

Judges 7A

- Have you ever wondered why God bothers to work through mankind to accomplish His purposes?
 - God has all the power to do anything He wishes without anyone else involved
 - He made the entire universe merely by speaking it into existence
 - He holds it together by the power of His word
 - So why bother partnering with weak, sinful humanity?
 - Clearly, the reason God works through men *can't* be because we bring something useful to the process
 - We aren't invited into God's work to improve the outcome
 - God invites us to join Him at work so He can improve us
 - This is exactly the plan for Gideon
- We know the Lord is working to free Israel from the Midianites
 - That's the cycle of the period of Judges
 - Israel falls, God punishes, the people repent, the Lord rescues
 - So we know a rescue is coming
 - But we also know the people of Israel are becoming increasingly weak spiritually
 - So all that remains to be seen is how the Lord will accomplish His purpose through this weak people
 - So far, Lord has chosen His hero: a weak, wavering man named Gideon
 - As we saw last week, Gideon is unaccustomed to hearing the Lord
 - When the Lord spoke to Gideon, he was unsure if it was the Lord
 - And then when Gideon received confirmation the Lord was calling him, he doubted the Lord's commitment to be with him

- So Gideon demanded a sign
- And then when a sign was given, Gideon doubted the Lord's sincerity
- Gideon was about as weak a follower of the Lord as we might find in all the Bible
- And yet here's the Lord endeavoring to work through him
- So back to our question for the morning
 - Why does the Lord need Gideon?
 - Well, as we can see, it's actually Gideon that needs the Lord
 - Gideon needs to learn to hear and trust the Lord
 - He needs to recognize that the Lord's word can be trusted
 - He has to understand that the Lord has the power to keep His promises
 - And that Gideon's success doesn't depend on his own strength
 - So if the Lord is going to demonstrate these things to His servant Gideon, how best can God teach this lesson?
 - Wouldn't we expect the Lord to put Gideon in situations where his weak faith can be strengthened?
 - Shouldn't we expect the Lord to expose the error of Gideon's fearful nature?
 - And through these circumstances, the Lord can teach Gideon to trust in Him without reservation or doubt
- That's exactly what the Lord intends to do even as He works to free Israel
 - Remember at the end of chapter 6 last week, the Midianites were raiders were massing on the eastern border of Canaan
 - They were preparing to ride into the land, as was their pattern every year, to pillage the people of Israel
 - But this year the Lord has called Gideon to lead the defense of Israel against this imposing enemy
 - So now Gideon begins to recruit his army to fight the Midianites

[Judg. 7:1](#) 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.

[Judg. 7:2](#) The Lord said to Gideon, "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.'

[Judg. 7:3](#) "Now therefore come, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever is afraid and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead.'" So 22,000 people returned, but 10,000 remained.

- The one who contends with Baal (Jerubbaal), the one who mows down adversaries (Gideon) assembled an army in northern Canaan in the Jezreel Valley
 - The camp of the enemy had now crossed the Jordan River from their home territory in Ammon and Moab
 - They are staging near the hill of Moreh
 - From this position they can proceed southward by way of valleys leading through the heart of the land
 - Every major settlement in the land would be vulnerable to their marauding
 - All that stands between them and the people is Gideon's fledgling army
 - We learn in v.3 that Gideon has succeeded in recruiting 32,000 men into his army
 - That number sounds impressive until we remember that the Midianites have 135,000 men in their army
 - So Gideon is outnumbered by more than 4:1
 - And don't forget the Midianites have camels, which Israel doesn't
 - And the Midianites are experienced fighters, while Israel has no standing army
 - So by any assessment, Israel is at a significant disadvantage in this fight
 - But we're not worried, are we?

- We know the Lord is on Israel's side
- So although those numbers aren't very reassuring, we know the Lord can win the battle anyway
- But then in v.2 the Lord declares that Gideon has *too many* men for this battle
 - The Lord says that the people of Israel might be inclined to see their victory as a result of their own hands
 - And of course if they were come to that conclusion, then they would miss the point of what the Lord was doing
 - More over they would deny the Lord the glory that was rightfully His
 - But wait a minute, the odds are already stacked against Gideon and Israel?
 - If his ragtag army of 32,000 beats 135,000 warriors on camels, then certainly the Lord would receive the glory, no?
 - The Lord has allowed Israel to win battles with even stronger odds under Joshua or other judges
 - So the Lord isn't opposed to winning with strong armies
 - But for some reason in this case, Israel's army is still too strong
 - So the Lord instructs Gideon how he will whittle down his forces
 - He tells Gideon to release those from service who are fearful and trembling at the notion of the fight
 - We might assume every man facing battle against a superior foe might be fearful
 - But obviously, some men are more prone to fear
 - While everyone was feeling fear, some men were allowing their fear to control them, leading them to tremble
 - This was in keeping with the Law in Deut 20 that says Israel may not force the fearful into battle but should offer them the opportunity to return home
 - These are the men Gideon is to release, and when he did, he suddenly found his forces reduced by nearly 70%

- Rather than 32,000 men, he now had only 10,000 men
- Now Gideon is outnumbered by more than 13:1
- Surely now Gideon's odds are sufficiently long enough to ensure God gets the credit when Israel wins the battle

Judg. 7:4 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. Therefore it shall be that he of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go with you; but everyone of whom I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go."

