

“A Weak Tool in Strong Hands”

Judges 6-7

April 19, 2020

Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Judges, chapters 6-7, as we return to our series “*Extraordinary Times, Extraordinary God.*” Let me remind you that the purpose of this series is to build confident faith in the God to whom we pray.

Sometimes we struggle to move forward by faith because we are intimidated by our own weaknesses or limitations in light of what our circumstances require. Yet today we are going to discover that ***man’s weakness is no limitation for God but rather an opportunity to demonstrate His mighty power.*** In fact, 1 Cor 1:26-29 indicates that God delights to work through human weakness: “*God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong...so that no one may boast before God.*” He uses ordinary people—yes, endowed with spiritual gifts—yet the best stewardship of any giftedness is in the hands of those who realize their gift is only a dull tool apart from the Spirit’s power. In Judges 6-7 we will see through Gideon’s life how ***God prefers to wield weak tools in His mighty hand to reveal His limitless power.***

Extraordinary Times (Judges 6:1-6)

[6:1-6] These are extraordinary times for Israel. Vs. 1 says, “the Lord gave them into the hands of Midian for seven years.” They were living under the misery of God’s hand of discipline because they have done evil in the sight of the Lord by turning to worthless and wicked idols.

Note how devastating this oppression was. The Midianites would wait until Israel had planted their crops and then they would come in by the droves, driving the Israelites to the hills, and plunder the land, destroying their crops and stealing their animals. Their crops and animals were Israel’s only source of sustenance. So severe was their oppression that the Israelites made dens and caves in the mountains. Verse 6 says, “so Israel was brought very low because of Midian.” It took seven years of oppression and famine

before Israel cried out to the Lord in their misery. But before God raises up a deliverer, He first sends a prophet.

Blessed Confrontation (Judges 6:7-10)

[vs. 7-10] Through the prophet God reminds them that He is the great deliverer who brought them out of Egypt to be His own people. But in response, they have broken their covenant with Him to follow false gods in the way of evil.

By the way, notice in vs. 10 that because Yahweh is their God, they were not to fear the *gods* of the Amorites (not just the Amorites themselves). This is not just a military issue. It is a theological issue. In fact, *every issue in your life, at some level, is a theological issue because every circumstance in life is impacted by how you relate to God in it.*

Vs. 7-10 are what I call a “blessed” confrontation. Why? Because one of the most gracious things God does for us is to bring us under the weighty conviction of His word. He does this to expose our sin and idolatry which results in the misery of God’s severe but loving hand of discipline. We are so much like Israel. We want to escape our painful circumstances while God wants to use them to help us discern our hearts and error of our ways. When our suffering is the result of straying from God, we need repentance more than we need relief. “*Understanding God’s way of holiness is more important than the absence of pain.*”¹

It’s so easy to be regretful of the miserable consequences of our sin without truly being repentant. 2 Cor 7:10 is so instructive: “***Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death***” (2Cor 7:10). So what’s the difference between worldly sorrow and true repentance? Worldly sorrow is mere regret for the consequences of our sin while repentance is a response to God Himself.

Tim Keller explains it this way:

¹ Dale Ralph Davis. *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*, pg. 92

“worldly sorrow or regret does not produce any change, while repentance does. Why? Regret is sorrow over the consequences of sin, but not over the sin itself....If there had been no consequences there would have been no sorrow....Regret is all about ‘us:’ how I am suffering, how my heart is breaking; but repentance is all about God: how our sin betrays Him, how He has been grieved, how His [reputation] as our Creator and Redeemer has been trampled on,” [and how His grace has been trivialized by our sin].²

Worldly sorrow grieves because the false pleasure of our idol has led to misery. Repentance grieves because God’s favor has been forfeited for a time. Yet true repentance erases the offense of our sin *and our regret* of losing sin’s pleasure because it restores our relationship with the Lord. A repentant heart says, *“I deserved far worse than these painful circumstances. [But praise God] the real punishment fell on Jesus, and will never fall on me.”*³

How do we know if we are on the path of shallow regret or the path of genuine repentance? Tim Keller says it this way: “If you are... [“stuck”] ...continually falling into the same [sinful] pit, and your falls are not decreasing in number or intensity, then you may be responding [with the regret of worldly sorrow] rather than repentance.” We need to ask ourselves, what am I sorry about? The unhappy consequences of my sin or the damage it has caused to my relationship with God?⁴

Here’s our take-away: ***Let the Word of God expose the idolatry beneath our sin so we can put it to death.*** This is not easy! We need other solid believers to help us discern our hearts through the Word and the Spirit’s power through the Word to overcome worthless idols that have taken control of our hearts.

When God sent His word through a prophet before He sent a deliverer, it was a great act of mercy—a blessed confrontation—because God wants to address more than the circumstances—He wants to free their hearts!

² Tim Keller. *Judges for You*, pg. 68-69.

