

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Judges 7.

The book of Judges follows chronologically to the book of Joshua, and it'll take us, historically, almost 340 years forward in Israel's history to the time of their first king, King Saul. But Joshua takes us up to the time that Joshua died. It's the first generation that came into the Land of Promise after that generation that left Egypt died in the wilderness (remember?) through unbelief. By the time that Joshua died, there's another generation that's coming up; it's really the third one since they've left Egypt. Joshua left everything in good shape - the people knew the LORD, they knew His power. They had defeated the thirty-one biggest city kingdoms, if you will, in the land. Everyone had been given their place to occupy as far as being tribes. They were told to purge the remaining heathen people out from their areas, not to allow them to stay or to continue. The problem was the next generation didn't follow suit, and because of that, this generation that followed Joshua's death didn't know the LORD, didn't know His power. They left the idolaters in place. It wasn't long before these little, small areas of agitation became great problems for the children of Israel, and it left them really facing the God who loves them but facing His wrath. And so it's not a happy book in many ways - the book of Judges - because it's 340 years of problems, problems that kind of are systemic, and they are circular.

There are seven sin-dromes, as we call them - procedures whereby we find the children of Israel at rest, blessed, and, as a result of not having any pressure on their life, they rebelled against God one way or another. A lot of times it was idolatry, certainly involvement with the world. God loved them enough to chastise them so they became aware of their sin. Sometimes that was quick; sometimes it wasn't very quick. Eventually they repented because it was more horrible than they imagined. They weren't getting out of sin what they hoped. And though most of the people did not repent at one time, many of them did. God delivered them all. He sent a deliverer.

There are fifteen judges in the book; actually one or two of them are really not judges, but they ruled during that time so we've listed them for you in the handout that we've given you. If you don't have a handout of all the judges, they are at the

back counter tonight. And then God would provide a deliverer, someone that would lead the people, in times of tremendous difficulty, back to the LORD. And it would almost always last less than a generation before that whole process began again. So, we've seen Othniel and a guy named Ehud and a guy named Shamgar and Deborah, along with Barak.

And then last week we started, in chapter 6, with the fifth judge, a fellow named Gideon. And Gideon's a guy that we get his whole life story just like we will in a few weeks in Samson, as well. But Gideon's story is found in chapters 6, 7 and 8. Chapter 6 was all about his development in faith. Chapter 7 is all about the victory that faith can bring. Unfortunately, we are going to end tonight in chapter 8 with where faith can fail.

But last week we started chapter 6, and there's that familiar story - you can look at verse 1. "Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD delivered them into the hand of an oppressor, this time the Midianites, for seven years, and they prevailed against Israel." And Israel suffered, and their crops were being taken; they were living in squalor and in caves, and it took a while, but they finally wised up and said to the LORD, "Help us!" But the LORD didn't immediately send a judge. He sent a prophet, and the prophet's message is pretty much found there in verses 8-10 of chapter 6, where the LORD said, "Look, I'm the guy who brought you out of Egypt, and I've given you victory over the gods of the Egyptians and over all gods. You don't need to fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But you're not obeying Me, and so you're at a disadvantage. I'm not with you on the team. I'm not fighting your battles." And, as a result, the children of Israel like this sin-drome. This is the fourth one of the seven; I think the last one is in the days of Samson, at least the one that's recorded.

And so God begins, in verse 11 of chapter 6, to provide a judge. He was a man from the tribe of Manasseh. He was the least in his father's home. He was frightened by the oppression. He was shredding some wheat, not up in the mountaintops where you'd get the wind but down in the valley where the winepress was. He was in hiding, and the LORD came to him, and He called him "a mighty man of valor." And Gideon was an honest guy. He said, "Well, that's not me. Look at me!" And the LORD said, "I will help you," and he said, "If the LORD's with us, why are we in this predicament?" And Gideon began to rattle off (to the LORD) all of the things that God had done in the past, and, "Why don't we see the LORD now, and why isn't He here with us now?" And the LORD said, "I'm going to send you. I'm going to deliver