- The Lord tells Gideon He must reduce their numbers even further!
 - In fact, the Lord is about to reduce Gideon's army to a ridiculously small size
 - Gideon is already working with a skeleton group, so what does God accomplish by making it so pitiful?
 - Once again, we can only assume the Lord has some other purpose at work here
 - We begin to get our answer in the next part of the story
 - He orders Gideon to take his troops down to the waters of the Springs of Ein Harod to "test" them, the Lord says
 - In the course of this test, the Lord says He will tell Gideon which men to keep and which to dismiss
 - In other words, the Lord will choose His army according to His standards
 - And what standard do you think the Lord will use to select His army?
 - Perhaps He will apply a test of strength so that only the strongest will remain
 - Or perhaps the Lord will test their warfare skills or their bravery
 - Or perhaps the Lord will test their spiritual strength and faith
 - But the Lord's test focuses on none of these things
 - Instead, the Lord devises a curious almost nonsensical test

Judg. 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.”

Judg. 7:6 Now the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was 300 men; but all the rest of the people kneeled to drink water.

Judg. 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.”

Judg. 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.

- The Lord’s test will examine the way men chose to drink from the water of the Spring
 - The Lord says those who drink water in a conventional manner would be separated from those who drank in an unconventional way
 - When you don’t have a cup or canteen, the natural way to drink water from a stream is to kneel down next to water, placing your mouth into the stream
 - Or perhaps even to wade into the water and drink by cupping your hands
 - But the Lord says some men will chose to drink the water like a dog, lapping at the water in their hands
 - In v.6 the Lord describes the process of these men as lapping at the water in their hands, as they bring their hands to their mouth
 - Now why would someone drink in such a strange way?
 - If you have brought your hand to your mouth, why lap at it?
 - Why not just drink the water in a natural way?
- Some have suggested that this was a tactic to maintain awareness of your surroundings
 - They propose that by lapping the water a person could maintain a clear view of the horizon
 - In this way they were wise to maintain vigilance against the enemy’s attack

- Unfortunately this conjecture is not only wrong, it's the opposite of what the Lord is trying to accomplish by His test
- In Jewish culture, the lowest animal was not the pig (as we might assume)...it was the dog
 - Remember, when the Jews wanted to cast an insult upon the Gentiles, they didn't call them pigs
 - Israel called Gentiles dogs
 - Even scripture uses the term to describe the most ungodly of men
 - For example, speaking of those in the Lake of Fire, the Lord says

Rev. 22:15 Outside are the **dogs** and the sorcerers and the immoral persons and the murderers and the idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices lying.

- Further proof that poodles will not be present in the New Jerusalem (can I get a Amen?)
- So in v.5 God specifically describes these men as drinking "as a dog"
 - In later generations when the children of Israel read this story and heard the Lord compare these men to a dog, they would have interpreted it as the worst possible comparison
 - That's how we should understand it
 - These men aren't the most savvy warriors...they are the dogs, the least of the men
- So out of Gideon's 10,000 men, the vast majority chose to drink water from the brook in a conventional manner
 - But 300 men took to drinking out of their hands lapping like dogs
 - The Lord said *these* are the guys He wants on Gideon's team
 - Even the perfect number of the them (300) confirms for us that this is the Lord's doing
 - So now thanks to the Lord's efforts Gideon's army is out numbered 450:1
 - As the Lord declared, this is a number guaranteed to bring God all the credit once the victory is won

- Nevertheless, had the victory been won by 10,000 men or even 32,000 men, we would still have reason to credit God with the outcome
- Obviously, this ridiculously small force only serves to reinforce that truth
- But my point is that the reduction in force wasn't merely a matter of increasing the degree of difficulty for God
- There must be something else at work here...
- Notice that God's first step of diminishing Gideon's army centered on removing those who were fearful
 - God was indicating that fear has no part in following the Lord to victory
 - Then the Lord told Gideon to remove those who thought and acted in conventional ways, according to man's normal tendencies
 - Leaving behind the weak, the despised, those who weren't like the world
- The Lord constructed an impossibly small force by removing fear, eliminating human convention and personal honor
 - The message the Lord is sending is starting to become clear
 - Those who wish to serve the Lord and see the victory can't serve in fear
 - Those who God calls must be willing to set aside human conventions about success and strength
 - God will do impossible things in ways only He can, so when we fear we're saying we don't have faith in His power or goodness
 - And when we rely on human standards of wisdom and strength, we're pushing the Lord off His throne as it were
- The Lord constructed this entire exercise to expose the weaknesses in Gideon's faith, especially his tendency to live in fear rather than in faith in God's strength
 - The Lord has taken Gideon's army down to the point that Gideon couldn't have helped but experience fear and doubt

