



THE VICTORY BELONGS TO THE LORD

SERIES: JUDGES: CONQUERING THE IDOLS OF OUR HEART

Judges 7

7th Message

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Do you like to lose? Of course not; no one wants to be considered a loser. Vince Lombardi once said, “Show me a good loser, and I’ll show you a loser.” We all want to be on the winning side in any contest, and we do our best to stack the odds in our favor. At work, we want to find the best technology, people, and strategy to succeed. In sports, we want to choose the best players, build the deepest bench to sustain the playoff series. We want to win, and win with strength. I have an illustration for this mentality in this T-shirt. For those of you who can’t see this shirt, it’s the NBA Finals T-shirt for the 2016 Golden State Warriors. It says *Strength in Numbers*, referring to the caliber and strength of the whole team. The Warriors’ rallying cry throughout the season, *Strength in Numbers*, illustrates the mentality that the world imposes on us. If you’re going into a challenge, you rely on *Strength in Numbers*, building up the best people and strategy to better your chances for success. I imagine all of us can see the value in this saying. That’s what the world relies on and teaches us.

What does God teach us? How does God want us to approach a difficult task or challenge? Shall we depend on *Strength in Numbers* or *Strength in Something Else* or *Someone Else*? This is the lesson we come to today in our study of Gideon in Judges chapter 7. Gideon was this timid farmer who was called by God to battle against an army of invaders. We saw last week how Gideon was weak in faith, testing God using a fleece. How does God prepare Gideon for the impending battle, and what does God want us to learn from this story?

Gideon’s battle in Judges chapter 7 is composed of four sections: God prepares His army, God prepares Gideon, Gideon takes action, and the army takes action. I will offer a spiritual principle or lesson for each section, then we’ll examine the battle as a whole to see how it teaches us to prepare for our own spiritual battles. I’ll conclude with an application drawn from Gideon’s life, returning to our opening question: Strength in Numbers or Strength in Someone Else?

God Prepares His Army

Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod. And the camp of Midian was north of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley.

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.’ 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.

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.” 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.” 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. 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.” 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 7:1–8 ESV)

When God chose and prepared the army for battle, He did a very counter-intuitive thing. His strategy for battle would seem disastrous from a human perspective. Gideon had 32,000 men of Israel arrayed against a vast army of Midianites. How vast? We find later in Judges 8:10 that there were 135,000 swordsmen! If you only had 32,000 men, you would wonder how you were going to engage an army 4 times your size. Yet God’s shocking plan was to whittle down the army even more! If you thought it was bad after 22,000 men left you in fear, think of how dismayed you feel when God further reduced your numbers to only 300 men. For you math people, that’s 1 man for 450 enemy soldiers. Strength in Numbers just doesn’t work here.

Why did God do this incredible thing? He explains it very clearly in verse 2; it’s so that Israel would not boast in its own strength *against* God. He did not want Israel to claim *Strength in Numbers!* We humans can become arrogant if we believe we accomplished something on our own strength. Then in our arrogance, we set ourselves up as idols above God and against God. We worship ourselves, our money, position, or pride instead of worshipping God as we ought to.

God stripped everything, all human confidence and resources, so that Gideon would learn that God is the One who is totally sufficient to accomplish His divine will. The army and plan are God’s, and the glory and honor are God’s. This lesson is for us that we are not to boast in ourselves or accomplishments. Do not claim, *our own strength has saved us*. Our salvation does not come from what we accomplish, but rather is a gift from God.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.” (Eph 2:8–9 NIV).

God Prepares Gideon

That same night the Lord said to him, “Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant. 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 outposts of the armed men who were in the camp. And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance. When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade. And he said, "Behold, I dreamed a dream, and behold, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian and came to the tent and struck it so that it fell and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat." And his comrade answered, "This is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp."

