At first, he is craven and cowardly, but he is called by God to save Israel from its enemies. After witnessing some astonishing miracles, his faith is strengthened and he is transformed into practically a new person, performing many exploits. He was used by God even though he was a coward, and even though he was craven, he took on the work God called him to do. You could say he was forged by this process and made new.

[Judges 7:1-8, 15-25]

Judges 7:1-8

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² The Lord said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.' ³ Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.'" Then 22,000 of the people returned, and 10,000 remained.

⁴ And the Lord said to Gideon, "The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there, and anyone of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' shall go with you, and anyone of

whom I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' shall not go." ⁵ So he brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gideon, "Every one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink." ⁶ And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. ⁷ And the Lord said to Gideon, "With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home." ⁸ So the people took provisions in their hands, and their trumpets. And he sent all the rest of Israel every man to his tent, but retained the 300 men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

[Judges 7:15-25]

¹⁵ As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped. And he returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand." ¹⁶ And he divided the 300 men into three companies and put trumpets into the hands of all of them and empty jars, with torches inside the jars. ¹⁷ And he said to them, "Look at me, and do likewise. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. ¹⁸ When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the trumpets also on every side of all the camp and shout, 'For the Lord and for Gideon.'"

Gideon Defeats Midian

¹⁹ So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. ²⁰ Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" ²¹ Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. ²² When they blew the 300 trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army. And the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, [a] as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. ²³ And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian.

Actually, the character we're focusing on today, Gideon, is never called a prophet himself. However, the book of Judges is grouped together with other books of the Old Testament in a category known as 'the (former) prophets.' Gideon was appointed by God to be a leader of Israel (referred to as a 'judge'), and he was used to accomplish God's salvation.

From Gideon's story, we will observe, first, that God can use even feeble cowards, and this displays the power of his grace. Secondly, I'd like us to reflect on the astonishing manner of God's salvation. It is far different than the way we think and plan, so it requires faith. And, lastly, through the story of Gideon I'd like us to focus our hearts on the gospel of the cross, to repent, trust in our savior, and walk in obedience.

The Time of the Judges

Before we talk about who Gideon was, let's take a quick look at the social circumstances of his time. The people of Israel were rescued out of Egypt by Moses, but due to their unbelief, God caused them to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. After that, they were finally led into Canaan by Joshua, and they settled there (around the 13th century BC).

However, after the deaths of their two great leaders, Moses and Joshua, there was a period of time with a leadership vacuum, with no reliable leader to step in. The Bible says that the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and idol worship became widespread. They abandoned the God that brought them up out of Egypt and began to follow after other gods, worshipping Baal and Ashtaroath.

Then, the neighboring peoples and countries began to invade Israel over and over again. Israel was economically plundered, and they suffered greatly. According to the Bible, these trials were judgement from God, because his anger burned towards them.

However, when the Israelites cried to the Lord for help, he heard their cries. God used leaders called 'judges' (prophets) to save them from their invading enemies. After the time of Joshua, and before the prophet Samuel, King Saul, and King David came on the scene, God sent as many as 12 judges. Judges 6:1, 4

6:1 The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years... 4 They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey.

1. God Uses a Coward

When Midian invaded Israel, God sent an angel to Gideon to command him.

6:14 And the Lord turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?"

God sent a hero to rescue his people from the Midianites, who were invading Israel like a swarm of locusts. God didn't leave his people alone when they were suffering and distressed. Even though they were suffering the consequences of their own sin and evil, he didn't abandon them when they cried out for help. God sent judgement to lead his people to repentance, but he never abandoned them!

However, Gideon shrank back from his calling, from the mission God gave him. When the Midians invaded Israel to begin with, he had hid away like a coward. Even though it wasn't wine season, he hid in a winepress about the size of one tatami mat, and about 60 cm deep, and threshed his wheat in there. Shouldn't he have mustered his courage to join the other fighting men and fought to protect their families and towns?

Furthermore, Gideon said to the Angel of the Lord, "Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?" as though to say "This is all God's fault!" He even began to insult God, saying "Where are your wonderful deeds of old?" and claiming that God had abandoned them.

But the Lord patiently spoke to the cowardly Gideon, and God guaranteed his presence and power would go with him saying, "The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor," (12) "I will send you" (14). But did Gideon acquiesce? Did he trust God and accept his calling? Nope. He made more excuses.

6:15 And he said to him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house."

Before Gideon, Moses made the excuse that he was a poor speaker. And then hundreds of years after Gideon, Jeremiah said, "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." Gideon asked for a sign to prove that it was really God himself speaking to him. And God responded to that request too.

Everyone, God deliberately uses fainthearted and gutless people like Gideon. What are the criteria God uses for choosing his servants? We tend to think that cowardly, unassertive, weak, excuse making people who lack courage are not suitable for God's amazing work. We think, if I could just be a little more mature, if I could just study a little more, if I could have just a little more training, if I get just a little better at prayer, if I could understand the Bible just a little bit more, then I'll be able to share my testimony, then I'll be able to do evangelism, then I'll be able to serve, then God will be able to use me.

But how much is 'a little' more? God wants to use you now! Precisely because you are discouraged, anxious, and lacking courage, you can trust in the grace of Christ and be guided by the Holy Spirit. And what will be on display is not your work, but God's work.

