

No Room for Heroes

Beyond the Fleece – Part III

Judges 7

Introduction

Many people know about George Whitefield, the revivalist of the 1700s, but few know of a man by the name of William McCulloch. Whitefield would go to Scotland and have quite an impact on the people there, but it was McCulloch who really prepared Scotland for Whitefield's coming.

It is interesting, as I have read of William McCulloch's life, that he was a parish minister and somewhat, as it would seem, ineffective. His own son would write of this scholarly pastor, who seemed to enjoy Hebrew more than he did speaking, that he was a slow speaker and very cautious. His son would even say that he was not a ready or eloquent speaker. In fact, he was nicknamed "The Ale Minister". His son writes, "The Ale Minister designated that, when he rose to speak, a number of men in the audience left to quench their thirst at the local tavern."

Yet, God would use this "Ale Minister"; this slow speaking scholar, to prepare the hearts of many people in Scotland. Then, when Whitefield came, Scotland was ready.

Frankly, I have a feeling that we would have overlooked McCulloch ourselves. We are more impressed, obviously, by the impressive people – people who are charismatic in their personality. We tend to follow these people; we tend to be influenced by people who are impressive. In fact, it is our natural tendency when some well known political or celebrity figure comes to Christ, to say, "Wow," as if we wonder what God ever did without that person. It

is our natural tendency to think that with that person as part of the kingdom, the church will take off.

II Corinthians 12:9 sums up God's attitude toward our natural thinking. He says, paraphrased, "My power is most fully displayed when My people are weak."

Notice that He does not say, "My power is most fully displayed when My people feel weak."

We may not feel weak at all.

He says, "My power is most fully displayed when My people reckon they are indeed, stripped of anything of any importance apart from My strength. It is when they are reckoning to be weak that they *are* weak and *My* strength can be fully displayed."

As we continue our study of the life of Gideon in the book of Judges, it is obvious to me, as I have read and re-read chapter 7, that the problem God has is not so much with Gideon now, as it is with Gideon's army.

This army is made up of impressive people. They have volunteered to follow Gideon into battle. They number 32,000 men, which is not a large number compared to the number of Israelites, but it is a lot of men. God, in this chapter, will work on this army, as well as Gideon, to prepare them to be recipients and displays of His full power.

Turn to Judges 7, where we will pick up our story. As we read, we will discover that Gideon is probably surrounded by too many heroes and not enough servants. God will take care of that.

Divine Mathematics

In Judges 7:1, we read,

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

From this vantage point, Gideon – or Jerubbaal, which is his nickname, meaning “The Baal Fighter” – can see much of the Midianite army. They number 135,000. They are described in Judges 7:12, which says,

Now the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the sons of the east were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

Perhaps at this point, Gideon looks at his 32,000 people and begins to wonder. His army is encamped by the spring of Harod. It is interesting that the word “Harod” means “trembling,” which is probably the feeling Gideon is experiencing. He is there by the spring called “trembling,” and he looks at his 32,000 cocky soldiers and he looks at the Midianite army of 135,000 people, and he thinks, “How in the world?”

Now at this time, God speaks to Gideon. Look at Judges 7:2a.

The Lord said to Gideon, “The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands . . .

I can hear Gideon saying, “Right, Lord. Sure. I’m not a mathematician, I’m a farmer, but I know that 32,000 against 135,000 means that we are certainly overpowered.”

However, God had something else in mind. Note the last part of Judges 7:2.

. . . “The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, ‘My own power has delivered me.’”

Now this says it all. The problem is not the size of the Midianite army – the problem is the size of the Israelite ego. It is not Midianite power that is the problem – it is Jewish pride that is the problem.

Do you get what this verse is implying? It is implying that even though there are only 32,000 men in the Israelite army, if they went into battle and were victorious, *they* would take the credit.

God says, “You have too many. We’ve got to make this thing so overbalanced that you *must* depend on Me.”

So the real battle, at this point, is not as much with Midian as it is with the hearts of the Israelite soldiers. They must learn the same thing we must learn, ladies and gentlemen, and we do not necessarily like to think this way. The truth we need to re-learn was taught by Jesus Christ when He said,

. . . apart from Me you can do . . .

Something?

. . . NOTHING. (John 15:5b)

There is no room in that word, is there? It is black and white; it is shut. Without Jesus Christ, we can accomplish *nothing*.

Two ways God reduces Gideon’s army

So God unveils a plan that will reduce these 32,000 Israelite soldiers substantially.