³ *Ibid.*

Heavenly Visitation (Judges 6:11-24)

[Vs. 11]: Note where Gideon is—threshing in secret for fear of the Midianites

[Vs. 12]: *Why does He say this to Gideon?* It’s not because He has ever won a battle. It’s not because He is so courageous. In fact, we will see increasingly that Gideon is faint-hearted. The angel of the Lord calls him a valiant warrior because *God is with Him* and has decreed to make him something he could not naturally be apart from God. *When God gives you a new identity, that’s what you are apart from your past record!* Yet Gideon’s response reveals His disillusionment... **[Vs. 13]**

Gideon responds not with the confidence of a valiant warrior with God’s help. He responds by questioning how God could possibly be with them: If you are with us, why is all this happening? Why all this oppression? Where are the miracles? Why isn’t God acting as in former times? It seems as though God has abandoned us. Does this sound like a man of faith? No, it’s a man who is discouraged and disillusioned because he has lost sight of the God of heaven.

Aren’t you a little surprised that God would choose a man like Gideon? How does a discouraged, disillusioned, doubting man win battles? He doesn’t! It would have to be God. Gideon has lots of limitations. God has none—including Gideon!

[Vs. 14] In other words, God’s command was not up for discussion. The only right response would be obedience. *In exceptional circumstances we are tempted to make exceptions to our obedience. Yet the only right response in exceptional times is unwavering obedience to God that refuses to forsake the favor of His grace.*

Yet Gideon objects to God’s call **[vs. 15-16]**. It’s true that Gideon is wholly inadequate in himself for this mission. But God has promised Gideon that

⁴ *Ibid.*, 70.

His presence will go with him. Yet Gideon looks for human reasons to excuse himself from God's call on his life: "Who am I? I have no experience; I am insignificant!"—that's exactly why God chooses Gideon! Listen, *when God is with you, acting on your behalf, it doesn't matter how small you are. God has no limitations!*

Still, Gideon is unwilling to step out in faith and trust in the presence of the Lord. So he asks God for a sign [vs. 17-24]. Gideon wants a sign. Isn't it a pretty significant sign to have the angel of the Lord speaking to you?! Yet Gideon's heart is overcome by skepticism because *Gideon lacks the experience of walking with God*. He is the product of a secularized culture.

Incidentally, there is a clue here that Gideon is ignorant of God's Word. The offering he brings is not the offering that was prescribed for Yahweh. Rather it resembles the offerings of the Canaanites to false gods. Nevertheless, God consumes the offering to open Gideon's eyes. And open his eyes He does! Instead of being comforted by the sign in vs. 22, He is terrified. Gideon has experienced the fear of God! It's been said that most of us *"have no real sense of the terror and awesomeness of God...There is nothing amazing about grace as long as there is nothing fearful about holiness."*⁵

Ironically, Gideon built an altar to the Lord and named it Yahweh-Shalom, "The Lord is Peace," yet this altar of peace will lead to intense conflict. The problem is that two altars cannot co-exist side by side. You cannot have an altar to Yahweh (vs. 24.) and an altar to Baal (vs. 25). Yahweh is a holy and jealous God. His altar must be exclusive. So God calls Gideon to take his first practical step of obedience and tear down his father's family altar to Baal.

First Step of Obedience (Judges 6:25-32)

[vs. 25-27] Gideon obeys the Lord and tears down the altar of Baal and Asherah, but he does it with fear and trepidation. Why? Because the fear of man has a stronger hold on his heart than the fear of God. He obeys at night because there is a war going on in his own heart between man's power to

hurt him and God's power to protect and deliver him. People don't like it when you mess with their idols. So what's going to happen?

[Vs. 28-32] Gideon's father, Joash, courageously stands up for his son and says to the men of the city, "you lay a hand on my son and you'll be dead by morning. After all what kind of god is Baal if he can't take care of himself." So he gives his son a new name, that means "let Baal contend against him!" He's taunting Baal with this new name: "Come on Baal, Gideon tore down your altar. Let's see what you're going to do about it."

I imagine Gideon breathed a sigh of relief that his father came to his defense. I can't really blame him. I'd have been afraid too. Yet that doesn't excuse Gideon does it? No, it just condemns the fear of man in my own heart. Though Gideon is afraid, nevertheless he takes the step of obedience. Sometimes ***Godly courage means taking a step of faith to obey God in the face of fear.***

Persistent Reluctance (Judges 6:33-40)

Now that Gideon has faced the neighbors, the next step is to face Israel's enemies, the Midianites and Amalekites. [vs. 33-35]

The Midianites have come for their 8th annual plunder of Israel's land. But this time they will be met by the Spirit of the Lord working through the most unlikely of men. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon and for the first time he takes his stand as a leader for his people. Yet as the moment of military conflict gets closer, his persistent reluctance and doubt rises. He's not a military leader. Will God really come through? If not, he's dead meat! [vs. 36-40]

Don't follow Gideon's example on this one. Some people have misinterpreted what Gideon is doing here as a means of decision-making. That's not what is happening. Gideon clearly knows what God's will is. Notice twice he says, "as you have spoken" (vs. 36, 37). Is he taking God at His word by faith? No. Gideon knows he is testing the Lord. That's why he

⁵ Davis, pg. 97.

says, “do not let your anger burn against me!” He’s testing the Lord with his lack of faith rather than appropriately “testing” the Lord with his prompt obedience. Yet God will stretch Gideon’s faith further still...

