



SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 7:1-8:35

To learn about Gideon's 300 men, and the power of God to do impossible things.

This is Sparta!

One of the most iconic movie moments from the early 2000's was Gerard Butler's King Leonidas yelling in fury the unforgettable words, "This is Sparta!" The movie 300 was in many ways the first of its kind. It was the first real mainstream movie directed by Zack Snyder, with Frank Miller serving as an executive producer, and the visual effects of the movie were in a class of their own. The movie centered around the nearly legendary Battle of Thermopylae (Gk. "The Hot Gates) in 480 BC, and chronicles a *fictional* imagining of King Leonidas I and his 300 men (and, well, a few thousand Arcadians and other Greeks). Leonidas uses the narrow pass in Thermopylae as a force multiplier, which allows his mere 300 men to stave off wave upon wave of Persians. This is most definitely what makes the story compelling. It seems unreasonable and unbelievable that 300 men could defeat thousands of soldiers, because of their skill in battle and the close quarters of the Hot Gates, the Persians couldn't leverage their numbers. In the end, the 300 men die, but not without causing considerable damage to their enemies first.

Today, we will continue to look at Gideon's narrative as a judge of Israel, and examine *the original* 300 story. The Judges timeline falls nearly 600 years before the Battle of Thermopylae and there are some significant differences. Gideon, unlike Leonidas, is merely a judge, not a king. The enemy is not the Persians but the Midianites. And crucially, Gideon's 300 men are successful in their war efforts, not because of a land force multiplier, but because the Spirit of God is with them (Jg. 7:7).

The Context

Chapter 7 begins by bringing us back to continue the story begun in Judges 6:33: “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.” Now, in the beginning of chapter 7, “Midian was north of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley” (Jg. 7:1). Gideon strategically encamped near water, knowing that his men would fare better after having been refreshed by the water to both drink and cool down. There is a little bit of likely wordplay happening here, as well. Gideon and his army stop at, “the spring of Harod” (Jg. 7:1). Harod in Hebrew means literally, “trembling.” Is Gideon still trembling at the idea of facing the Midianites? Are the rest of his men scared? The wordplay suggests some kind of fear is present.

Attacking the Midianites

The main thrust of chapters 7 and 8 are the military successes of Gideon against the Midianites. However, before God will send them to battle, he demands that some of Gideon’s army goes home. Usually, in a war setting, the more people you have, the better. However, God does not want the people of Israel to get the idea that their victory is because of them, but rather God (Jg. 7:2). God instead gives Gideon a series of commands to reduce the number of men that will go to fight with him. Below is a breakdown of these events.

PRUNING THE NUMBERS, PT. 1

The first thing that God commands Gideon to do is tell the men, “Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead” (Jg. 7:3). The, “trembling” concept now comes to light. Here, at the, “Spring of Trembling,” Gideon asks the soldiers who are trembling in fear to go home. It’s at this time, by simple math, that we realize how many men were with Gideon: “Then 22,000 of the people returned, and 10,000 remained” (Jg. 7:3). Gideon had around 32,000 men, and after this one simple request, two thirds of his army vanish.

PRUNING THE NUMBERS, PT. 2

Apparently, 10,000 men was still too many men for God to feel ok with going to battle. The next request is to take the remaining men to the water to drink, and the manner in which the men drink will be the separating factor. Those who, “lap the water with his tongue, as a dog laps,” (Jg. 7:5) will be sent home, and those who drink with their hands will be allowed to stay. The remaining number of soldiers after this effort is a mere 300 men.

THE PLAN OF ATTACK

After Gideon sneaks into the Midianite camp and hears two soldiers talking about a dream one of them had that predicted Gideon’s military successes, Gideon returned to camp, and he and his men were ready to attack. Gideon divides them into three groups of 100, and gives each of them a trumpet and an empty jar with a torch in it (and notably, not a sword). He commands his 300 men in verse 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.’” The plan was executed without problem, and the Midianites were run out and ultimately captured and destroyed.

Doubt

Regarding the sequence where Gideon visits the Midianite camp and overhears prophetic dream, it would be an oversight not to come back to the topic of doubt for a moment. Gideon has already demonstrated his propensity to doubt God. This time, however, we see God offer this reassurance rather than Gideon demand

it. God says in Judges 7:10-11: “But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant. And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.” God recognizes that Gideon might be afraid to do what God is asking him to do, and so he offers him a sign of reassurance. This speaks to the character of God deeply. God, as we found out last week, can handle our skepticism. In some cases, He is sensitive to it and acts in order to bring us to a place of faith. Genuine doubt does not entail a lack of willingness to be obedient, but an inability to comprehend how what God is asking is even possible. God’s graciousness to meet Gideon in his fear and reassure Him is what ultimately leads Gideon to obedience.

A Sad Ending

Gideon’s story seems like it should be a happy one, but in the end, it takes a turn for the worse. We see two aspects of Gideon that are very unfortunate and only serve to incur more judgment onto the people of God in the long run.