- Even the bravest man would have felt the pressure as the Lord took more and more men away
- And even the most faithful follower would begin to doubt in his ability to win this war
- But that fear was completely unnecessary when you remember the Lord could have defeated the Midianites with even zero men
 - The size of the human army is completely irrelevant to the outcome
 - The Lord is systematically diminishing the army's size merely to trigger Gideon's fear so He can teach Gideon to put it aside
 - Gideon needed to see that human limitations are irrelevant when considering what God can accomplish through us
- If God's people allow fear to guide our choices for when and how to follow God, we're going to spend a lot more time worrying and a lot less time following
 - If we decide what God can accomplish based on human convention or personal abilities, then we're never going to see miracles
 - Remember, Gideon was ready to turn down his opportunity to serve God because he thought he didn't possess the proper pedigree
 - And he was so afraid to follow the Lord into battle that he required multiple signs to be convinced
 - Think what he would have missed out on experiencing had the Lord not addressed His fears?
- Spiritual maturity requires that we move beyond seeing our weaknesses as barriers for God
 - Who we are or what odds we face in ministry or life in general are merely opportunities for God to demonstrate His power through us
 - Assuming we are walking with the Lord and answering His call, then we can be sure He will show up to win the battles we face
 - But if that's the kind of walk you want, then you need to be prepared to see the Lord expose and test those weakness standing in your way

- The Lord reduced Gideon's number to a point where Gideon experienced a crisis of faith
- So that Gideon could face his fears and realize they were barriers to faithful service
- Whatever stands in the way of your service to God needs to be exposed as well...and the Lord is an Expert at exposing weakness
- So in the face of fear, Gideon hears the the Lord say in v.7 that He was now ready to deliver the Midianites into Gideon's hands
 - This man, a man full of doubt, a man lacking the proper pedigree, a man accompanied by 300 "dogs" was going to defeat an army of 135,000
 - I would have loved to see the expression on the 300 men remaining – to say nothing of Gideon himself – when God gave His final order
 - I'm sure every man was trying to put on a brave face
 - And then to make matters worse, we hear in v.8 that the entire camp of the Midianites is visible down below in the valley
 - The Jezreel valley is surrounded by five high peaks
 - From each peak, you have a spectacular view of a wide open plain miles wide
 - This army of Midianites with their camels and tents would have virtually filled this valley
 - Imagine 300 men standing atop one of these peaks looking down on such a force
 - What is going on in their hearts? Once again, the answer has to be fear
- So to reassure the men, the Lord extends His grace to the men

Judg. 7:9 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.

Judg. 7:10 "But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp,

Judg. 7:11 and you will hear what they say; and afterward your hands will be strengthened that you may go down against the camp." So he went with Purah his servant down to the outposts of the army that was in the camp.

- Notice the Lord says to Gideon go into battle, but then He qualifies the command
 - He says I don't want you to enter my service in a fearful spirit
 - The emotion of fear is not an irrational response to circumstances
 - It is highly rational
 - Fear says something about what we believe about our situation
 - Fear means we have considered possibilities and have an expectation of the worst case outcome
 - For example, imagine you hear a strange noise while lying in bed one night
 - You could conclude it's just the sound of the house settling or an animal running across the roof
 - Or you could assume a thief has entered your house and is preparing to enter your bedroom and attack you
 - One assumption will allow you to fall back asleep easily
 - The other assumption will leave you in a breathless panic fearing what follows
 - If you experience fear, then you know you have determined that the thief explanation is the more likely possibility
 - Fear isn't raw, irrational emotion; it's based on considered assumptions, however unlikely
 - So when we fear in the face of God's call, we're saying something about our view of God and our trust in His power and goodness
 - If you fear what may happen to a son or daughter sent into mission work, then you are demonstrating a lack of confidence in God's ability to care for them no matter what they face
 - Or else you are indicting God's wisdom and purposes should He decide to allow your children to experience difficult times
 - Either way, our fear of what may follow from obeying God's call indicts either God's sovereignty or God's goodness

- Fear in our relationship with the Lord is a sin
 - And that's why the Lord has been at work to expose Gideon's fear in these circumstances
 - God wants Gideon to walk with Him in confidence
- Having said that, the Lord is not without mercy for His fearful, doubting children
 - And so the Lord makes accommodation for Gideon's fear
 - He says if you fear, sneak down into the camp with Purah, another member of the 300
 - His name means fruitful, so will he be for Gideon's faith
 - I love the way the Lord sends Gideon a friend to help him in his time of fear
 - The Lord could have just easily told Gideon to go down by himself
 - But the Lord knew that when we're fearing, we are strengthened by friends working with us
 - And the Lord promises that when they go into the camp, they will hear something that will strengthen their confidence
 - What could they possibly hear that would make them more confident in defeating 135,000 men?
 - The only thing we might imagine could be cause for confidence would be a report that exactly 134,700 of the Midianites were going on vacation
 - We'll learn what they hear next week, but even now we can see God's lesson to Gideon
 - If the Lord can deliver a message of courage through the mouths of the enemy, then surely He's in control of everything and everyone
 - No man's actions or outcomes in life are outside God's control
 - And therefore, on what basis do we have to fear?
 - If God is for us, who can be against us?