you and your people from the Midianites through your life. And you go in this might of yours." And Gideon wondered what might that might be. And we talked about it last week - it was his desire to see God work in his generation, in his time, in his life. And so the LORD waited while Gideon ran off to prepare an offering, and the LORD consumed it - fire out of the rock. And Gideon went, "All right. I guess that's the LORD all right." And the LORD disappeared out of his sight, and then He told him that night to go and destroy the idolatrous idol in the back of his father's house (a Baal idol). And he went at night, he was afraid what would come of it. He did what the LORD told him. He acted on the little faith that had been built into his life. And dad was told by the other men, "Hey, your son did this. We've got to kill him!" And dad said, "Well, if you serve a god that you've got to defend, maybe that's the wrong god," and he changed sides, and he came and stood with his son and came to know, really, or to walk again with the God of Israel. And so, as the LORD began to speak to Gideon, and God poured out His Spirit upon him, Gideon was terrified. The Midianites were huge, and they were powerful, and the Jews were on the run and in hiding and on the defense. He asked the LORD for another sign. He put a fleece out at night, and he asked, "Could the fleece be wet and the ground be dry? Then I'll know." And when that happened, he said, "All right. Let's try this one more time so it's not just luck. If the ground could be wet and the fleece could be dry, then I'll really know." And the LORD did that for him as well. In fact, verse 40 of chapter 6 says, "And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground."

And so we come to chapter 7 tonight, where Gideon is called upon to put faith into action for the sake of his people; one guy who the LORD is blessing and using. We read, in chapter 7:1, "Then Jerubbaal" (that's the name that he got back in chapter 6:32; 'let Baal plead for himself' - that's what the name means, that's what his dad said, so he's called his son that) "(that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the well of Harod, so that the camp of the Midianites was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley. And the LORD said to Gideon, 'The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, "My own hand has saved me." ' " And so the LORD brings Gideon to the day where he has to put into practice the faith that he has been developing as God has been giving him lots of time to grow. We don't know how long chapter 6 went on, but it went on for some time. Gideon sent out word that he wanted a volunteer army. In chapter 7, when we come to it, there are 135,000 Midianites in the valley. We know that from chapter 8:10 because we're told that 120,000 of them are

dead, and there're 15,000 left. We did the math. And 32,000 folks had shown up from Manasseh and some of the neighboring tribes to fight against them. So, they were literally standing together in faith, outnumbered four to one, which is probably not a fight you'd like to take on; you against four guys in an alley. You know? It doesn't seem like it's a very good setup. And the LORD, in seeing the 32,000 that have shown up, says to Gideon, "You've got too many people with you." And his explanation, in verse 2, is they're too many because there is always the leaning of man to take glory for something he hasn't done. God had been proven by Gideon three different times now - an offering and two fleece issues. Now the LORD wanted to prove to be his God by his actions in trusting the LORD. God was going to prove Himself to these men now.

There is, it seems from what we learn tonight, a persistent danger for you and me to take glory for ourselves; that there's something about man that doesn't like to give glory to others; that we like to take credit for everything that is right in our lives. And, though the LORD would want to work through our lives, the conflict comes when we realize that God won't share His glory with you. In fact, He says (in Isaiah 42:8), "I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another." God wants full credit. Is that all right with you? I mean, full credit for all that He has done. But there is this issue where we want to - very subtly - exalt ourselves. He wants all of the praise. He's not willing to share the glory with an instrument of His work.

He wanted His people to learn to depend upon Him, not the size of the army, not the strength of the army. He wanted them to come out of this deliverance from these oppressors saying the right things about God - that He's the One that we could trust and rely upon. So He reduces the forces as a way of challenging them to begin to not look at numbers but to begin to look at Him.

I know that we believe, in our western thinking, that bigger is always better. But it certainly wasn't the case here. Smaller seemed to be better in every way. And it gives you God's perspective on faith. They were already outnumbered four to one. Right? But God wanted to make it worse. Because the only thing worse than being outnumbered is seeking God's glory for yourself. That's worse. And Gideon, in his heart, I suspect (although we have no comment from Gideon), thought this was crazy. I would have thought, "This is crazy! We don't need less, LORD. Have You counted on the other side? We need more! We need four times more." But a faith that can't be tested is also a faith that can't be trusted. And so if he was really

going to believe God, he was going to have to put it on the line. And God wants your faith to grow, but He tests it to make sure that it's genuine, and then He exercises it like a muscle - to give you strength. And that's really what Gideon is going through.

Notice, in verse 2, that the LORD said, " 'The people who are with you are too many for Me to give you victory.' " They're just too many. The LORD was going to do the work; not them. He was going to do the fighting, but He knew the proclivity that we have towards sin and to be glorified and to be honored ourselves and to take credit for what we don't deserve. And so here's the way to eliminate that - put you in a position where you can't brag, put you in a position where you can't point to anyone and go, "Yeah, we did it, the two of us against 135,000." The reduction of troop size eliminated the temptation to brag. God stacks the deck against them, and He whittles the size of the army down.

