

# Material from Tim Kellers Leaders Guide on Living in Pluralistic Society

## Gideon leads to victory

### Study 2 Judges 7:1-25

#### 1. vv.1-8. Who is sent home and why? Why did God want to reduce the size of Gideon's army?

Who is sent home and why?

The first group which is sent home are those "*who tremble with fear*" (v.3) This was 22,000 men out of the 32,000 — over two thirds! These were people who were able to admit publicly that they had no heart for battle. When Gideon offered to release anyone who was afraid to fight — he was using a pretty good psychological screening device. Surely there were many who were very frightened of battle but were unwilling to admit it. Those who were so willing to admit their fear in public would also be far more likely to retreat in battle. The reason it was good to send them home is a practical one. Fear is contagious, as we can often see in Judges. When any significant body of soldiers panic and flee, it can sap the determination of everyone and lead to a rout. (See Deut.20:8.) Though it was surely discouraging to lose these numbers, it was still very practical to let them go. This move was concerned for the morale of the army.

The second group is sent home for much more obscure reasons. 9,700 out of the 10,000 remaining are given another test. They are brought to a body of water at a time when they would be thirsty. All but 300 knelt down and put their mouths into the water to drink, while the smaller group used their hands to scoop up water into their mouth and "lap" it. God tells Gideon to only use them. Why did God make this a test? What was its purpose?

People have differed over the answer. It is typical for people to conclude that the 300 were being more alert and watchful. It is often assumed that they held on to their weapons and stayed on their feet while the others drank in such a way that they were defenseless. But surely this is a stretch. The text does not say anything about holding on to weapons. Unlike the first "screening" — this test surely does not measure well how good a warrior a man would be. Besides that, the common idea that this was a small group of "elite" troops goes completely against the purpose of the reduction in numbers.

Why did God reduce the army?

God makes it very clear in v.2 — so that Israel will not think "*her own strength has saved her.*" This is the greatest spiritual danger there is — that we should believe that we can

or have “saved ourselves”. The lesson we always need to learn is that salvation is by grace and God’s action, not by earning it with our actions.

Again we see the principle of salvation we see continually in Judges and the rest of the Bible. God does not save through expected means, or through strength. Most of the Judges are unlikely and the victories defy the world’s logic. Gideon is a man from a weak family in a weak tribe, and now he must face the Midianites with only a handful of men. This points the way to the greater Gideon, who was born in a manger and who won our salvation in his weakness.

**2. vv.1-8. “You have too many men for me to deliver...” (v.2). How does this principle shed light on how God has worked in your life? (cf. 2 Cor.12:7-9). What do you tend to “boast” in?**

Another way to put this principle is found in 2 Cor.12:7-9. God does not simply work *in spite* of our weakness, but *because* of it. He says that his saving power does not work when we are strong or think we are strong. How does this work practically?

First, this principle is the basis for salvation itself. We cannot be saved if we think we are good or able. God’s saving power only works on us when we admit that we have no worthiness or goodness in ourselves.

Second, this principle explains how repentance works. Paradoxically, it is only as we repent and sorrow over our failures before God that his love and grace become more precious and real to us. For example — if someone says to you: “I paid one of your monthly bills”, you don’t know how overjoyed to be until you hear how big the bill was. The bigger you understand your debt to be, the greater your joy in his payment will be. So it is only as we see our weakness that the strength of knowing God’s grace and love comes.

Third, this principle explains how we almost always grow. Our problems come because good things have become too important to us. Anger, fear, discouragement come because of “idols” — good things have become things we feel (at an emotional level) will really save us and give us worth. It is only when these things are threatened or removed that we turn and find our safety and significance in the Lord. That makes us stable and deep. This principle is perfectly mirrored here in this story. Gideon (and all Israel) was going to put its confidence in its fighting men, but God removes them so that the victory will lead them to trust in God in new ways.

You may wish to share specific cases of how a loss or experience of weakness led to a) salvation, b) or growth.

**3. vv.8-15. Why does God send Gideon into the Midianites’ camp? List all the things this incident tells us about a) about God, and b) about us?**

Why does God send Gideon?

It is pretty obvious that the result of the visit to the camp was God's purpose. The result of what Gideon heard was — *"he worshipped God"* (v.15). Then he came back and *"called out, 'Get up!'"* (v.15) So God wanted to assure Gideon one more time and fill him with confidence and joy.

What does this tell us about God?

First, we see that God is the one who takes the initiative. Gideon needs this, but does not ask for it.

