

Strength in Weakness

Judges: Deliverance in Darkness

Judges 6:1-8:3

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March 19, 2017

Might Magnified

We live in a culture that magnifies the might of men and women. The strongest and fastest athletes captivate much of our attention in March. The smartest students are paraded on the platform before us during graduation season in May. The most creative and successful business men are celebrated in magazines. The sexiest and most fit plaster our advertisements. And even in the church, the most eloquent speakers and the biggest personalities take pride of place. It's no wonder we have a hard time grasping the message of the Bible. The Bible isn't obsessed, as we are, with our human strength. In fact, the Bible not only paints a different picture; it tears down the canvasses of worldly glory. God usually calls servants not heroes. And most of God's servants don't fit the mold that Madison Avenue has taught us to prize.¹

Gideon illustrates this point both positively and negatively. In our text this morning, he illustrates this positively. He's a humble servant of God. His faith isn't always exemplary, but he shows that salvation is not the result of personal achievement, but a divine gift.² Next week, we'll see Gideon illustrate this point negatively as he does seek to work in his own strength and take glory for himself. Our passage this morning covers all of Judges 6-7.³ It's 68 verses long; a little too long to read it all. But we'll read some of it and I'll try to summarize the rest. In chapter 6, we see the defeat of Israel's internal enemy of idolatry. In chapter 7, we see the defeat of Israel's external enemy, the Midianites. These two enemies in these two chapters teach us two lessons. What I want to do with our time this morning is summarize each chapter in a sentence. And then show you how that summary is supported by the text.

REBELLION AND REPENTANCE (6:1-40)

Here's the first lesson or the summary of chapter 6: Suffering is a result of rebellion and designed to lead us to repentance. To show this is the lesson in chapter 6, I want to highlight three things in the chapter:

1. An unusual twist to the normal cycle in Judges.
2. Gideon's misunderstanding of oppression.
3. The two altars.

A Sermon before Salvation

First, let's look at an unusual twist on the normal cycle in Judges. The Gideon cycle starts out the way all of the cycles do. Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD (v. 1). Their rebellion then leads the LORD to give them into the hand of Midian for seven years (v. 2). The oppression is the worst we've seen in Judges. The Midianites aren't oppressing Israel politically; rather, they're

¹ Davis, Dale Ralph. *Judges: Such a Great Salvation*. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2007.

² Webb, Barry G. *The Book of Judges*. Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans, 2012.

³ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

oppressing them economically.⁴ They're devouring their crops and livestock (vv. 3-5). This reminds me of the animated movie, *A Bug's Life*. In that movie the grasshoppers show up at every harvest and take the grain from the ants, who are living in fear and hiding. That's the picture we have in Judges 6. So Israel was brought low and they cried out for help to the LORD (v. 6). So far, everything is consistent with what we've seen in the other cycles in Judges. But in verses 7-8, there's a twist on the normal pattern. What we expect is for God to raise up a judge and save Israel. But instead of sending salvation right away, God sends a prophet. They get a sermon instead of salvation.⁵ And this sermon highlights that the real problem in Israel is not oppression from the outside, but rebellion inside of Israel. Their oppression is a result of sin and idolatry. Listen to the sermon in verses 8-10.

Judges 6:8-10

⁸...the LORD sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage. ⁹And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. ¹⁰And I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed my voice."

God had been faithful to his covenant, but Israel hadn't. They'd been commanded to not fear (worship) the false gods (idols) in Canaan, but they didn't obey God's voice. Human rebellion is always linked to unwillingness in God's people to obey his Word. Those who love God will obey God. They will have no longings for false gods. They'll be satisfied in God alone.

Why did God send a sermon instead of salvation? Because God wants his people to repent before they're saved. Israel had cried out to God, but only because they were miserable in their circumstances. It wasn't because they were sorry for their sin. It wasn't because they wanted to be restored to relationship with Yahweh. God sends a sermon because God's Word is regularly the means God uses to convict people of sin and draw them back to himself. And that teaches us something about what we should do when we sit under the preaching of God's Word. God's Word should lead us to confess our sins and return to God. That's the first highlight in chapter 6.

Discipline should lead to repentance.