So He says to them, in verse 3, and to Gideon as well, " 'Now therefore, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, "Whoever is fearful and afraid, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead." 'And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained." So, "If you're afraid, go home," and they went, "Thank You." And 69% of those who showed up bailed out. They reported for duty and then took the first bus out of Dodge. So, from four to one, the odds now become $13\frac{1}{2}$ to 1. And God, in essence, was creating a more difficult situation so that everyone would realize and recognize His power. You might have, if you've been with us for a while - going through the Old Testament, there's a phrase that God constantly uses, especially early on in Israel's history, and the phrase goes something like, "So that they might know that I am the LORD." And He does interesting things, but He does them "so that they might know that I am the LORD." And whether "that they might know" has to do with His work in Egypt or His words of prophecy or His power to deliver, the thinning of the ranks was intended to let everyone know that He's the LORD. And notice who gets sent home - the people that were fearful. Fear is a natural response when you are overwhelmed. The description of the Midianites in the valley (chapter 7:12) will be, "They were lying there like grasshoppers for multitude." And most of these folks who showed up were terrified because the enemy sounded and looked to be far greater and stronger than the God that they served. Fear is pretty much an exponent of how big your God is. If your God is super big, and you know that to be so, fear doesn't stand much of a chance. But if God is small, and the challenge is great, well then fear grows exponentially. Faith's work is a test of courage

because, look, if one of these folks had run in battle, everybody, I think, would have turned and run as well with them. It's kind of like fear is contagious. But so is faith. So, "Tell the folks that are afraid to go home," and, like I said, 22,000 of them went, "Yeah, I'd rather not go."

Back in Deuteronomy (and I'll read it to you), chapter 20 beginning in verse 1, here's what Moses said, " 'When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses and chariots and people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God is with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt. So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people. And he shall say to them, "Hear, O Israel: Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies. Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them; for the LORD your God is He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you." Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying: "What man is there who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. Also what man is there who has planted a vineyard and has not eaten of it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man eat of it. And what man is there who is betrothed to a woman and has not married her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man marry her." The officers shall speak further to the people, and say, "What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart." And so it shall be, when the officers have finished speaking to the people, that they shall make captains of the armies to lead the people.' " So pretty much a, "Don't bring that fear here. It's really going to be something that preoccupies us and keeps us from the battle." I always thought about the fact that God wants to grow in our understanding, and so the way you get rid of fear is you get to know God better.

Elijah faced off with those hundreds of prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18), and you remember the story, there in the valley - how he challenged them to offer to their gods and call upon their names, and they tried it all morning long until the afternoon and all, cutting themselves, crying out to Baal. Finally Elijah built this simple altar, but then he had these men take water pots - four of them, pots full of water, and pour them out over the altar three different times. So the thing was just soaked. Not only was it soaked, there was kind of a river around it. The odds were being stacked against him. But God was bigger than the stacking against the odds. And so he prayed very simply, "LORD, let Yourself be seen," and from

heaven comes the fire. And not only does the water disappear but so does the offering and the place of offering and all. And so God made Himself known, but He did it putting His people at a disadvantage so that we wouldn't get credit, and He would get a lot of credit, and your faith would grow in Him.

David went out against Goliath (1 Samuel 17). That was pretty much the odds stacked against him. There's a shepherd boy with some stones facing a very skilled, proven killer. And yet he went because he knew how big his God was.

The LORD said to the disciples (Luke 10:3), " 'Go out into the world. I'm going to send you out like lambs that are among the wolves.' " Don't you feel like that sometimes as a Christian in our world? You feel like you're a lamb among the wolves. There's nobody on your side here. They want to devour you. But yet our God is greater, isn't He? We sang that. He's greater. And He sends this ragtag team of men out - zealots and fishermen. " 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel' " (Mark 16:15). But they were outnumbered. I would suggest to you that the first eleven apostles, if you at least just begin with the book of Acts, shaped their world more than we have ever done with all of our technological advantages - because they were sure of the God that they served. They were sure. They were outnumbered, they were outgunned, they were outmatched.

