

## **What Gideon Reveals**

### **3. About Odds & Ends**

*Judges 7:1-23*

Danny Massie

First Presbyterian Church  
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In this brief series of sermons, we are trying to discern what Gideon's story may reveal that could help disciples today respond to the call of God in our own lives. We first examined the experience of Gideon as he was called of God to be the deliverer of the oppressed children of Israel. What was revealed is that Gideon, like us so often, had a difficult time believing that he was equipped to do the work that God was calling him to do. We learned that God doesn't call the equipped so much as he equips the called and when Gideon came to see himself as God saw him, he took up God's challenge.

Last week as we considered Gideon's "fleece tests" it was revealed that while God's people are always looking for confirming signs and evidence that God is with us or that God wishes to use us to serve his purposes. The fact remains that these signs are subject to various interpretations and the truth of the matter, whether we like it or not, is that we walk by faith and not by sight. We don't understand and therefore believe but rather we believe and are enabled to understand. Only as we believe and obey will we discover whether God can be taken at its word.

Today we come to another exciting episode in the Gideon saga, the story of Gideon's miraculous defeat of the great Midianite army with his small band of three-hundred soldiers. Gideon has always been for me an heroic and epic figure in the story of God's people. His defeat of the Midianites is an epic tale of how God's people can win overwhelming victories despite the odds transcending if the end they are serving is the will of our sovereign God.

Now if the story of Gideon and his little army of three-hundred is to have any practical value for those of us here today, then we need to see in this story more than simply the ancient tale of one man or one people's faithfulness centuries ago. This is not just the account of an amazing military victory. It reveals something essential to God's followers in every generation. Like Gideon, we too have been given a mission as servants of God and as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Like Gideon, we too have been called and commissioned to be liberators of oppressed people. The oppressors today may not be as visible as they were when the Midianites invaded Israel, but their work is every bit as demeaning and as dehumanizing. As recruits in the Lord's forces, as witnesses for Jesus Christ, you and I are called to help free people from the shackles that enslave them,

shackles of the mind, the body and the spirit. You and I have been commissioned by our Lord to go to the very ends of the earth teaching, preaching, and sharing the gospel. We have been recruited to liberate people from whatever it is that keeps them in bondage — be it sin, ignorance, poverty, disease, hunger, materialism, homelessness, despair, fear, prejudice, guilt, and the list goes on and on and on. The Christian Church is no less an army today than was that band of three hundred men so long ago, and even though we have removed much of the militaristic imagery from the liturgy and hymnody of the church in recent decades, we must never forget that as God's people we are engaged in a struggle (call it a battle) against the powers of darkness. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians "Put on the whole armor of God so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of devil for our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6:11-12)

*The Company of the Committed* by Quaker theologian D. Elton Trueblood was written back in 1961 and has profoundly influenced me. It seems more relevant to the church of today than even when it was written nearly fifty years ago. Listen to Trueblood's argument:

*One of the most surprising facts about the early Church was its fundamental similarity to a military band. This is hard for us to recognize today because the ordinary successful church of the twentieth century is about as different from an army as anything we can imagine. Instead of being under anything resembling military discipline we pride ourselves on our "freedom." We go and come as we like, as no soldier can do; we give or withhold giving as we like; we serve when we get around to it. Obedience is considered an irrelevant notion, and the theme of "Onward Christian Soldiers" is so alien to our experience that some churches avoid the hymn entirely. A few avoid it on the mistaken assumption that it glorified killing, which of course it does not. The military metaphor seems strained when it is applied to smartly dressed men and women riding in air-conditioned cars to air-conditioned "churches." (page 30)*

And he adds later:

*The idea of the Church as a military company was by no means strange to early Christians. Indeed, military language can be found in various parts of the New Testament. It need hardly be said that this language had no reference to killing, or preparation for destruction, but rather to the mood of men and women whose responsibilities were of the same demanding character as those of enlisted persons. Thus, it seems wholly natural to read of "Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier" (Philippians 2:25); of "a good soldier of Christ Jesus," with his share of suffering (II Timothy 23); of "Archippus our fellow soldier" (Philemon 2); of "the whole armor of God" (Ephesians 6:11). It is perfectly clear that early Christians*

*considered Christ their Commander-in-Chief, that they were in a company of danger which involved great demands upon their lives, and that to be a Christian was to be engaged in Christ's service. (page 31)*

To be sure, Jesus Christ has given his disciples a daunting and demanding mission to serve him and transform the world about us. You may well wonder how such a gigantic task can realistically be achieved? It seems that the odds against us are overwhelming. And here is where the story of Gideon and his army of three hundred can prove insightful, inspirational and revelatory. This ancient story that dating from more than three thousand years ago reminds us of some of the traits we must possess as the people of God if we would function as liberators in our own time.