1. First, He allows the secretly frightened to return home.

This is a problem in their gut that they are not telling the other soldiers. Look at Judges 7:3a.

Now therefore come, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, “Whoever is afraid and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead.” . . .

You may remember that all of these men volunteered for the army, so they are not shaking in their knees publicly. This is an inward thing. Gideon probably held his breath. Look at Judges 7:3b.

. . . So 22,000 people returned, but 10,000 remained.

Two thirds of the soldiers said, “Gideon, I’m so happy you gave me a chance to rethink this. I think I’ll go home.”

This left Gideon with 10,000 soldiers.

Now it is interesting that under the Mosaic system, as the book of Deuteronomy tells us, an Israelite soldier that is afraid does not have to fight – he can return home. This is an interesting draft, is it not?

The point is that the soldiers of Israel fought on a different plane than our soldiers today. These soldiers really did not go into battle confident in themselves – their confidence was in the Lord. So basically, a

person who was afraid was a person who was not confident in the Lord. That kind of lack of confidence is contagious. So Moses said, "Let's get rid of these people who spread their contagion of fear. Let's allow them to return home."

This is what happens with 22,000 of Gideon's soldiers.

So Gideon counts the men who remain and there are only 10,000. At this time, his insides really begin to churn.

2. Secondly, God reveals at the water fountain, a subtle indifference to the enemy.

God speaks again, in Judges 7:4a.

Then the Lord said to Gideon, "The people are still too many; bring them down to the water and I will test them for you there. . . ."

The Hebrew word "test" could be translated "smelt". It is the word of the goldsmith; the coppersmith. It is not necessarily a test to make stronger, it is a test to separate. God will take off the dross – those who are not afraid, but are perhaps, trusting in their own ability. He will separate them as well, down by the water.

Let us take a look at the test, in Judges 7:5.

So he brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gideon, "You shall separate everyone who laps the water with his tongue as a dog laps, as well as everyone who kneels to drink."

Now I had to read and re-read this many times. I am slow, but I finally started to get the picture. There are basically, two kinds of drinkers in this. I am not sure that came out right! There are those who lap the water with their tongue as a dog laps, as we read in verse 5. Then, Judges 7:6 adds,

. . . putting their hand to their mouth . . .

This is the confusing point. They are lapping from their hand, not directly in the water.

Then, there are those, according to verse 5, who kneel to drink. Judges 7:6 adds,

. . . kneeled to drink . . .

Verse 6 lets us know that 9,700 soldiers knelt to drink. The key distinction is that they did not use their hands. They got down on all fours and put their face directly into the water. Some of them may have even waded into the spring. The point is that they took their eyes off the enemy.

There are 300 soldiers who drink with their sword in one hand and water in the other.

This reveals a subtle difference in their attitude toward the enemy. It is a subtle difference that must be in our own hearts, as well. The victory is won, but there is respect for those we war against. It is an attitude, not of fear perhaps, but of a lack of focus. It caused these men to be separated. Those who scooped up the water remained alert, focused, and ready.

Note Judges 7:7.

The Lord said to Gideon, "I will deliver you with the 300 men who lapped and will give the Midianites into your hands; so let all the other people go, each man to his home."

How many men does Gideon have now? Three hundred. Three hundred against 135,000! God will teach them the battle is not theirs, but His.

Helen Keller was not necessarily a theologian, but she once wrote a powerful statement, saying, "The world is not moved forward by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker."

Gideon is basically, being told by God, "All I need are 300 little pushes to move the Midianite world."

Look at Judges 7:8.

So the 300 men took the people's provisions and their trumpets into their hands. And Gideon sent all the other men of Israel, each to his tent, but retained the 300 men; and the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

Divine Methods

Now if there was ever a night Gideon had trouble sleeping, it was this one. Look at Judges 7:9a.

Now the same night it came about that the Lord said to him, . . .

I am sure Gideon's first reaction is, "No, Lord, 300 isn't too many."

However, God has something else in mind.

I would imagine that Gideon, on this evening, is trying his best. He is not necessarily the most courageous man. He is trusting God, but afraid. He is probably trying to keep his chin up. He is not being naïve; he is just trying to be faithful.

This is like the general who was rather naïve, but he had a great positive attitude. He had a small band of soldiers and on the day of battle, he got up before

his men and said, “Men, you know that we’re surrounded, so don’t let any of them get away.”

This may be a great attitude, but I am not sure it wins. Perhaps Gideon is thinking, “Three hundred, well, at least we can surround them.”

