

Sermon 6: Judges 6:33-7:25: God of the Weak

OUTLINE

The fleeces
The 300

INTRODUCTION

We will be familiar with Paul's thorn in the flesh. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 Paul is explaining his qualifications as an apostle to the Corinthians, 'So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.' This raises the question why does God use our weakness to demonstrate His strength. An accusatory and unsympathetic understanding would accuse God of one-upmanship where He builds up His own reputation by putting others down, this is not what is going on. From another angle there is truth to the idea that we need to be humbled because we are proud, and we are made weak to learn to depend upon Him. But I think that there is a more basic truth that we need to learn here, we are weak, and He is the God of the weak. It is not a case of we are strong and need to learn humility. In fact the truth is the opposite, we are weak and sinful and we are self-deluding and think we are strong and righteous. We think we are ok when we are not ok worse we are condemned. We are in truth weak, and over and over again God shows Himself to be the God of the weak, especially in the portion we have before us, Judges 6:33-7:25. These two episodes of Gideon and the fleeces and Gideon and the 300 remind us that God is the God of the weak.

The fleeces

V33-35, 'Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. ³⁴ But the Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. ³⁵ And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them.' Gideon has torn down the idols in his father's village; Gideon has become a believer in YHWH and practiced his repentance by tearing down those idols. These verses return us to the problem Gideon has been raised up to face, the triumvirate of enemies cross the Jordan and set up camp in the Valley of Jezreel. Gideon has just been beating out the wheat in a winepress, it is harvest time, and these marauders are here to collect. But not this time. God has appointed Gideon to deliver Israel. He blows a trumpet calling for his own people, and the people of the tribes of Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, all those nearby who would be directly impacted by these invaders, and they respond. Why did they respond, his own people who recently wanted to kill him for tearing down their idols? Were they desperate enough to follow anyone willing to fight; were they coming to see the light that they too should follow YHWH not Baal; had Gideon's infamous acts spread like wild fire and lit a fire under them? We are not told, but

we do see that the Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon. Perhaps it was something similar to what happened with Saul in 1 Sam. 11:6-7, 'And the Spirit of God rushed upon Saul when he heard these words, and his anger was greatly kindled. ⁷ He took a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by the hand of the messengers, saying, "Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!" Then the dread of the Lord fell upon the people, and they came out as one man.'

Can you feel the great swell of enthusiasm and expectation, the people have responded as one, everyone is keen, and then we have the fleeces, v36-40, 'Then Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, ³⁷ behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said." ³⁸ And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. ³⁹ Then Gideon said to God, "Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew." ⁴⁰ And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.'

Now at this point it would be understandable if we began to get impatient with Gideon. He asked for a sign and he got it when the Angel of the LORD caused the meal he had prepared to spontaneously combust and disappeared in the flames; followed by an audible voice. You would think that the response of his once murderous clan; plus the overwhelming response of the people; plus the Spirit of the Lord clothing him would be sufficient. Just because Gideon is commended for doing great things through faith does not mean that he had no doubts and weaknesses. Contrary to word of faith style teaching, our faith is not a state of mind where we have absolutely no doubts, and by the strength of our positive determination we will God into action, as if God can only act in response to a perfect faith. Believing faith is always a weak hold on a strong Savior, it is not a moment where we suddenly become perfect and God can now reward our perfect faith. This is demonstrated clearly in the case of the fleeces.

Some have thought that Gideon is trying to get out of his commitments, but this is not the case he is just doubting. We must remember that the book of Judges is not a picture of men at their best but their worst, it is recording a time of darkness in Israel. Gideon is a new convert from syncretistic worship and does not know God like he ought. This moment is not presented positively but negatively. The fact that Gideon uses the language of testing in v39 is significant. Testing God has a history, Israel tested God in the wilderness and were punished, Ex. 17:2, 7. Jesus spoke against testing God when tempted in the wilderness, Matt. 4:7. To make God prove Himself when He has already promised is a slight on God saying that He is a liar and untrustworthy. In this instance God shows grace to Gideon and accepts the tests. In fact, He over answers when a huge amount of dew is extracted from the fleece. God's condescension to Gideon's weakness displays God's grace and patient with doubting sinners. This flies in the face of the Word of Faith teaching that has spiritualised self-confidence and claims that God only answers our total confidence. God knows our dust and inabilities and is gentle and patient when we are weak. He does not excuse sin but still continues to treat His children according to grace.