To begin with, as God's people of liberation we must realize whose we are and whose battle we are waging. After Gideon had rounded up an army of some thirty-two thousand men, the Lord says to him: "The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, 'My own hand has delivered me.'" You see, the critically important thing that Israel needed learn was not just that she needed deliverance from the Midianites, but also that it was only the Lord God who could be her deliverer. That is to say, it was not merely redemption that God's people needed but also knowledge of their redeemer.

How well the Lord knew the human heart. If Gideon had gone up against the Midianites with an army of thirty-two thousand men, even though the Midianites numbered in an excess of one hundred thirty-five thousand, they might well have been victorious and may even have assumed that it was their own amazing might and prowess and military astuteness that delivered them. So, the Lord knew that if Israel were to be saved by her own strength and cunning, she could very well end up farther away from God than she was before. It was essential, therefore, that Gideon and his army realized that the battle was God's to fight and not theirs and that they were simply instruments in the hand of God.

I think there is a message for you and me to be found in this story. Any of us today who would be instruments of God called to liberate his children must recognize that ultimately those are God's battles and we are God's instruments. The mission of the church is God's mission. God is the one waging the war to redeem and reclaim his children who have become enslaved to countless oppressors. You and I are God's recruits, but the battle depends ultimately upon God and not upon us. If this is so then we can take heart in the knowledge that just as our successes will not insure victory, neither will our failures produce defeat. This is God's world and God's church and the Lord God is sovereign in both and will accomplish his purposes despite the enemy or the odds.

In addition, if we remember whose we are and whose battle we are waging, we will be less likely to despair as individuals over our seeming weakness, our lack of native gifts or even the smallness of our number as the people of God. Who could possibly have imagined that an army of three hundred could route an army of one hundred thirty-five thousand, but it did! When those three hundred recruits spread out among the surrounding hills, lit their torches, broke their jars, and blew their trumpets and began to descending into the foreign camp shouting, "For the Lord and for Gideon" the Midianite camp became stricken with panic and fear. All of a sudden, the Midianites, the Amalakites, and the other nomadic tribes that had joined this loose federation, drew their swords and began killing one another in the darkness and pandemonium. According to chapter eight when they finished killing one another and fleeing, only fifteen thousand of the original one hundred thirty-five thousand troops remained alive.

Yes indeed, who could have imagined that an army of three hundred could defeat an army of one hundred thirty-five thousand? And yet they did so, and in a dramatic fashion. If our end, our goal, is to honor and serve God then the odds are irrelevant. If God is with us then we are a majority, despite the numbers. Size is inconsequential. Whether we are a band of three hundred, three thousand years ago, or a band of less than three thousand right here in Greensboro, all it takes is a real commitment to God and the willingness to be used by God.

So, if we would be used of God in our day to be liberate people and to help them discover the life that God desires for all of his children, and if this church would buy into that mission, then we must first remember whose we are and whose battle we are waging.

Secondly, we might notice that when the Lord began reducing the size of Gideon's army, he placed a high premium on courage. He instructed Gideon saying: "Proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.'" With that announcement twenty-two thousand packed it up and returned home, leaving only ten thousand troops with Gideon.

I suppose that those twenty-two thousand who returned home ought to be commented for their candor if not their courage. Still in all, let it be said that if we genuinely wish to have our lives count for God within this world, if we want our church to count for something, if we want to be in a position to challenge the forces that would demean and enslave the children of God, then it will be incumbent upon us to take risks, to become vulnerable, to lay our prestige, our popularity, our power, and our very lives on the line for Jesus Christ. There comes a time in the life of each believer and each family of faith when great courage is required in order to be faithful, because if we say "yes" to God we must of necessity say "no" at times to the world. If there are divine truths to which we are committed, then there are demonic practices and policies we must reject.