Second, we see that God is a teacher. He is always, always instructing us in the way we should go (Ps.25:9-10,12).

Third, the teacher is very kind and sensitive. In v.10 he says: "If you are afraid to go into the camp, take your servant." Remarkable for the King of the Universe to think of such things.

Fourth, God goes out of his way to assure us. The whole book of 1 John is written to say that we can *"know that we know him"* (1 John 2:3). The work of the Holy Spirit is to assure us that we are his (Rom.8:16). God does not simply adopt us as his children, but then he provides numerous ways to know that this is true. If you love anyone, you are willing to assure them of your love — and God is the same.

Fifth, we learn here that God may ask us to take risks on the way to assurance. Going into the enemy camp is dangerous (thus the advice to take Purah). In the same way, we may find that we lack assurance of God's presence with us because we never do anything bold — we never do anything that is beyond our human ability to do.

Sixth, we learn that God can use secular sources — non-Christian people — to give us wisdom and insight. Here we see that God had inspired at least the second and maybe both of the Midianites who Gideon overheard. The second one clearly perceived God's will (v.14). We must not forget that God gives wisdom and grace to all sorts of people, besides believers, from whom we can learn (Rom. 2:14-15; James 1:17).

Seventh, this all shows us the patience of God. Though we need confirmation and assurance over and over again, God does it.

What does this tell us about us?

Evidently, the need for repeated assurance and repeated lessons must be one of the main points of the narrative. Gideon cannot sustain his direction or his energy without repeated lessons and lots and lots of confirmation and re- assurance. Of course, he is no different than we are. When we see the narrative "telescoped" as it is, the impression is that Gideon is very weak. But if we think of our own spiritual history, we will see the same thing. How many times have we felt: "I'll never forget or doubt God again?" Yet soon we have again become indifferent or anxious. How many resolutions have we

made that we have not kept? We aren't any different. We never relax and trust him. No matter what he does for us, our deeply unbelieving hearts are quite stubborn.

#### **4. What do you need assurance about? [Or what lessons do you need God to tell you over and over?] How does God assure and teach you?**

*What do you need assurance about?*

There are many possible areas you may need God's assurance and instruction. One major area is the basic assurance that God loves and accepts you as his child. After we fail or sin in a significant way — how do we know that he has not rejected us? Another major area is the assurance, during troubles, that he is working wisely within it all, that he has not abandoned us. Another major assurance sometimes comes when we are not sure that we have made the right decision. Sometimes God can confirm to us that we are going in the right direction.

*How has God assured you at times you needed it?*

Basically — whatever God has done to lead you to deep worship and confidence (v.15) — is an example of how he assures. But there are three categories of ways God helps us that are suggested by the text and the narrative. First, God assures us through his word. (In the story, God apparently has sent a special revelation in a dream to one of the Midianites. God's revelation here confirms the promise he made by revelation previously to Gideon.) When we read his Word and especially his promises, we often find that the Holy Spirit comes and makes the promises both real and sweet to us (Rom.8:16).

Second, God often assures us through other people. Here, God does not give Gideon his promise directly, but rather he gives it through the mouth of another. It is important to have others who are close friends who can do this. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* discusses how often God puts a word of assurance in our mouths for our friends. Third, God often assures through circumstances of life, as here. Gideon just "happens" to overhear this conversation. Such "coincidences" often bring God's assurance to us.

Those are the categories. Now think of ways that God has brought you his assurance in your life through the Word, the Spirit, friends, circumstances. Celebrate them and thank God for them.

#### **5. vv. 15-25. What did Gideon's battle plan have going for it? Where does the strategy for the "surprise attack" come from? How does the strategy that was chosen fulfill the dream of the barley loaf?**

The battle plan

Gideon's battle plan was brilliant in several ways. First, this strategy eliminated the factor of numbers and size of the armies. Obviously, any strategy Gideon used would have to compensate for the huge disadvantage they had in size.

This did so beautifully. The whole point was for the Israelites to appear (and sound) far greater in size than they really were. Second, this strategy eliminated the factor of skill or strength of the competing armies. It did not take any prowess or power to break a jar and blow a horn! In any battle, there is the possibility that the enemy's superior skill would lead to a defeat. But this strategy brilliantly removed military skill level as any factor at all. In this battle plan, it was only the Midianites who would be doing the fighting — with themselves! The Israelites simply stood "*in their position*" (v.21) while the Midianites slaughtered each other and ran (v.21-22).

