

September 23, 2018

Scripture:

Judges 7: 1-25

Ephesians 3: 14-21

“The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men.”

“The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men.” --- this is a very peculiar phrase in a time of war.

Imagine if the General said to the Colonel --- “You have too many men.”

“You have too many men.” --- this is not a phrase generally associated with war.

“Give me more men please.”

“Give me more soldiers please.”

“I need more men.” --- that’s a phrase often associated with war --- but the phrase “You have too many men.” ---- that’s not often associated with war.

God doesn’t want the Israelites to ever even conceive that they might be responsible for winning this battle.

This battle --- like the Exodus from slavery in Egypt ---- is to be proof not of the powers of the Israelites ---- but instead another miraculous example of the power of God.

This battle is to be another example of God’s power --- of God’s ability to do just as God so pleases regardless of appearances.

Gideon starts out with 32,000 men to fight 135,000.

With 32,000 men set to fight 135,000 men there’s a ratio of 4.21 to 1 ----- there are 4.21 Midianites for every 1 Israelite.

Not great odds --- each Israelite would have to kill over 4 enemy soldiers in order to win ----- tough odds ---- but certainly not impossible.

But at this God says --- “You have too many men.”

A 1 to 4 ratio is less than desirable for sure ----- but if the 1 to 4 pulled it off the credit would most certainly go to the soldiers ---so ---- too many men according to God.

So God thins out the pack.

Not once but twice.

32,000 are reduced to 10,000 ---- “So twenty two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained” ----- verse 3 from Judges today.

But that is still too many.

The ratio has now fallen from 4.21 to 1 ----- to 13.5 to 1.

Each Israelite soldier would have to kill 13.5 Midianite soldiers for Israel to win now.

Those are even tough odds --- the chances of victory drop dramatically.

And yet ----- according to God ---- there are still too many men --- in fact according to God there are still far too many men.

So from 10,000 God narrows it down to 300.

So now we have 300 Israelite soldiers ready to fight 135,000 Midianite soldiers.

What started out as discouraging odds ----- 32,000 to 135,000 ---- went to unrealistic odds 10,000 to 135,000 ---- and now ends up foolish odds ----- 300 to 135,000.

What started out as 4.21 to 1 ---- went to 13.5 to 1 ---- now ends up at 450 to 1.

450 to 1.

For each 1 Israelite soldier there are 450 Midianite soldiers.

No general or Colonel or Lieutenant --- no military commander would enter into battle 450 to 1 ---- 300 against 135,000 and expect to win.

But as we soon see this is not a human battle ----- this is a divine slaughter.

Like the Exodus before this ---- this is not a human battle it is a divine slaughter.

And like the cross of Christ after this ----- this is not a human battle but a divine slaughter.

Theologian and Presbyterian pastor Tim Keller has some faithful and powerful observations about this battle between God and the Midianites in judges 7.

And of course this is not a battle between 2 armies ---- it is simply God building faith and trust for His people by demonstrating His power and authority.

Tim Keller rightly notes ---- the glory is God's --- and the privilege is ours.

The glory is God's and the privilege is ours.

And the privilege is us being included in what God is doing.

That's Gideon and the Israelites ---- that's Moses and the Israelites --- that's Jesus and the disciples and the cross ---- and that's us ---- as 21st century followers of Jesus Christ as well.

The glory is God's and the privilege is ours.

And the privilege is all about being permitted and invited ---- to be a part of what God is already doing.

Too often we think bigger is better.

A bigger TV is a better TV.

A bigger bank account is a better bank account.

A bigger church is a better church.

And so on.

And sometimes bigger is better.

But not always.

Here in judges 32,000 wasn't better than 10,000 ---- and 10,000 wasn't better than 300.

And 135,000 wasn't better than 300.

As Tim Keller noted regarding Judges 7 ---

“We cannot be saved if we think we are good or able.

God's saving power only works on us when we admit that we have no worthiness or goodness ourselves.”

If someone says to us --- “Hey I'll pay your car repair bill.” ----- we don't truly know how overjoyed we are until we know how big the bill is.

If someone says I'll pay your car repair bill and the bill comes out to \$78 and 30 cents we are not nearly as overjoyed if they say I'll pay your car repair bill and the bill comes out to say \$4,361.

The bigger we understand our debts to be ----- the greater the joy in their payment is.

As Jesus points out in Luke 7 verse 47 ----- someone who thinks there is very little in them to forgive --- a proud person ----- they will have little love for the Forgiver.

“Whoever has been forgiven little” ---Jesus says --- “loves little.”

Put another way ----- once we know how huge a mess we are and just how great the forgiveness is from God --- our love for Him grows exponentially.

Maybe something like say 450 to 1 instead of just 4.21 to 1.

God doesn't simply work despite our weakness ---- God works because of our weakness.

The weaker we are --- the more dependent we are on God --- and the more God works in and through us.

God knew there was no hope of Him being glorified if the odds were 4.21 to 1.

God knew there was no hope of Him being glorified if the odds were 13.5 to 1.

God knew there was only hope if the odds were 450 to 1.