But sometimes, if you want to see God work, you have to be at a disadvantage because that's how He likes to work. He likes to get the credit. I've heard people in times past in the church - if they get involved in ministry and their heart is consumed by it - they will say things like, "We need more help. We need more people. We need more folks to just sign up and join in." And my thought sometimes is maybe we don't. Maybe this is the perfect size for God to be glorified in all that He is doing. And what you don't need is a bunch of fearful people that are going to be slowing you down. You just need some faithful hearts. God can do (and work) by many or by few. Right? Jonathan and his armor bearer had that right (1 Samuel 14). He said to his armor bearer, while his dad Saul was eating banana cream pie (I'm pretty sure) under the tree, "Let's go fight the enemy. Who knows what the LORD'll do. He can save by many or by few. There're just two of us and thousands of them. It should be perfect." But His God had grown in his understanding. Sometimes there is strength in subtraction rather than in addition, and I think that helps us to understand when we see how big God is. When Ananias and Sapphira were in the early church, and they were putting on airs and what benefactors they were and all, if you read the story (there in the

book of Acts, chapter 5), when the LORD causes this couple to drop dead at the church door, really, the immediate fallout underneath that event was that we read that the church began to grow, that the deceptiveness was removed. And sometimes there's something called blessed subtraction. Right? God subtracts so that He might multiply. It's heavenly arithmetic. He subtracts so He might multiply.

And you find it here. And so the LORD said to Gideon, "Thirty-two thousand is too many." He gets rid of 22,000, and then He says (in verse 4) to Gideon, "The people are still too many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. Then it will be, that of whom I say to you, "This one shall go with you," the same shall go with you; and of whomever I say to you, "This one shall not go with you," the same shall not go.' So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, 'Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink.' And the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water. Then the LORD said to Gideon, 'By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people go, every man to his place.' " So, "Just let everyone else go home." Now this is a strange test. I guarantee you if you join the Army this week, they're not going to ask you about how you drink water. They're happy that you're showing up. But here's the deal. There were 10,000, 9,700 of which - when they went to get a drink - forgot where they were (in a war zone, just across the valley from the enemy). And so, though water is a necessity of life, they forgot for a minute where they were, and they got on their knees, and they stuck their face in the water. And the only thing that preoccupied their view and their interest was getting water. They were sitting ducks; they weren't aware. There were 300 that bent over and brought a hand up out of the water to their face, drank. But their eyes were up, and they were looking around. They were still ready. They were aware of the position that they found themselves in. They were engaged, and so they find themselves on a wariness. And the LORD takes those 300 and says, "I'll use these guys. These guys are ready for battle." You know, water is a necessity of life, but I'll tell you what. There are a lot of Christians tonight who spend an inordinate amount of time on the necessities of life and never get to any kind of spiritual benefit or victory - "what I've got to eat, where I'm going to live, what I'm going to give, what I'm going to wear, where I'm going to go." It's like the whole survivalist thing kicks in, but then they really aren't aware of the fact they are in a

battle for souls and that there's a battle that they're engaged in, and people don't engage themselves. They're almost oblivious to the battle that we're in. They have no awareness that there's an enemy, there's a devil, that he wants to take people to hell, and God sent us to proclaim to them that there's a way out. So, as a result, they don't feel any urgency to be on guard. They don't feel any urgency to learn or to hang on to the sword of the Spirit or to use it well or to step out to serve or to remain close to the army of believers. But the LORD picked 300, and they were the ones that were ready; 9,700 were there, they weren't afraid, but they were preoccupied - there were other things in their life. And then there're 300 guys, "All right. Where's the enemy? Yeah, we'll drink. We've got to drink. But I don't want to take my eyes off the horizon. They could be coming over the hill any minute." And they were ready for whatever the LORD was going to bring their way. And so the LORD says to Gideon, pressing the odds, 10,000 was too many; another thinning-out process. He got down to 300 as they drank from this place called Ein Harod, or the well of Harod, where we visit on our trips to Israel.