To be responsible steward in an age of materialism, to be a peacemaker in an age of alienation, to be a defender of the poor, a protector of the weak, to speak the truth to the entrenched powers of this world requires courage. To stand for what is right, even in a losing cause, to risk being misunderstood, or being ridiculed, or being abused is not for the faint hearted. The truth of the matter is that apart from courage there is little faith and less obedience and precious few opportunities to be used as vessels of the Lord. Paul reminds young Timothy, "God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." (*II Tim. 1:7*)

Thirdly and finally, I would like for us to pay close attention to the last test the Lord uses in order to reduce the size of Gideon's army of liberation. He told Gideon to take his ten thousand remaining men down to the water and allow them to drink, but to watch them carefully and separate the ones who cupped the water in their hand and lapped it like a dog from the ones who laid down their arms and got down on their knees, brought their hands to their faces and drank the water. There were only three hundred who did not get down on their knees and in the process, they alone became the faithful few who routed the Midianites and were used of God in a mighty way.

Some commentaries suggest there may well have been nothing significant in this last test. Maybe it was just an arbitrary way of reducing the number because the main objective was to reduce the army to such a size that would require the troops to depend upon the Lord. And yet, I cannot help but believe that this strange test might be indicative of something more profound. Could it be that the very way the men drank their water was an indication of their single-mindedness, their constant readiness, their whole-hearted commitment to the mission before them, and their refusal to allow anything, even their own thirst or their own need for nourishment to distract them from their primary mission of being ready for the enemy and always at God's disposal. You see, the ones who got down on both knees and brought their hands to their faces had to lay down their weapons in the process. But the ones who refused to get down on both knees and who refused to use both hands were ready at a moment's notice to engage in battle.

A few weeks ago, Doug McLeroy in our Vesper Service reminded us of another soldier who was single-minded in his devotion. Do you recall Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba who was all but murdered by King David? Remember David had fallen in love with Bathsheba and forced himself upon her while Uriah was away in battle. Bathsheba conceived David's child and so to cover up his sin David had Uriah return from the front in hopes that Uriah would sleep with his wife. Thus, in months to come the child she was carrying would be regarded as her husband's. But Uriah was a more dedicated soldier than David dared to imagine. He steadfastly refused, not only to sleep with his wife, but to eat or to drink while his fellow soldiers were still engaged in battle and were being denied such pleasures. So it was that David arranged to have Uriah slain by having him placed in the front of the battle. He thought no one would know of course, but the Lord knew.

Like Uriah, Gideon's three hundred may simply have been characterized by single-mindedness, by commitment to their sacred mission above all else. The Danish philosopher and theologian Soren Kierkegaard once wrote that "Purity of heart is to will one thing." For Gideon's army of three hundred, their commitment to the task at hand mattered more than their personal pleasure or their personal needs, and that of course prompts me to ask each of us where our commitment to Jesus Christ falls on our scale of values. What is our commitment to Christ and his church? What is our personal commitment to the work God has given us to do?

Single-mindedness, unwavering commitment to the liberating work of Jesus Christ — that is what the Christian Church needs today and that is what this congregation needs if we hope to be faithful and effective in the work God has given us. It is not simply enough to know whose we are and whose mission we are on. It is not enough to be gifted with courage. It is also necessary that we see the work of the church and God's calling to each of us as the single most important thing in life, more important than our own needs or our personal pleasures. And my friends, the time you spend, the talents you use, and the resources you give are an indication of the level of your commitment.

We here at First Presbyterian Church of Greensboro may be only a small part of the army of the Lord and yet we are an important part for our time and place. Indeed, we are actually an army much smaller than the nearly three thousand whose names are on our rolls. Not all of these are engaged in the Lord's service. All of them do not worship, nor do they serve, nor do they give of themselves to the mission of the church. But it's not the numbers but the commitment of the few that God needs. When God is with us the odds are not against us.

This community and this world needs what God can accomplish through us. Countless people about us and among us need a relationship with the living Lord. They need education, healing and wholeness. There are still battles for us to wage in our own time. And like any other army, we may be tempted at times to worry more about our wages than our work, to be more interested in our rations than in our armor, to be more concerned about our survival than our effectiveness. And yet, those whom God calls he also equips to do his work. And it is my prayer that as individuals and as a church we will be found faithful and effective in the mission before us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.