Military Downsizing (7:1-8)

[7:1-8] Verse 2 is the key to understanding the entire Gideon story. **[Vs. 2]** God wants to make absolutely sure that when the Midianites are defeated, the only conclusion that Israel can come to is that God has done it and not themselves. So the Lord has Gideon send home all those who are overcome with fear at the prospect of war—22,000. Over two-thirds of Israel’s army goes home defeated by fear before the battle even begins. Just ten thousand remain. Why did God do this? Because *fearful people breed fear in others*. In Dt 20 where God gave instructions for war, He had them send home those who were fearful and fainthearted so that they would not make their brothers’ hearts melt (Dt 20:8). **Fear erodes confidence in God.**

Surprisingly, the Lord reduces the army even further from 10,000 down to just 300 men! Israel’s army has been reduced by more than 99%! We know from Judges 8:10 that the Midianites have an army of 135,000 which puts them at a ration of 450 to 1.

Why is God doing this? Because even God’s people have a strong tendency to glorify their own efforts and to trust in their “proven” methods. We like to calculate our own contributions rather than admitting our weakness and helplessness. We are not fit for God’s work until we know how inadequate we are for it. Why? So we will not take the credit for what God does.

Having just weakened Gideon’s ranks to a measly 300, God now comes to reassure Gideon of what matters most—*God is with Him!*

God’s Presence Reassured (7:9-15)

Let me summarize vs. 9-15. To weaken Gideon’s fear and strengthen his faith, God sends him down to the enemy camp where he overhears a Midianite describing his dream to a friend. In the dream, a loaf of bread (which is totally harmless) tumbles into camp and wipes out the Midianite

army tent. His friend’s interpretation is that the dream must refer to weak harmless Gideon—‘God has given us into his hand.’ How ironic that Gideon’s encouragement comes through his enemies. They feared the very truth Gideon was struggling to believe. In response, Gideon bows in worship to the Lord. He could now see that God was going before him. *When God is with us, the things that oppose us are not as strong as they appear to be. Our weakness is the stage from which God can showcase His power.*

The Battle of Trumpets and Torches (7:15-25)

[7:15-25] This is one of the most unconventional battles of all time. Gideon’s army marches without weapons, only covered torches and trumpets. They strike at night when at least a third of the army would have been sleeping and **by God’s providence** Gideon’s army arrives at the beginning of the 2nd watch of the night when the enemy had just changed guard. The sudden light of the 300 torches and the overwhelming alarm of 300 trumpets in the middle of the night induced panic and when the sleeping soldiers scrambled out of their tents they are confronted by armed men (returning from the 2nd watch) but in the dark were unable to identify them as their fellow soldiers. **Vs. 22 identifies God’s hand in it all:** “the Lord set the sword of one against the other... throughout the whole army and they fled...” God defeated the enemy by sending confusion upon them so that 120,000 Midianites were slain among themselves without Gideon lifting his sword (8:10).

God uses the Weak

Now just step back for a minute and look at the big picture. Gideon was *not* a great man of faith. In spite of the prophet’s explanation of Israel’s suffering, in spite of a visitation from the Angel of the Lord, in spite of receiving God’s specific instructions and a personal promise of assurance that God has his back, in spite of God speaking to him directly, in spite of God’s patience in giving him multiple signs, Gideon is fearful and persistently reluctant to trust the Lord God of heaven and rely on His word. This begs the obvious question...

Why would God choose a man like Gideon? Because God's power is magnified through weak instruments in His hands! Only God could cause such a weak man to be so triumphant! The whole point was for God to do something so big with a people so small that they would honor Him as the all-powerful, limitless, supreme God (Judges 7:2).

Don't be surprised when God brings you to a point of having all your self-confidence stripped away so that your only remaining confidence is in the Lord. He wants to create in you a heart of confidence in God who said, *"My Grace is sufficient for you for power is made perfect in weakness."* Can you say with Paul, *"I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me."* (2 Cor 12:9-10).

Are you willing to have God humble you and stretch you enough to work through your weakness so that His mighty power and grace can be manifested for His glory?

Will you see your troubles as impossible problems or possible ways for God grow your faith and change your character?

Prayer Challenge: "Lord, if You could wield Your mighty power through Gideon's weakness, then surely my limitations don't limit Your intervening power (or sustaining grace) as I trust in You."