So, here's the problem. Now there's 135,000 Midianites and 300 fighters. Now the odds are 450 to 1. That's a lot. That's not good. Literally, Gideon had no army left. He was reduced to trusting God with the faith that God had been building in his life. I always think about David. He says to Goliath (1 Samuel 17), "You come to me with a sword and a spear and a javelin, but I'm coming to you in the name of the LORD of hosts." And I always like that. "You've got all the weapons in the world. I've got the LORD. So we'll see how this goes." But if you say to me, "We're going to send 300 people against 135,000 people in battle," I'm going to say, "Yeah, you're going to lose." If you say to me, "I'm going to send God against 135,000," I say to you, "Poor 135,000." Right? It's all a matter of who's involved. I think it was Luther who said you and God are a majority. If He's with you, it's all you need. If you want to have spiritual victory, though, you've got to have a pretty good understanding about how big your God is tonight. And so often that is revealed when the pressure is on, and you're having to stand by faith. If God will help us, as a church, to recognize that the days are desperate, that the battle for the souls of men continues, that we're a part of that generation, then hopefully, like Gideon, we'll cry out, "God, work today." And God's looking for a few good men and women. I think there's probably 300 He's putting together as well. He's drawing them out of the church.

And so, as God had allowed Gideon plenty of tests to prove who He was, now God would test Gideon and the others to say, "Believe Me." And notice what He says in

verse 7, " 'I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand.' " Verse 8, "So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent, and retained those three hundred men. Now the camp of Midian was below him in the valley. It happened on the same night that the LORD said to him, 'Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand. 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.' Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outpost of the armed men who were in the camp." So everyone goes home but 300. The enemy is just over the hill. The time had come for faith to get some legs, to put up or shut up, to get movin'.

And the LORD, knowing the weakness of His man, gives him and the 300 faithful men an option for one more test. Notice, you read in verse 9, that the LORD spoke to him that night. And I suspect that Gideon was laying in his tent, thinking, "How in the world are we going to fight with 300 guys? We're going to get annihilated!" And as he mused, and as he worried about what might have taken place, the LORD, in His sovereignty, arranges some circumstances to give Gideon one more kind of shot in the arm. And He gives him the option - notice He says, in verse 9, " 'Get up, get goin', the fight's on, we're gonna win.' " In verse 10, He said, " 'But, if you're still afraid.....we can go do this thing, but if you're still worried, I can give you a little bit more encouragement before you go.' " And then He suggested that he go down to just listen to the talk around the camp of the enemy and take his servant with him. And the LORD is going to use this feeble, quaking-but-faithful, tentative-but-available young man, Gideon, and 300 guys and to give them one more and I'm glad, 450 to 1, you need a couple, don't you, to be sure - and he was very much afraid. I mean, here's a young man who was honest and willing, and he was terrified. But he was going to go. Not such bad qualities. I can see him sneaking down there to hear it, though.

"Now the Midianites and Amalekites," verse 12, "all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude. And when Gideon had come, there was a man telling a dream to his companion. He said, 'I have had a dream: To my surprise, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed.' Then his companion answered and said, 'This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole

camp.' And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshipped. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, 'Arise, for the LORD has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand.' " The barley that was tumbling into the campground - barley is the food for the poor; that's all Israel had to eat. They don't really have much else. Their land had been denuded by the Midianites. But don't you love just watching this unfold, how the LORD takes and encourages the weak? I think He'll do that with you and me as well. The key is if you're going to get that encouragement, you're also going to have to be willing to step out. So you don't get it until you're going. You don't get to sit home and go, "Come on, LORD. Prove Yourself, then I'll go out." No. You've got to start moving, but in the moving, God will meet you there so that you're able to overcome. I mean, so far the offering that he offered was miraculously consumed. The fleece was dry, the fleece was wet. God reduced his army to 300. Now he runs into the enemy, and they're talking about him by name - that he's going to wipe them out, and there's fear.

Well, the LORD took him every step of the way. And then, notice in verse 16, "Then he divided the three hundred men into three companies," (three hundred-men companies), and then they're given their weapons - a trumpet, a jug and a candle. A torch, a horn and a jug. Sounds like a birthday party to me. (Laughing) Not a battle. In any event, they went forward (verse 17), and Gideon said to the men, " 'Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do: When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp' " (and so they surrounded the camp, the three hundred-men companies) " 'and yell out, "The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!" ' So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers - they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing - and they cried, 'The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!' And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled." They were terrified! "When the three hundred blew the trumpets, the LORD set every man's sword against his companion throughout the whole camp; and the army fled to Beth Acacia, toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah, by Tabbath. And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites. Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the mountains of Ephraim, saying, 'Come down against

the Midianites, and seize from them the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan.' Then all the men of Ephraim gathered together and seized the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan. And they captured two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side of the Jordan." So, from what I gather, the 300 men made it look - to the panicked Midianites - like there was a captain with armies all around them, and in their frustration, and in their confusion, they began to kill each other. Notice that we read here that the shift change had just happened. Right? Kind of interesting - verse 19 - the middle watch, and they just posted the watch - new guys coming, old guys leaving. There was chaos and pandemonium, and the LORD kind of routed the people as they killed each other, and then the other tribes kind of joined in. And it was a rout, a total rout. In fact, it was such a big deal that it became known as "the day of Midian," and Isaiah uses that phraseology in chapter 9 to speak about that the God who was there "in the day of Midian" will still be with them today.