Thirdly, the timing was brilliant. Gideon "attacked" just after the Midianites had changed the guard on the middle watch (v.19). The night time (6pm to 6am) was probably divided into three watches of four hours each. One third of the army took turns standing guard around the camp while the other two-thirds first ate and relaxed and then slept. This would have been the situation just after the middle watch (10pm). One third of the army would have been walking back through the camp to their tents, while another third would have been asleep. Thus, when the noise woke up the sleepers, they would have rushed out of their beds to see the camp filled with armed men. In their confusion and fear, they began to fight the returning soldiers. That is what led to the massive slaughter.

Fourthly, the battle plan eventually deploys the thousands of Israelites who had been left behind. If all that original Israelite army had fought the Midianites directly, many of them would have been killed and wounded. Now they are fresh and able to pursue the Midianite army, tattered and bloody from fighting with itself (v.23-25).

Fifth, the "technology" of the Midianites' camels was eliminated. (Review the notes from last week.) The camels gave the Midianites an unequalled ability to move its army rapidly over great distances. This battle plan made the camels a non-factor. In fact, it is possible that the camels might have added to the confusion and mayhem in the camp.

Where did this brilliant strategy come from?

The text does not tell us that God directly revealed the brilliant strategy to Gideon. There is every indication that he came up with it himself. That would certainly rank him with history's military geniuses. But on the other hand, we must recognize how God led him so beautifully into his work of genius.

First, it was God that had forced him to confront the Midianites with only 300 men. It was almost as if God had given him a riddle. "You have 300 men to defeat many thousands of Midianites. How can you do it?" Obviously, if God had not forced him into such a situation, he never would have given thought to how to create a rout with a handful of men. God knew Gideon could do it. But if he had not "painted Gideon into a

corner”, Gideon would never have thought of his plan. Gideon’s part was this — *he accepted the limits God had given him.*

Second, Gideon had finally grasped the principle — that God chooses *what is weak in the world to shame the strong*” (1 Cor.1:26ff.) It is because he began to think of how weakness can be strength that he was able to hit upon his plan. Gideon’s part was this — *he submitted to God’s saving principle, that his power is made perfect in weakness.*

Third, Gideon had learned in the camp that there was a spirit of nervousness and fear in the Midianite camp. Gideon would never have suspected that if he hadn’t done first hand research. But, of course, that first hand research was provided by God.

How does the strategy fulfill the dream?

Barley was the most cheap and common grain available in that time. It was considered the food of the poor. In the dream God sent, a very weak and poor thing unexpectedly becomes a weapon that destroys the powerful Midianites. That is what happened.

**6. Where are you feeling “outnumbered”? or in need of some intervention? How can you: a) accept the limits God has given you, and b) accept that ‘God’s power is made perfect in weakness’? Can you ask the group to join you in your “battle” by praying for you?**

This question might lead members to share some sensitive topics, so be quick to listen and slow to speak or “fix” one another.

There are an infinite number of possible answers to this question. But consider the following. When we face a trouble, we often try extremely hard to change the circumstances or we pray to God to have it removed, when God wants to use the trouble to deepen our character so that we can “escape” it by becoming able to “endure” it (cf. 1 Cor.10:13). We fail to see that the limits God has given us (as in Gideon’s case) may be the only way for us to reach our potential spiritually.

**7. Think back over all of chapter 6 and 7. Make a list of everything God had to expose Gideon to in order to help him reach his potential as a leader?**

- God gave Gideon promises — that he would be with him and would use him. (6:14-16) This is like the promises we have in his Word.
- God sent three major miracles into his life as assurance. (6:20; 6:36ff.; 6:39ff.) We too usually experience a couple of very dramatic interventions in our lives where God shows his power.
- God asks him to get his family life in order before he goes out to the larger tasks of leadership in the world. (6:25ff. He cleanses his own family life of idols.) In the same way, we cannot be effective in service to others if we are not doing right by our families.

- God sends the Spirit of the Lord (6:34) to give him courage and confidence. In the same way, we must experience his power and joy in prayer (Rom.8:15-17)
- God teaches him the principle of the gospel — that we are not saved by works but God’s grace. (7:2) In the same way, we do not really “get” the gospel until God has had to show it to us again and again. Our guilt, anger, anxiety are all because we don’t believe we are saved by grace, not works.
- God tells him how *he* sees Gideon — “*a mighty man of valor*” (6:12). It is God’s assessment of us, and not our assessment of ourselves, that we must be controlled by.