As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped. (Judges 7:9–15a)

Imagine how fearful Gideon must have felt as he looked down into the valley filled with the enemy. His fear must have been palpable; and God saw this and was gracious to him. God gave one more sign to strengthen Gideon's faith and calm his fears. He said, "if you are afraid to attack, go down... you shall hear... your hands shall be strengthened" (Judges 7:11–12). By obeying God's instructions, Gideon was able to hear the interpretation of a dream. Gideon believed and was strengthened. Then he bowed down and worshipped.

It is ironic that Gideon has more faith in the dream of a pagan enemy than he has in God's own words. God has already assured Gideon three times that He will deliver the enemies into Gideon's hands. Yet Gideon believed a pagan soldier whose message only repeated God's words. Those of us who are parents can probably identify with this behavior. We give wisdom and guidance to our kids, and their reaction is to roll their eyes and ignore us. Then they hear the same advice from their peers, and they listen wholeheartedly! How frustrating that is for us parents! This must have been how God felt with Gideon.

Gideon is not the best example of faith for us, but we still can learn from this incident. When we feel inadequate or the odds seem insurmountable, pray for strength. Listen for the Spirit to encourage us. The Spirit may do so through the Scriptures, through friends, and maybe even through the words of non-believers. And when we hear and are encouraged, worship God! Ask God for courage, listen to the Spirit, and give Him the honor and credit for our confidence.

Did you notice that throughout the account thus far, Gideon has been silent? There were no words recorded of him speaking; he obeyed silently without resistance, but also without any initiative. Here in the third section, we see Gideon taking action.

Gideon Takes Action

And he returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand." 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. And he said to them, "Look at me, and do likewise. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. 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.'"

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. 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!" (Judges 7:15b–20)

After having been emboldened by God, Gideon takes action decisively. He shouts, he arouses their battle instincts, and he leads, surprising the sleeping army with an unusual tactic of trumpets and clay jars.

Here are some noteworthy observations of Gideon's actions. First, he instructed his men of God's promise, assuring the men that "The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands". The credit and glory goes to God first.

Second, Gideon devised a plan that is brilliant and strategic. As he wasn't told by God explicitly what to do, I believe this was Gideon's own idea. He used his God-given intelligence to come up with a crazy idea that is the best he can come up with. And God used this *out-of-the-box* thinking to accomplish the victory.

Third, the band of 300 men did not use weapons. They held a trumpet with one hand and with the other hand the jars of clay with torches. No sword was used. Sometimes the world's weapons simply do not work, yet exclamation of God's name and the light hidden in clay jars can do wonders. I will expand more on this theme later.

The spiritual lesson I wish to consider for this section is this: Gideon used his own common sense, strategic thinking, and leadership skills to participate with God in this battle. When we are doing God's work, we are called to use the gifts and talents God has given us. We have been blessed by God with common sense, ideas, and resources that we are to use for Him. We are taught in Ephesians 2:10: *...for we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* So do not hesitate to make use of our God-given sanctified common sense, talents, and wisdom to participate with God. In this way, we fulfill our destiny, which is to do His work that He prepared in advance for us to do!

God's People Take Action

Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. 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, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian. (Judges 7:21–25)

This final section is the climactic conclusion of the battle. The 300 men sounded the trumpets, broke the jars, then stood in place. God caused such fear and confusion that the enemy soldiers killed each other, and the army was routed without Gideon's man having to do anything more than follow instructions and stand firm. The victory belongs to the Lord! With this battle won, all the northern tribes of Israel banded together and participated in God's victory, chasing and vanquishing the enemies throughout the region.

Here then is our spiritual application: God has won the battle, but we get need to participate with Him. We must not sit idly on our hands, but get up and do God's work alongside Him. Let's put this in a spiritual context. Suppose there is an enemy, a sin or idol in our lives that consumes us. We know that the battle against sin has been won by Jesus on the Cross, who has defeated Satan once for all. That sin should no longer have any hold over us. However,

if we take no action to root out the idols, if we persist in sin and continue our habits, then our battle against the idols is lost and our demise is certain. We must actively participate in this spiritual battle and not be complacent or idle. So put on your armor of God: the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shield of faith, helmet of Salvation, and sword of the Spirit so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground! (Eph 6:13–17).