Well, we end with one thing so that we can be introduced to chapter 8; and that is as all of these tribes come to help, there are these folks from Ephraim (up in the hills) who also come, and they're asked by Gideon to get involved and to take out whoever's trying to hide in the mountains, if you will. And they capture two guys: one's name is Oreb (that means raven), the other fellow's name is Zeeb (it means wolf - I think it's some biker gang). (Laughing) But they're trying to get out of Dodge, right? They're pushing towards the Jordan to try to cross it. Gideon calls upon the largest and most powerful tribe in the area, Ephraim, to mop up instead of letting these guys get away. Now, he had called upon them earlier (back in chapter 6), you might recall, and they hadn't responded.

But here in chapter 8, as we begin, these guys, though they had responded later on - really late, they now complain that they haven't been allowed to be involved with this great victory from the beginning. And so we read in verse 1, "Now the men of Ephraim said to him, 'Why have you done this to us by not calling us when you went to fight with the Midianites?' And they reprimanded him sharply. So he said to them, 'What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?' " In other words, what was left to be taken was far better than us who went first. " 'God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. And what was I able to do in comparison with you?' Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that.

When Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over, exhausted but still in pursuit." So here come the Ephraimites. Now I want you to keep them in mind the next couple of weeks. We're going to run into them in chapter 12 as well. They're going to try the same thing with a judge named Jephthah, who is not nearly as diplomatic as Gideon. Notice what Gideon says, "Oh, man. You guys, what you did in a little time is far better than we've ever done! We couldn't have done this without you." And they went, "That's right. Okay. That's the kind of thing we want to hear." They tried it with Jephthah, and he kills 42,000 of them. "Don't you ever show up like that again." He slices and dices. I don't know. It's horrible.

Jealousy is always a problem in ministry. And it is certainly the case here with Gideon, who's been extremely successful with just 300 men, and yet there's this very large tribe of Ephraimites who really didn't come early on, and Jephthah will say the same thing to them, "I called you, you didn't come." But they like to come in at the end when the work is done, and the risks are taken, and the cost is paid; and then they want to go, "Yeah, we were great!" They want to come in and get the award. They want to be on the team. Jealousy. And you find it in the Ephraimites a lot (in these next generations as we read forward), focusing their attention on not the work of God but on their own work. Paul faced that in ministry. He wrote to the Philippians (in chapter 1), "I'm confident that there are some folks who are taking boldness in speaking the word without fear; and because I'm locked up, they're bold now. They preach Christ. But then there're others who come and preach Him out of envy and out of strife, some out of goodwill, some out of selfish ambition." Paul said "There're a lot of people being motivated to try to get glory out of this stuff," and then he said, "It doesn't matter to me what motivates them. I'm just glad that Jesus' name is out there, that Christ is being preached, and I rejoice in that." Here these Ephraimites, who had a reputation - not for walking by faith but for being troublemakers - are representatives of those people who really want glory for themselves. And Gideon, like I said, had called them early. They hadn't shown up. But they show up after the glory is there to get. Maybe you know some people that are like that. You know? They are unwilling to take, or reluctant to take, steps when there's a cost involved. But after the faithful, risking, willing kinds of adventurous folks have come and gone, these guys now step forward. And Gideon gives a very tactical answer. "What could I have done more than you? You've captured their leaders." I would argue, "Well, you've killed 120,000 with 300 guys." (Because we're going to read there're only 15,000 left). But who's counting? Gideon follows that proverb, "A soft answer turns away wrath"

(Proverbs 15:1). He does a good job of calming these guys down. And like I said, Jephthah's around the corner, and he'll calm them down all right. But for Gideon and all (notice verse 4), it had been quite a day. Verse 10 tells us there are only 15,000 left out of 135,000. But notice Gideon still has all 300 guys. He hasn't lost a man in this battle. Boy, how good is God! They were hungry, and they were tired, and they were exhausted, verse 4. And let me just point out to you - you can be weary and exhausted and suffer hardship while serving the LORD. It doesn't mean life is easy. You can be wiped out serving the LORD. It can wipe you out. But you can still have victory, can't you? And they had.