The second thing I want to highlight is Gideon's misunderstanding of the Midianite oppression. It's interesting that, although God wants us to repent before he delivers us, he didn't wait for Israel to repent before he raised up a deliverer. In verse 11, we're told that the angel of the LORD—which is a manifestation of the LORD himself—appears to Gideon.⁶ And the LORD addresses Gideon by saying in verse 12, "The LORD is with you..." In what follows, Gideon rebuts God. If the LORD is with us then why are all of these bad things happening to us? It feels more like God has abandoned us, not like he's with us. This is a common response. It's the classic problem of evil. If God is all powerful and all loving, then why does he allow us to suffer? The answer in Judges and in the rest of the Bible is that God often uses suffering in our lives to draw us back to himself. He uses suffering to lead us to repentance.

Gideon doesn't understand all of this. And so in verse 17, he asks for a sign from God to prove he's with him. He sets up a sacrifice to God. And God consumes the sacrifice with fire (vv. 17-24).

⁴ Keller, Timothy. *Judges for You*. Purceyville, Va: The Good Book Co, 2013.

⁵ Keller

⁶ Keller

Gideon's request for a sign here, and his request for a sign at the end of the chapter with the fleece (vv. 36-40), may indicate weak faith. But God doesn't indict Gideon. Instead God gives him a sign to strengthen his faith. This highlights God's grace yet again.

You can't serve two gods.

Ultimately, God wants Gideon to trust him and to repent. This is drawn out in the third thing I want to highlight in chapter 6, the two altars. In verses 25-26, God gives Gideon a command to tear down the altar to Baal and the Asherah pole in his dad's back yard, and to build an altar to God to worship him. This further highlights the real problem in Israel. Before the external enemy of Midian is dealt with, the internal enemy of idolatry must be dealt with. Why is this? Because two altars cannot co-exist side by side.⁷ You can't have an altar to Baal and an altar to Yahweh. During the period of the judges, there was clearly a lot of idol worship going on. But if we want to understand how this applies to us, we have to have an accurate picture of how it applied to them. It wasn't as if the Israelites were worshipping Baal *instead* of worshipping Yahweh. They were trying to maintain *both* worship of Baal *and* worship of Yahweh.⁸ They likely maintained their formal worship of Yahweh (cf. v. 13). But when it came to the nitty gritty aspects of their lives, they didn't see Yahweh as sufficient. The Canaanites seemed to experience success in agriculture when they worshiped the baals. It brought them material prosperity (or so they thought). So Israel thought they'd mix it up a bit. They'd worship Baal alongside of their worship of Yahweh, so they could be more successful.

Isn't this what we do as well? Not much has changed. What will it take to gain material prosperity? Pleasure? Acceptance by others? Recognition? The world offers many solutions to these desires, many idols. The idols of work, creature comforts, sex, social media, you name it. And we're quite drawn to these and a host of others. We come to believe we can have our cake and eat it too. We can be Christians *and* serve the idols of the culture. But God says, "no way, Jose." You can't have two altars. Jesus said, "You can't serve two masters. You'll love one and hate the other." If you want to worship God, you have to tear down the altars of the world. You must be satisfied in him alone. And you must trust that he will meet all of your needs in Christ Jesus. That's what Gideon does in this passage. He steps out in faith. He acts in repentance. In verse 27, he tears down the altars to the false gods. Then he lets the chips fall where they may as he faces his father and the villagers (vv.28-35). We need to do the same.

STRENGTH IN WEAKNESS (7:1-25)

Dealing with the internal enemy of idolatry is the first step in Judges 6. Let's now turn to the external enemy in chapter 7. This is the lesson we learn: God is glorified when his strength is experienced in our weakness. To show this is the lesson of chapter 7, I also want to highlight three things in the chapter:

1. The pruning of the Israelite army.
2. The dream of the Midianite.
3. The theme of fear.

⁷ Davis

⁸ Keller

We need to know our weakness.

Let's start with the pruning of the Israelite army. Chapter 7 begins with Israel gathering for battle against the Midianites (v. 1). But before they move into battle, the LORD begins a whittling down of their army. In fact, God cuts the army by 99%, from 32,000 to 300. This happens in two stages. First, God asks Gideon to send home all the men who are afraid (v. 3). And that results in 22,000 going home. Then all the men who knelt down to drink water were sent home (vv. 4-5). Commentaries spend a lot of time trying to explain the rationale behind this selection process, but we don't need to get too creative in our interpretation. God gives us the reason in verse 2. 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.'" God wanted Gideon and Israel to know their weakness so that they would come to know God's strength. It's the LORD who saves. It's the LORD who secures the victory. When this is called into question, there's a tendency for man to get the glory. But when we know we're weak and God is strong, then the glory goes to God. Everything that follows in this chapter highlights this lesson.

We need to know God's strength.