Applications / Summary of Gideon's Battle

This battle concludes at the end of chapter 7. Gideon's narrative continues in chapter 8, in which his moral character becomes compromised and he sets up an idol that snares his family and all of Israel.

No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. (Judges 8:33 NIV).

The cycle of sin unfortunately continued.

As we view the battle as a whole, we can draw some applications for us. Gideon's 4-part battle gives us a four-step process to participate in God's victory:

1. Before the battle: Realize that we don't rely on Strength in Numbers or our own ability. The Strength comes from God. Humble yourself before the Lord and do not boast in yourself.
2. Preparing for battle: Be guidable and teachable. Be willing to trust and obey even when the strategy seems disastrous. Listen for encouragement. And when you hear Him, worship!
3. During the battle: Make wise decisions by using the spiritual gifts, common sense, and resources God has given you. Participate using your gifts and not sit idly on your hands.
4. After the battle: The Victory belongs to the Lord; give Him the credit and glory. Let the results be God's responsibility. In this way we are freed from fear, indecision, or arrogance.

Application from Gideon's Life

Since this is our last sermon in our 3-part series on Gideon, let's examine what we can learn from the life of Gideon as a whole. We know that Gideon was mentioned in the *Hall of Faith* in Hebrews 11:32. Since he was listed there, was Gideon a paragon of faith for us to emulate? Actually, he was not good an example of faith. He was weak, did not trust God, and tested Him. Not just Gideon, but many of the heroes in the Bible were flawed. Israel lied to his father and cheated his brother. Moses was a murderer, and so was David, who also committed adultery. The apostle John was self-righteous. Peter denied Jesus. Thomas doubted. Paul persecuted believers. So what's the deal? Why does God use all these flawed people to accomplish His purposes?

Because that's all God has to work with! All human beings are flawed and sinful in origin. There was only one single perfect human being; the rest of us all have some serious weaknesses. When it comes to moral perfection, the talent pool is pretty thin.

But God loves to use the weak to defeat the strong, the foolish to shame the wise. He uses flawed people like you and me to do some pretty amazing things right here in this body: teaching the Word in bible studies, leading in kids ministry, helping in deacon ministry. And I encourage more of you to step out and do so. Whether that means leading a home fellowship, helping neighbors, being a courageous witness at school or work, supporting missions, fighting human trafficking, or ministering in prisons. When God

accomplishes amazing things through flawed characters like us, He shows His power is sufficient to accomplish His work; our strength is in Him. We become His instruments, His *weapons*.

This brings to mind the way in which Gideon's army confounds the enemy. The soldiers did not use conventional weapons of war. Instead, they smashed the jars of clay to expose the light within, and God used that light to win the battle.

The broken jars of clay remind us of a metaphor and exhortation from the New Testament. The apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians chapter 4 one of the most important passages to teach us who we are and how God works through us:

we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. (2 Cor 4:7 ESV).

We are all jars of clay—non-descript, ordinary on the surface. Yet do you know what's inside our jars? It is Light; it is a Treasure! What Light? What Treasure? Paul tells us in verse 4 of 2 Corinthians 4: "... the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God". This treasure and light is the good news of Jesus Christ, the free gift of salvation and comfort that brings life out of death, light out of darkness, a treasure for us to share!

At times, the best way to let the light shine is for us to be broken, to be weak and vulnerable, real and authentic and humble. God can use us when we know we are weak, see our own flaws, admit our mistakes, and cry out to Him for help. At those times God's power—what Ray Stedman liked to call "resurrection power"—shines through to restore relationships, break down walls, heal broken hearts, forgive sins, impart hope, and bring resurrection life where death used to reign.

Are you willing to be the broken jar of clay in a seemingly insignificant army? Are you called to do God's work, to proclaim His gospel to the neighborhood, work, family? Will you let the Spirit of God blaze through you, especially when circumstances look dark and insurmountable?

8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

7...we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. (2 Cor 4:8–10, 7)

Strength does not lie in numbers. Rather, Strength comes from the light of Christ released from broken jars of clay.

May God grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.