So verse 5 tells us, "Then he said to the men of Succoth, 'Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian.' And the leaders of Succoth said, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?' " In other words, the men of Succoth went, "Yeah, we feed you, they beat you, they kill us, bad idea. We're not taking a side until it's decided." No faith at all. Verse 7, "So Gideon said, 'For this cause, when the LORD has delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers!' " "I'll be back." There it is, right there in the Bible. "I'll be back." Verse 8, "Then he went up from there to Penuel and spoke to them in the same way." "We need to eat! We're starving here!" "And the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. So he also spoke to the men of Penuel, saying, 'When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!' " So, here're two groups - first of all Ephraim, who just wants glory, and then two cities who don't want to risk anything. They want to be Switzerland all the time. Right? They just want to hang around in the middle and take no sides. And when you take no sides, by the way, you're always on the side who wins. Good for you. Let's hope the right people win. And they've made the wrong choice. And so the loss or the risk that you seek to mitigate when you take no stand is usually the one that you end up paying for anyway.

Well, beginning in verse 10 and heading down from there all the way to verse 21 (and I'll save us some reading time), there is the capture of and the slaying of these two kings. They found them, they xxxxx them, they chased them down, and they caught them. And so, when they did (verse 15), Gideon then said to the men of Succoth (those are the guys that said, "Hey, you don't have them"), "Here they are. We got them. And remember how you ridiculed me, asking if we had them? And you wouldn't feed our weary men?" Verse 16, "And he took the elders of the

city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth. Then he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city." So, better that you just participate, I think. And he brought these two men, and he ordered them killed. Verse 21, "So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments that were on their camels' necks." Great victory, great deliverance. As a result, the people wanted to make Gideon the king. "Man, you're the best. We need a guy like you to lead us in the years to come."

And notice, in verse 22, "Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, 'Rule over us, both you and your son, and our grandson also;' " (be a dynasty) " 'for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.' But Gideon said to them, 'I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you.' Then Gideon said to them, 'I would like to make a request of you, that each of you would give me the earrings from his plunder.' For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites. So they answered, 'We will gladly give them.' And they spread out a garment, and each man threw into it the earrings from his plunder. Now the weight of the gold earrings that he requested was one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments, pendants, and purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the chains that were around their camels' necks." And so they got a lot of stuff. So people wanted to make Gideon a king and his family a king. In fact, there was no succession as far as judges. You didn't get dad and then son and then grandson. God picked and chose a deliverer. So that wasn't even a practice. But they offered this to him, and Gideon seems to show his character and his humility by saying, "God wants to be your God. I'm not the one to rule. He's supposed to rule."

But then you read this (verse 23), "But I wouldn't mind taking an offering." And notice that Gideon puts himself in kind of a difficult position. He's right in giving the answer, "Why wait for a monarchy when you can have a theocracy? Why have man rule over you when God wants to rule over you?" However, here's the vulnerable point for him - he wants to get some credit for what God has done in his life. So he says, "If you guys can just take up an offering, it's good." And from what we read here, he gets 42½ pounds of gold. A lot of gold. And, according to verse 27, "Then Gideon made it into an ephod and set it up in his city, Ophrah." (That's where he came from). "And all Israel played the harlot with it there. It became a snare to Gideon and to his house. Thus Midian was subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted their heads no more. And the country was quiet for forty years in the days of Gideon." So the deliverance comes, but then

there is this problem at the end of Gideon's life, and it is one that we should have learned in the chapters alone; and that is God doesn't share His glory. The word for "ephod" is just the word for image. We don't know if it was a big, bold statue in gold of himself. We do know that it became a stumbling block for Gideon and his household, that Israel showed themselves to be harlots in a spiritual sense, worshipping it rather than God. Their relationship to this idol took the place of them having to worship with God. And so Gideon's dad had an altar in his backyard. It seems like Gideon, in his older days, reverted back to that as well.

We do know that he had seventy sons; he had lots to support. He also had a hooker or a concubine with whom he had one son. He had seventy kids with his wives, and then he had one son with this woman, this concubine, and he named him Abimelech. Now you'll need to remember that for next time when we get together. But the name Abimelech means this = your father is a king. Isn't that weird? "You want to be a king over us?" "No, no, no. God wants to be your King. By the way, I have a boy. I'm calling him, 'Your father is a king.' " So maybe it shows you a little bit about his heart.