So is Gideon an example to follow in laying out fleeces before the Lord as we seek God's will? Our answer must be no. Firstly, Gideon is not seeking the will of God he knows the will of God, he has been called to be a mighty man of valour and to fight the enemies in God's strength. There is no mystery as to what the will of God is. Gideon is looking for assurances not direction. Sadly many Christians look at this event and think that they can use this event as permission for them to set God a task to make His will clear. There is no permission here to do so. We must be careful of the typical mistake of reading ourselves into the text and thinking that we are the main characters of God's plan and can expect God to act towards us like He does with Moses; Elijah; Joshua and here Gideon. I have news for all of us, you are not Gideon! You are not a Christological type set to deliver Israel when in dire straits, so stop making the miracles that God is performing through Gideon irrelevant by demanding that they be everyday affairs. God is doing something specific through Gideon that He is not doing through us. Secondly, the text is quite clear in showing that Gideon is in error; that he is too doubtful; too unbelieving; that he is testing God; and that his doubts and fears are irrational. He is described negatively not positively in order to emulate. Thirdly, it has also been suggested that Gideon as a new convert who probably has a large gap in his understanding of God is in need of this level of assurance. You should see this as God condescending to help a new convert at a time when not everyone had a bible, a church, a pastor, and the internet to answer all their theological questions. Think about what we have that Gideon did not. We have the whole bible, the OT and the NT to teach and guide us. We are sufficiently equipped for every good work. More than that we know our God. He has shown Himself to be a God who is gracious to sinners, who is willing to save us, adopt us, hear our prayers and aid us in the task He has set for us. He has shown us Himself through Christ dying on the cross; given Himself to and for us in the incarnation and the infilling with the Holy Spirit. The problem with seeking God to spell out His secret counsels for us so that we don't 'step out of His will' is a false dilemma. God does not have to reveal His secret will to you for you to stay in His will; all you have to do is what the Bible says obeying His revealed will. God does not expect us to read His mind and has given us a bible which is sufficient to instruct us and is a lamp to our paths.

The 300

The invaders had gathered a force of more than 130 000 and here we see that Gideon was able to gather 22 000. But God says that it is still too much and he gets Gideon to begin whittling down the fighting force, v1-3, '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.' 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.' Gideon tactically takes the place where there is fresh water, the spring of Harod. It may be that this spring was named Harod after the fact because it means 'trembling.' They are opposite the valley to the invading force. God knowing our own weakness for taking the credit for what He has done; overestimating our strength, being blind to our own weakness amplifies the truth of our weakness and His strength by getting Gideon to sift the crowd. Gideon makes a tactfully wise move and removes the fearful. It often happens that

when those who are fearful break and run it can cause a rout and the whole army can turn tail.

But it is not enough, v4-8, '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.' Some have tried to reason out why God chose these 300. It has been suggested that these 300 who drank water from their hands instead of on their hands and knees were the vigilant ones and God chose them for their superior awareness. Some have suggested that they drank with one hand because they were holding a weapon with the other God choosing them because they were ready to fight, but there is no evidence of this in the text. If God's purpose was to glorify His strength He is not choosing a 300 of legend like the 300 Spartans who held back the Persian army. God reduces their number by 99% so that there is no question about their strength. These are not 300 super warriors who could take over 130 000, but a token force God will use as a canvas to show His strength.

God orders Gideon to go that very night and take the enemy camp, v9. But given his record of doubt God offers Gideon some assurances. He tells him that if he wants he can go down into the enemy camp with his servant, v10. And there he will hear things that will strengthen him, v11. Gideon sees first-hand the number of the enemy, v12, '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.' God in His providence provides a dream and its interpretation for Gideon to overhear, v13-14, '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." ¹⁴ 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."

Imagine the impact of that, you walk up to a conversation and a man has dreamed of you and your name is on their lips, this is enough for Gideon he rallies the troops and makes his plans, v15-18, '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.' "

This is the ultimate in psychological warfare. The sound, surprise, the apparent appearance of three armies, as well as the timing of the return of 1/3 of the army from the watch as armed men walked past the tents of those suddenly awoken. These would all have been surprised, those in the camp who were returning from watch would have drawn their swords, those rushing out of their tents with sleep in their eyes would have weapons in hand. And with the appearance of being surrounded and invaded they would have attacked each other in the confusion. The stampeding of numberless camels no doubt would have helped, v19-22, '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, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath.'

Then the armies of Israel are called upon when God has given the victory and it is time to mop up, v23, 'And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian.' What do we learn from this episode? We learn that God is the God of the weak, and I think two lessons need to stand out. Firstly, when we are weak, not only is God strong, He loves to use our weakness as His opportunity to show His strength. When we see ourselves as having few gifts and no apparent effect for Christ; when we see how small our numbers are; when we think how unattractive and unflashy our worship services and buildings are; or the fact that we don't have any famous superstars who have high powered conversion stories, all of this is irrelevant. God is strong, and He gives us the victory. Be faithful with whatever impossible task He has given to you to do, believe His promises and leave the results to Him. He delights to show forth His strength through our weakness. Secondly, don't forget you are weak. God is not staging our weakness, he is reminding us of what we are, and what we need in Him. Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who admit they are sick; blessed are those who come in their emptiness because He is strong; He fills what is empty; He cleanses what is dirty. Jesus came to this earth not to save good people, strong people, brave people, able people, but sinners who cannot save themselves. He died to pay for the sins we can't pay for; He makes it free for those who have nothing to offer. He is not the God of the strong, He humbles the proud; He is the God of the weak and needy, and He exalts those who humble themselves. For me a key lesson from Gideon is that God is willing to save the weak and broken; the doubting and timid, and this is greatly encouraging for us all.