God then comes to speak. And of this entire chapter, I love verses 9-11. These verses speak to me the most – they are absolutely incredible verses. Look at Judges 7:9-11.

Now the same night it came about that the Lord said to him, “Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hands. But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp, and you will hear what they say; and afterward your hands will be strengthened that you may go down against the camp.”

The compassion and the patience of God is fantastic. He does not ridicule Gideon’s anxiety as the leader of this troop. He does not say, “Gideon, what in the world are you waiting for?! Attack!”

God says, “It is time to attack, but I want to develop you. So, slip down there with your servant and take a look at what I’m already doing in the camp of the Midianite soldiers.”

In effect, God says, “I want to teach you how to take the next step. I’ve led you this far; I will lead you through the next one.”

A couple of days ago, I was walking through our living room to our dining room with our stairwell to my left. Just as I got to the foot of the stairs, my son, standing on the top step, said, “Dad, catch.”

I said, “AHHH!”

Interpreted, that means, “*Don’t jump!* If you do, we’re going to go through the wall and land in the back yard.”

I thought about this with fascination because I can remember as if it were yesterday, propping that little tyke up on the second step and saying, “Jump! Come on, jump.”

This is a game all parents play – we like to terrorize our kids! I say, “Come on, I’ll catch you. I’ll catch you, come on. All you have to do is jump. Jump! I won’t feed you if you don’t jump!”

Finally, their hand is actually touching yours and they, in the sheer ecstasy of fear, kind of teeter off and we catch them. We are thrilled that they would trust us like they do.

Then what do we do? Do we say, “Now go up to the eighth step and jump.”?

No. We repeat the jump on the second step about fifteen times. Then, we try the third step.

Now my son is on the tenth step and says, “Dad, catch!”

He has gone beyond my ability to catch him, but his faith in me is something to behold.

What step are you on? The wonderful thing about it is, if you are on the first step, God does not say, “Oh my goodness, the first step!”

God says, “Jump!”

Then, as our faith is developed, we start sliding up the steps.

I find Gideon, in these verses, somewhere around the third or the fourth step. He is beyond his ability to touch and he is a little afraid.

By the way, at this point, Gideon does not know what the battle plan is. That is critical to understand. God has not revealed it yet. So God says, “Gideon, I want to encourage you to take the leap. So take your servant and go down to the Midianite camp where I have prepared encouragement for you from the most unusual lips – the lips of a Midianite soldier.”

Look at Judges 7:13. Gideon sneaks to the Midianite camp.

When Gideon came, behold, a man was relating a dream to his friend. And he said, “Behold, I had a dream; a loaf of barley bread was tumbling into the camp of Midian, and it came to the tent and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down so that the tent lay flat.”

Just as Gideon sneaks to this camp of 135,000 soldiers and perhaps, 80,000 tents, he comes to the right one. And just as he arrives, one of the Midianite soldiers wakes up from his sleep, wakes his buddy, and says, “You won’t believe this dream I just had.”

Continue to Judges 7:14.

His friend replied, “This is nothing less than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given Midian and all the camp into his hand.”

It is interesting that God gave a pagan soldier revelation for Gideon. The small loaf of barley bread would represent Israel. It is easy to see that this makes sense because barley was the bread of the poor;

it was usually fed to cattle. Since Israel has been in famine conditions, the people are eating barley. The tent would be a symbol of the nomadic Midianite people. It is interesting that this Midianite man was given the interpretation.

Now, we talked about dreams in our last discussion. The context today, of course, is a completely different context.

I do not know if this is coming back to haunt me or not, but a couple of ladies in the church had dreams this past week. They were telling my wife about these dreams, which had to do with the church. I thought you might enjoy hearing about them.

One lady said that she dreamed about our very first service. She said we were practicing. I was in the front, practicing a sermon, the musicians were practicing their music, and there was a row of people who were judging us. She said everything was fine, except the sewage was not in. I will not tell the rest of the dream!

The other lady dreamed about the very first service in the auditorium. She dreamed that she and her family arrived a little late and had to sit in the front. I hope this is not convicting to you – I know you want to sit in the front! She said the front seat was actually like a porch swing. So they sat there and were swinging. The worship music leader told them to stop, but they could not stop, even though they tried. So the worship leader made them leave the auditorium!

I do not know what these dreams are saying, but all this talk about dreams in the last week is a little crazy – it is coming back to haunt me now! Perhaps the sewage is late and we do need more chairs. And as for the worship leader, who knows?