In Christian missiology, it's often said that the best evangelists are actually those who have just become Christians, within a couple of years of choosing to follow Jesus. Even if they don't have a lot of Bible knowledge, and even if they're still pretty immature, they are mostly surrounded by non-Christians, and they have a lot of opportunities to share their faith. Once you've been a Christian for a while, your close friends become mainly Christians, so even if you want to share your faith, there are fewer chances for evangelism. Probably the most effective combination is a person who's recently become

a Christian, and someone who has been a Christian for a long time evangelizing together.

In any case, the first point in today's message is that God uses the craven and cowardly. And that is so the power of God's grace will be displayed. Even if you think "just a little bit more..." God wants to use you now.

2. God's Surprising Method of Salvation

So, how did God use Gideon to rescue Israel? It was truly miraculous and amazing. First, let's consider the number of troops. The Midianite army of desert warriors had an army of 135,000 soldiers, as opposed to General Gideon's army which had 32,000 people, less than one fourth the size of their enemy. Surely, the Israelites faltered at this overwhelming disparity.

In light of this reality, God's strategy was not to increase the size of the army, but to decrease it. Since 32,000 soldiers was too many, he commanded anyone who was afraid of the Midianite army to leave and go home. With that command, 22,000 soldiers left, leaving only 10,000 men. But God commanded Gideon.

7:4 And the Lord said to Gideon, "The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there, and anyone of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' shall go with you, and anyone of whom I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' shall not go."

Surely, Gideon couldn't believe his ears. 10,000 soldiers was still too many, and he needed to decrease their numbers even further? So Gideon took the 10,000 troops to the Spring of Harod and had them drink from it. And then a test! Separate out the men who scoop the water up with their hands to drink. Those who kneel down on the ground to drink are eliminated.

7:6 And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. 7 And the Lord said to Gideon, "With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home."

Only 300 men! This is less than one Israelite for every 400 Midianite soldiers, 0.22% of Midian's military force. Why did God reduce the Israelite army to such an extreme? Verse 2 says this.

7:2 The Lord said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'"

God had them reduce the number of soldiers so they wouldn't forget him. So they couldn't possibly think that they defeated their enemy and won the victory on their own. So they wouldn't forget their God and fall into idol worship again. Salvation and blessing are received through humility before God, and through reliance on his power and grace alone. If we boast in our own accomplishments and success, before we know it we will be separated from God, and we become haughty toward the people around us. From that heart is born every sin and evil.

Of course, the 300 men were brave and well prepared for battle. But the most important thing was that they had faith in God and they relied on the power of his grace. Because of this, they were given special weapons and strategy.

7:19 So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. 20 Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!"

So their weapons were... trumpets and jars and torches. Gideon divided his troops into three groups, and they approached the Midian army in the middle of the night. When they reached the camp, they blew the trumpets, smashed their jars, raised their torches, and made a loud cry of victory. When they did this, the Midian army fell into mass confusion and started fighting each other, and eventually they fled.

On October 20th, 1180, the army of Tairano Koremori was encamped on the west bank of the Fuji River in Shizuoka, and the combined armies of Takeda Nobuyoshi and Minamoto no Yoritomo were encamped on the east bank. That night, Takeda's troops rode into the shallow waters of the Fuji River, causing a tremendous number of waterfowl to take flight all at once. The sound of so many flapping wings echoed like the sounds of an army, and, alarmed, Tairano's army fell into chaos. Soldiers ran away without their bows and arrows, armor, or equipment. They mounted the wrong horses, and some tried to mount horses still tied to their stakes, spinning around in confusion. Ultimately, they were forced to flee. (The Battle of Fuji River)

What exactly were the trumpets, the jars, and the torches? They certainly seem useless for shedding blood and defeating an enemy army, they're just common items. However, the blast of the trumpets was the sound of God arriving to battle in power. The empty jars were packed full of faith. And the torches were the light of the illuminating Word of God. These are the Lord's weapons and the Lord's strategy. Ephesians 6:13-18

Ephesians 6:13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, 15 and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace. 16 In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one; 17 and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, 18 praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication.

3. The Gospel of the Cross

Gideon's troops were given trumpets, jars, and torches, but what has God given us? God has given us the cross of Jesus Christ. Many people assume that the gospel, faith, and the Word of God are useless in the warzone of life,

and we tend to try to find things that we think would be much more powerful and effective. 1 Corinthians 1:22-25.

1 Corinthians 1:22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Just like trumpets, jars, and torches don't look like weapons of war, the message of the cross can also be unappealing. However, God, who is full of wisdom, has given you the absolute best tools for battle. The cross is full of Christ's love. He sacrificed everything for you and became a substitute for your sins and mistakes. The Son of God was abandoned so that you could become a child of God. Don't underestimate the power of the gospel of the cross. The more you immerse yourself in this gospel, the softer your heart will become, and you will receive power.

God wants to use you as you are now, in Christ. Rely on the gospel of the cross. No matter how weak or cowardly you feel, the love of the cross will fill you, it will strengthen you, it will encourage you, and the Holy Spirit will fill you. The greatness of the gospel is displayed all the more in weak and mistake-ridden people.

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