That's' why he had only 300 stand up.

300 men defeating 135,000 men would show without question that God had a hand in their victory.

It is only once we come to a state of total dependency on God that there is any hope for us.

It is only once we come to a state of total dependency on God that God will ever choose us ---- privilege us ---- as Keller says --- to be a part of His plan.

And it isn't just about dependency in words --- saying we're dependent but not ever changing anything about ourselves.

God reduced the men by over 99%.

God left Gideon with less than 1% of what he started out with --- less than 1%.

Imagine if God took away 99% of what we have and value.

1% of what you started with isn't much at all ---- well Gideon had less than 1% of the men he started out with and in war --- soldiers are the first and the most important resource.

If God took away over 99% of what we have ---- we'd either fall apart --- or --- we'd grow into deeper trust and dependency on Him.

If we truly want to be dependent on God we better be ready to lose and lose a lot --- at least in appearances anyway.

The book of Judges reminds us that the Bible is not a nice little book about virtues and values ---- or a nice little book full of inspirational stories.

The book of Judges reminds us that the Bible is not a book about following moral examples.

The book of Judges reminds us about the God of mercy.

The book of Judges reminds us about the God of long suffering.

The book of Judges reminds us about the God who continually works in and through us despite our constant resistance to His purposes.

The book of Judges reminds us that God doesn't need a huge army to win.

The book of Judges reminds us that God is the one fighting --- God is the one saving --- and God is the one rescuing.

The 300 men don't defeat the 135,000 men ----- the 135,000 men defeat themselves in fear and foolishness while 300 simply follow as God so leads them.

The book of Judges reminds us that with one ----- God will defeat all --- and save all --- and set everything right.

We often think we need lots and lots ---- when all we need is to follow ---- follow God's lead --- even if it sounds a little wonky --- like sending home 31,700 men and keeping only 300 when facing 135,000.

In a certain sense ---- Judges is all about the movement from the perceived thought of the need for many --- to the reality of the need for just one.

In Judges we see a regular and repeated --- a systematic ---- decline ----- and revival cycle.

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And our passage today is a perfect example of this ---- as the people decline --- from 32,000 to 10,000 to 300 so revival comes --- so victory comes --- so salvation and freedom come.

We need a Saviour to win.

We need a Saviour to be saved.

Not more good advice --- not more money --- not more opportunity --- not more of anything --- just one man --- one person --- one Saviour --- Jesus Christ.

The regular ---- repeated --- systematic ----- decline ----- revival cycle in Judges reminds us ---- a decline in human effort --- a decline in us --- means a revival --- an increase --- in the grace and mercy and blessings of God.

God had to get rid of over 99% of the soldiers in order to demonstrate what He wanted to demonstrate --- that it is only He who is worthy of glory and praise ---- and victory.

That it is only He who can deliver ---- and save ---- and win.

And through 4 central figures in Judges God moves us closer and closer to Him and His power ----- and further and further from human effort.

Othniel --- Deborah --- Gideon --- and Samson --- are the 4 central human figures in the book of Judges --- and it's an interesting sequence of events that these 4 lives paint for us.

First of all ----- in the first period of the judges through Othniel we learn that God can save through all.

Then in Deborah ----- we learn that God can save through many.

Then In Gideon we learn that God can save through just a few.

And finally in Samson we learn that God can save through just one --- which of is a precursor to Jesus Christ.

Here in Judges we have a regular --- repeated --- systematic --- decline pattern.

All --- Othniel.

Many --- Deborah.

Few --- Gideon.

One ----- Samson.

The time of the Judges ---- is preparing the people for Jesus Christ ---- showing them that in the end salvation all boils down to just one.

One ----- Samson ---- prepares us for another one ---- Christ.

Our salvation comes not because of who we are --- how great --- or good --- or wonderful we may think we are.

Our salvation comes because of how dependent we are.

How dependant we are on God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit of God.

Othniel was a little dependent.

Deborah was a little more dependent than was Othniel.

Gideon was even more dependent on God than Deborah was.

Samson was even more dependent than was Gideon.

And we are even more dependent than Samson was.

The book of Judges paints a beautiful ---- regular --- repeated --- systematic - ---- schedule of human decline ---- and greater and greater dependency.

As one person said ---- “The mills of God may grind slow ----- but they grind incredibly fine.”

“The mills of God may grind slow ----- but they grind incredibly fine.”

It’s few hundred years --- this period of the judges ---- 300 or 400 years --- it takes God about 400 years to grind His people fine enough to see the details.

God will grind out the prideful --- God will grind out the divisive ---- God will grind out the chaff --- God will grind out whatever it is --- whoever it is that He knows needs to be ground out.

From 32,000 God ground out 300.

God ground out over 99% --- that’s a devastating percentage ----- but that was what God needed to do --- at that time and with those people --- in the time of Gideon.

What kind of general says to his commanders headed to war ----- “You have too many men.”?

“The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men.”

Further -----

“The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, ‘My own strength has saved me.’”