Let's look now at my second highlight, the dream of the Midianite. God knew that Gideon was weak and needed a lot of reassurance. He's already asked for two signs. Now in verses 10-15, without asking, God gives Gideon a third sign to reassure him that God will give the victory. God has shown Gideon that Gideon is weak. Now God wants to show Gideon that God is strong. He tells Gideon to go into the Midianite camp and spy on them. That alone took some courage. We're told in verse 12 that the Midianite army was huge! They were "like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance." But the risk was worth the reward.

In the Midianite camp, Gideon overhears a man tell of a dream where a barley loaf—a weak, moldy barley loaf—rolls into the Midianite camp, comes into a tent, and struck the tent so that it fell flat. The Midianites interpreted this as sure victory for Gideon and Israel. And they were terrified. This dream strengthened Gideon. He's not strengthened by knowing that he's strong. He's strengthened by seeing that God is strong. We know this because in verse 15, when Gideon hears this news, he worships God. And this is the appropriate response to seeing that God saves through his strength, not ours! Gideon's assurance is demonstrated in the next scene in verses 16-25. That same night, Gideon gathered his meager (barley loaf of an) army and set a plan into motion. He had his men each take a lamp and a trumpet and surround the Midianite camp. This was brilliant. He was making his army appear and sound much bigger than it was. He's acting like the Wizard of Oz, who looks big and bad, but behind the curtain is really quite small and weak. And this strategy works. When the Israelites blow their trumpets during the middle of the night, the Midianites are caught off guard. They're unprepared and, because of the dream, are filled with fear. As they see the 2nd shift guards coming off duty and back into the camp, they think they're Israelites and they begin to fight each other. The Israelites never even wield a sword. The sword of Yahweh (v. 20) is against them. What that means is that they end up defeating themselves. This was God's plan all along. All of this highlights that Yahweh secured the victory. Although the Midianites were big and bad, and Gideon and his men were small and weak, God was strong. There's no enemy too big for God! God brought salvation to his people and he got the glory and worship!

Connection with the Gospel

This principle is so basic to Christianity. It's foreign to the world. But it's integral to God's way of salvation. God doesn't save by the might of man. God saves men and women, boys and girls, who know they're too weak to save themselves. And God does this by the cross of Jesus Christ, which is the ultimate symbol of weakness in the eyes of the world. It's through the "defeat" of the cross that God secures the victory. We're not saved by our own strength. We're saved by acknowledging our sin and weakness, by crying out, "I need you, Lord; I need you. Every hour I need you!" We're saved by trusting in God's strength found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you're here this morning trusting in your own strength and ability, you're trusting in the idols of the world. And they won't save you. They'll only lead to further oppression. God's calling you to tear down those idols and trust in Christ. He's calling you to bow down to him and worship him alone.

Faith not Fear

To close this morning, I want to look at the last feature in our text—the repeated theme of fear. There are many people in chapters 6-7 who are full of fear. Israel's afraid of the Midianite oppression. They fear (or worship) the Midianite gods. And Gideon's afraid of the Midianite army. I think we too are quite prone to fear. We also fear and worship false gods. We too fear persecution or rejection or opposition. We fear that this world is going to hell in a handbasket. But in Judges 6-7, we see an antidote to fear. Generally speaking it's faith. But more specifically it's faith that God promises to be with his people. God comes to Gideon and the first words out of his mouth are, "The LORD is with you..." (v. 12) Gideon questions God's presence, but then God reiterates that he will be with him (v. 16). God proves his presence with Gideon in the fire, the fleece, and in the dream. Then God manifested his presence to him by clothing him with the Holy Spirit (v. 34).

Gideon is struggling throughout the passage to have faith that God is with him and that God's presence will secure the victory, just as it did in Egypt. We also struggle to believe that God is with us. So what should we do? Judges calls us to cultivate God's presence by repenting of idolatry and living in right relationship with God. And we're called to believe that God is with us. The promise of God's presence in Judges is reiterated in the Great Commission. Humanly speaking, the commission Christ gave the church is a fearful thing—to go into the wild world and proclaim the gospel and make disciples. But we're given a promise that Christ will be with us to the end of the age through the Spirit. We're called to take God's message of salvation to the ends of the earth. We do this in weakness. We have this gospel in fragile jars of clay to show that the power comes from God and not us. The strength we need comes from God's presence. So we don't have to be afraid. I love the way Isaiah 43 puts it. I'll close with reading the first three verses.

Isaiah 43:1-3

¹But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ²When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior..."