For some strange reason, the Midianite soldier's strange dream was given an interpretation by another Midianite soldier. Evidently, God gave it to him, and he said, "Oh, that makes sense, Israel is coming against us and they're going to strike us down."

God allowed Gideon the privilege of peaking behind the scenes at the providences of God. Let us briefly look at these. God:

- provided the dream for the Midianite guard;
- arranged for Gideon to arrive at just the right time and directed his steps to the just right place;

- allowed the other Midianite soldier to correctly interpret the dream;
- assured Gideon's safety; that is, he was not even detected; he was not caught – he was able to sneak into the camp, with sentries posted, and sneak out;
- created fear in the Midianite hearts; that is, He was already at work, lowering their morale.

God allowed Gideon to see these providences of God.

What a wonderful illustration this is for you and me. Sometimes we really wonder, "Is God at work?"

However, He is at work, behind the scenes.

Perhaps we cannot see it all, but even in the lives of worldly people, He has them exactly where He wants them. God is, in fact, at work in your life, even when you cannot see Him.

Note Judges 7:15a.

When Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, he bowed in worship. . . .

God was at work. Now, Gideon is at worship.

Ladies and gentlemen, when we understand that God is indeed at work, it will lead us to do one thing – worship. Outside that Midianite tent, in the dark cover of night, Gideon and his servant knelt and worshiped God.

Gideon returns to his Israelite army and arouses his troops. Look at Judges 7:15b.

He returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise, for the Lord has given the camp of Midian into your hands."

Continue to Judges 7:16. Evidently, God told Gideon what to do. The text does not let us in on that.

He divided the 300 men into three companies, and he put trumpets and empty pitchers into the hands of all of them, with torches inside the pitchers.

The pitcher were to cover the light of the torches until they broke the pitchers. Judges 7:17-18 gives us the plan.

He said to them, "Look at me, and do likewise. And behold, when I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. When I and all who are with me blow the trumpet, then you also blow the trumpets all around

the camp, and say [shout], ‘For the Lord and for Gideon.’”

God’s choice of weapons for Israel include:

- a trumpet to blow (a ram’s horn);
- a torch to wave (made in the custom of that day, in a smoldering substance that would burst into flame whenever it was waved);
- a pitcher to break;
- a voice to shout.

There were no swords, no shields, no rushing attacks. These weapons were it.

Let us read what happened. I will make brief comments as we go through the text.

Begin with Judges 7:19. This occurs between 10 and 11 p.m., just before the Midianite sentries could get accustomed to the darkness of the night.

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 posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands.

The blowing of the trumpets would sound like a thousand battle charges. The smashing of the pitchers accomplished a couple of things. It exposed the torches so that the Midianites could now see the light and it also created a tremendous noise. This would undoubtedly stampede the thousands of camels inside the camp. The camels probably did more damage in destroying the Midianite soldiers than even the Midianite swords.

Continue to Judges 7:20.

When the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers, they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing, and cried, “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!”

This cry is interesting because they did not have any swords.

Look at Judges 7:21.

Each stood in his place around the camp; and all the army ran . . .

Now God had already put fear into the hearts of the Midianites. We do not know, but He perhaps, multiplied that dream and its interpretation throughout the camp. The Midianite soldiers were already terrified.

The pitchers are smashed and the torches are now exposed. Three hundred soldiers, who are surrounding the camp on the hillside, begin to wave them, while shouting, “In the name Yahweh and Gideon.”

Now camels are stampeding and men are rushing out of their tents, groggy with sleep. They grab their swords and, thinking the Israelites are already creating havoc in the camp, begin to swing. All that the Israelite soldiers are doing is standing on the hillside, waving their torches, and every once in awhile saying, “I think I’ll blow my trumpet – toot, toot. I think I’ll shout now.”

J. Vernon McGee wrote that the torches served only as light for the Midianites to see just enough to go after each other. One hundred and twenty thousand Midianites fell. The Israelites never entered the camp; never waved a sword; never engaged the men in combat. They just stood on the side of the hill and hollered.

Application

Let me apply this in three very obvious ways.

1. When we are at our smallest, God can be at His greatest.
2. When we are at our weakest, God is at His strongest.
3. We can never be too small for God to use, but we can be too big.

There is no room in Judges chapter 7, for heroes. There is only room for human beings who leap from the top step into the everlasting arms of God.

The only hero; the only One worth worshiping is the One who waged and who won the battle. All that Gideon’s soldiers had to do, and all that we have to do today, was follow God’s battle plan. When it is all said and done, the only hero is God. And we, like Gideon, are driven, out of joy, to worship our God.

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