Sometimes ---- many times even ----- more times than we care to think --- God has to thin us out ---- strip us down to bare bones as a people of God --- ----- lest we be so foolish to think that what we are doing --- is on account of our efforts and not His.

Our passage from Ephesians today includes ---- verse 20 ---

“Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

That is precisely what happens in judges 7 today.

God does immeasurable more --- defeats 135,000 men ---- than we could ever ask or imagine according to His power working within us --- working within 300 men.

And He does this as Paul says in Ephesians ---- in order to remind them that to God be the glory.

We live in the age of the Spirit --- the age of the Holy Spirit.

Before Christ walked the earth --- it was the age of the Father.

When Jesus walked the earth it was the age of the Son.

And now we live in the age of the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus said ---- the Holy Spirit will come after He leaves.

John 14 verses 25 and 26 ---

“All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

And then in John 20 verses 21 and 22 ---

“Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.

And with that he breathed on them and said Receive the Holy Spirit.”

We now live in the age of the Spirit --- after Christ waling the earth is the age of the Holy Spirit.

So as Paul writes in our passage from Ephesians --- verse 16 ----

“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being...”

It is the Holy Spirit of God that now gives us power ---- and strength ---- and guidance ---- and wisdom.

As we await the return of our Lord in all His radiant ---- beauty --- and goodness ----- and glory --- we are sustained by the Holy Spirit of God.

As God points out in Judges today --- it is not more men and women that we need ----- it is more of God --- more of Jesus --- more of the Holy Spirit that we need.

It is not more men or more women ---- it is not more strength --- it is not more wisdom --- or moral examples or clever sayings that we need ----- it is God ---- Jesus --- and especially for us now living in the age of the Spirit --- more Holy Spirit.

And if we want to know more what it look like when the Spirit acts --- if we want to know more what it looks like when God speaks we simply have to read more scripture and pray more.

If a hockey player wants to be a better shooter ---- they practice shooting and shooting and shooting.

If a golfer wants to be a better golfer they practice hitting and hitting and hitting.

If a musician wants to be a better player --- they practice playing and playing and playing --- songs scales --- scales songs.

If we want to be better at knowing when it is that God is speaking ---- if we want to be better at knowing when it is that the Holy Spirit is moving and working --- than we have to read God's word ---- read God's word ---- read God's word.

Jesus said --- in John 10 verse 27 ---

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”

If we want to become better at recognizing the voice of God --- and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives we have to familiarize ourselves with that voice and with that presence ----- and the way we do that is by listening to the voice more and more and more.

Scripture contains the voice of God clearer than anything else.

If you want to know how better to know when it is God speaking and not just your wants --- practice by reading more scripture --- because there you'll learn to decipher between human words and God's words --- human voices and God's voice.

Gideon ---- check out chapter 6 --- Gideon learned to trust God and listen to Him ---- so when God says something seemingly insane --- like --- "You have too many men" ---- Gideon doesn't even once challenge or hesitate to follow this seemingly insane recommendation.

Gideon has already learned complete and utter dependency on God --- see chapter 6 --- he is already ready to follow God to the ends of the earth ---- He already knows the voice of his shepherd ---- and so he follows when the shepherd speaks.

Following God means following even when the requests seem ludicrous....

Ludicrous like ----- in facing these 135,000 men --- 32,000 are too many.

Ludicrous like ----- in facing these 135,000 men ----- 10,000 is too many.

Ludicrous like --- you will only need 300 to face and defeat these 135,000.

Ludicrous like --- get rid of over 99% of your men before going to war.

It's not just that less is more.

It's that less of us ---- and more of God --- is more.

It's that less of us means more of God.

It's that only when there is less of us --- is there any hope for more of God.

When we are weakest --- God is strongest.

God doesn't need huge numbers.

God just needs a faithful remnant of a people.

Look up the Biblical concept of the remnant --- and you'll see that God often pared down His people into smaller and smaller more and more faithful a people.

God just needs a handful few --- 300 from 32,000 is just a handful.

The Bible is all about the remnant faithful few --- and not the speak easy multitudes.

Judges reminds us of the regular ---- repeated --- systematic decline in person power.

What starts out with all ---Othniel --- ---- goes to many ---- Deborah --- --- goes to few --- Gideon ---- goes to one --- Samson.

God's great and saving rescue plan --- comes to completion --- fulfillment --
- in the very same movement as the book of Judges ----- from many --- to
few --- and then fewer --- until there is just one that is needed to save -----
Jesus Christ.

God doesn't need us --- it's already done ---- over --- completed --- fulfilled
accomplished.

God wins --- battle over.

The glory is God's and God's alone.

The privilege is ours ---- God doesn't need us ----- but the privilege is ours
to be included in --- to be a part of what God has already done in Jesus
Christ --- and continues to do through the Holy Spirit.

What joy that God is near and includes us in His great and saving plan.

What joy indeed.

And so because we are included ---- we get to proclaim --- "To God be the
glory."

To God be the glory.

And to us be the privilege of participating.

The privilege of participating --- being a part of it.

To God be the glory.

To Christ be the glory.

To the Holy Spirit of God ---- be glory.

Amen.