So he has this personal downfall, if you will. He's weathered the storms of adversity. He's just not doing very well with the storms of prosperity. He's good trusting God when he's down. He's not good at handling blessings when he's up. And maybe that, for us, is sometimes an issue. You know, he started off saying, "I am nothing, the least in my father's house." He follows the LORD tentatively. He acts upon the faith that grows. But at the end, he says this, "I am somebody, I would like to be rewarded, and here's my son whose name means 'his father is a king.' " He comes a long way in the wrong direction because pride will destroy everything God does. Everything. Right? Your marriage will be destroyed by pride. Your ministry will be destroyed by pride. Your life can be destroyed by pride. So, in his pride, he heads in this direction.

So we read, in verse 29, " Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house." This was after the victory. "Gideon had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, whose name he called Abimelech. Now Gideon the son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. Thus the children of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered

them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel." So the end was not so good. His pride led him to compromise. Compromise kind of led him to greed. He let God use his life, and yet, through it, he wanted honor and wealth rather than glory for God. And notice, from verse 35, it didn't last. Even in his death, he left no lasting impression. And his heritage, his descendancy, were not shown (by the nation) any kind of - the glory he wanted, they didn't get. It completely disappeared. He started off really well; he ended up very poorly. I suspect he rationalized every step along the way.

Here's the way you can defeat most of this - stop every once in a while and examine your own heart. Ask yourself all the hard questions about why you're doing what you're doing. And who do you really believe can do the work in you? And let God get center stage in your life all your life. Then God can do great things for you and great things through you. But notice that the LORD even uses the weak and yet, with the death of this judge and the death of the nation, sets in again to righteousness, and this whole sin-drome begins anew. And, in fact, next week I think we're going to just spend the week looking at Abimelech. He's not a nice man. We call him a judge only because he ruled in Israel. But know this - God didn't choose him. He makes himself a judge, he pushes himself ahead. He'll have a great fall, but he is in that lineage of time of rulership.

So what do you think God is looking for, as we close tonight, in terms of how He can use you? Make a list for yourself, just from Gideon, on what He would want to find in your life. Number one, I think more than anything else, an awareness of your own weakness. Right? You find Gideon not at all blowing his own trumpet. He was aware that he had no power, he had no strength. God gave him power, gave him promise, and gave him His presence. I think if you want God to use you that you should have your eyes on the LORD and not on the odds. I know a lot of people stop walks of faith because they start adding things up and say, "That'll never work." Yeah, it'll never work unless the LORD's in it. And then it'll work just fine. But if you're going to be on the forefront, learn that "if God be for you, who can be against you?" (Romans 8:31). I think the other thing that you want to do is you've got to be alert to the battle that you're in. This is not a joke. God created us. The battle is for people's eternal well-being. The prize is valuable, and so the sacrifice to gain it should be equally so. So, keep your eyes on the important issues of life, not, "I gotta have water, even if it kills me." There're other things in life that are more important. A sense of urgency. I guess that would be the thing.

Now, it seems to me that the church is living in a desperate time, but they're not desperate about their calling. So we just, ah, go to church, get out of here, "I hope he gets done on time." I should be done in a minute. (Laughing) You can't bury your head in the sand or your face in the water. There's a life-and-death struggle. Gideon should tell you that if you know that God's with you, you'll go, you'll be fine. And if you don't know that He is, then I think if you ask the LORD to help you, He'll convince you that He's with you. He never held back on the promises to convince Gideon. Never worry when God reduces ranks or thins the ranks, if you will, because it seems to me the less you have to depend on, the more you have to depend upon Him and the more glory He gets. I wouldn't worry about the people in the valley. And I know that God's interest is glory - not for me but for Him. So there's a band of 300 you can join. I think it does represent us as God's people; that you know His power, you know His goodness, you know His calling. "Fear not," He says, "I am with you. I'm going to save you. I'm going to deliver through you. Just go do the work." Good word to know. Gideon did well early on, terrible later on. Kind of like Samson. Every benefit early on, but doesn't guarantee you'll do well at the end. Right? That's a decision you make along the way.

So next week, chapter 9. Go read about Abimelech and hate him like I do.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
August 7, 2017