AN ANGER PROBLEM (8:4-17)

The first major issue that we find in Gideon is his anger issue. While pursuing the Midianite kings who escaped the initial siege, Gideon attempts to recruit the men of Succoth and the men of Penuel to feed and care for his 300 men, and neither of them are willing to help. After capturing the kings, he returns to Succoth and flails the flesh of the elders with thorns and briers from the wilderness, presumably to death. It is not clear if they die from this event, but given that he also kills the men of Penuel, it seems likely. This is not the way we would expect Gideon to act. To this point, he has been more reserved and unwilling to act unless God proved that He was with Gideon. Now, on the backside of victory, a much more emboldened Gideon exacts an ugly kind of revenge.

AN IDOLATRY PROBLEM (8:22-28)

Beyond murder, he returns home and creates an idol made from gold jewelry that had been melted down: “the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold” (Jg. 8:26). This is roughly 43 lbs worth of gold! Gideon used the gold to make, “an ephod” (Jg. 8:27). We aren’t given the exact shape or nature of the idol, but whatever it was, “All Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family” (Jg. 8:27). This should come as a shock given that Gideon, also called Jerubbaal, came into the Judges narrative by destroying the altar for Baal (Jg. 6:25-27); he leaves the Judges narrative having crafted another altar for idolatry. This led more naturally to the people of Israel turning back to Baal after the death of Gideon, which again began the cycle of sin and rebellion which would eventually lead to more judgment. In addition to worshipping Baal, the people of Israel also did not honor Gideon’s family though he had saved them from the Midianites (Jg. 8:35). However, while he was alive, “the land had rest for forty years” (Jg. 8:28).

What About Now?

The story of Gideon communicates many important lessons for today. For one, God is willing to meet us in our doubt and graciously lead us to faith and obedience. Secondly, God will sometimes use the most unlikely circumstances to do something supernatural for the specific purpose that no one would be able to take credit for it but God Himself. Perhaps the most important lesson we learn, however, is that despite being used by God in powerful ways, our character defects still have the potential to sabotage us if we do not get them under control. Gideon’s anger that led him to murder the men of Succoth and Penuel wasn’t new, but had likely been with him his whole life. For one reason or another, after great military success, he was more willing to act aggressively, and that provided a great outlet for his anger. The same can be said about his propensity

towards idolatry. Sometimes, we can be guilty of believing that a certain level of faith or maturity exempts us from the threat of idolatry, and Gideon proves that this is not true. We are always at risk, and thus we should always come back to the Scripture and measure our actions and intentions according to it.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Judges 7:1-8. Where did Gideon and his men camp? According to the notes, what is the significance of this place? Describe the process that God used to reduce the number of men that were with Gideon. Why did God want there to be fewer men?

2. Read Judges 7:9-18. What did God tell Gideon to do in order to know that he would have success against the Midianites? What was the dream that the Midianite soldier recalled? What was the plan of attack that Gideon gave to his men?

Day Two

1. Read Judges 7:19-23. Describe the attack on Midian in your own words.

2. Read Judges 7:24-8:3. Who did Gideon call to follow the fleeing Midianites? Why were the men of Ephraim upset with Gideon? What did Gideon say in response to their complaints?

Day Three

1. Read Judges 8:4-9. What did Gideon request of the men of Succoth and Penuel? What was their response? How did Gideon respond to this?

2. Read Judges 8:10-17. How did Gideon capture the two Midianite kings? Who did Gideon capture next? What list did he give Gideon? What did Gideon do with the men of Succoth and Penuel?

Day Four

1. Read Judges 8:18-28. How did Gideon kill the two Midianite kings? What did Gideon do afterwards? How much gold was given to him, and what did he do with it? Where was the idol located?

2. Read Judges 8:29-35. How many sons did Gideon have before he died? What was the name of his son born from his concubine? How old was Gideon when he died? What happened to the people of God after Gideon died?
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Week 6 Discussion: Character Defects

Gideon's last chapters are surprising for more reasons than one. After seeing God perform miracle after miracle in defeating the Midianites, Gideon is still pulled under by his own character defects. He murders the men of Succoth and Penuel, and he creates an idol for idol worship that becomes, "a snare to Gideon" (Jg. 8:27). What we come to learn through Gideon is that our character defects will work against us even in spite of experiencing God's power. Talk as a group about your own character defects and how you relate to a character like Gideon because of them, and why our focus should not be God's power, but His Gospel.

1. Icebreaker: Do you have any character defects that you have identified in your own life (e.g. co-dependence, self-reliance, insecurity, etc.)?
2. How have your character defects sabotaged what God was trying to do through you?
3. Have you ever accessed a Freedom Group or another means of dealing with those character defects? Why or why not?
4. Does having character defects mean that God cannot love you? Did God love Gideon?
5. How does being in touch with your own character defects help you relate to and love others when they are being difficult?
6. How important is it for the church to have a system that addresses character defects?

Takeaways:

1. Gideon is used by God to defeat the Midianites.
2. Gideon's anger problem led him to murder the men of Succoth and Penuel for not helping him and his men.
3. Gideon also crafted an altar for an idol that he created, and began to participate in idolatry, a marked shift from his actions as *Jerubbaal*.

PRAYER REQUESTS: