

You Really Need a King:

Gideon: Weakness in Numbers (Judges 7:1-25)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on October 2, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ One of my favorite biographies is a two-volume set on the 18th-century evangelist **George Whitefield**¹. He's recognized one of the greatest preachers in Church history. He drew crowds in the tens of thousands as he popularized open-air preaching (with no voice amplification!). He was instrumental in the famous *Great Awakening*, the spiritual revival that took place in the 1730-40s, in the English-speaking world, on both sides of the Atlantic.
 - ▶ In the second volume, there's a chapter called **Cambuslang**. It's named after the Scottish city, outside of Glasgow, that Whitefield visited in the late summer of 1742. By the time he arrived a revival had already broken out. He was invited to preach at an outdoor fair where estimates of up to 30,000 people gathered during the span of a few weeks. It was like a Puritan Woodstock festival. They just gathered outdoors all day long listening to preachers preach the gospel.

- ❖ In Whitefield's account, he says that immediately upon arrival he was asked to preach three times in ten hours, and he reported, "*Such a commotion surely was never heard of, especially at eleven at night. It far outdid all that I ever saw in America. For about an hour and a half there was such weeping, so many falling into deep distress, and expressing it various ways . . . Their cries and agonizing were exceedingly affecting.*"²
 - ▶ **Now usually, Whitefield's many critics would read the reports and argue that he was merely stirring up a form of emotionalism.** People were just moved by his beautiful, powerful voice. He captivated them by his sweet, pleasing words. They denied that this was a work of the Holy Spirit, a true awakening.

- ❖ But with this particular revival – what became known as the **Cambuslang Work** – many of those same critics were speechless. Because Whitefield's preaching didn't ignite this one. He arrived while it was already going on. The one whom God used to actually spark the revival was the local minister, the **Reverend William M'Culloch**.
 - ▶ You've never heard of him because he's nothing special. And that was God's point. **M'Culloch had a reputation of being a pretty boring preacher.** He's described as ineloquent with a slow and cautious manner of speech. He had the nickname the *Ale-minister* because whenever he would rise to the pulpit, a number in the congregation would rise and leave to quench their thirst in the local tavern.

- ❖ **And yet it was the painfully slow *Ale-minister* that God used to start the Cambuslang Work in order to demonstrate to all, especially critics, that this was truly a work of the Spirit and not the result of human eloquence or charisma.** God was going to get the glory for the revival at Cambuslang – not Whitefield and certainly not M'Culloch. And God delights to use our human weaknesses and deficiencies in order to get it.

¹ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield Vol. 1-2*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1980.

² *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, pg. 125.

- ❖ That's something we see happening in today's passage. **Gideon and his army are about to experience a mighty victory.** There's a chance they could take the credit for themselves, or their enemies could chalk it up as just a coincidence, an unlucky break for them. **But God, in his sovereign wisdom, arranges things so that there's no doubt. So that there's no question that salvation belongs to the LORD.**
 - ▶ As we walk through chapter 7, I want to show you three things that God is doing. 1) He's deflating our confidence in us. 2) He's defending his glory from us. And 3) He's deepening our trust in him.

Deflating our Confidence in Us

- ❖ The first thing I see God doing in this chapter is deflating our confidence in us. I think that's pretty evident in the way he trimmed down Gideon's army to less than one percent of its original size! **There was no way he was going to let Gideon walk into battle thinking that him and his boys have got this handled.**
 - ▶ Gideon was probably feeling pretty confident. We looked last week at chapter 6:36-40 where he had just tested God by throwing out a fleece (twice!). **He was trying to confirm that the LORD really meant what he said when he promised victory.** And as we said before, this is not a prescriptive passage teaching you how to interact with God. This is more of an illustration of how weak Gideon's faith is yet how merciful God is to condescend and help him.
 - **So now Gideon's about to go into battle feeling pretty confident.** Not only did God confirm his Word through the fleeces, now he's provided Gideon an army of 32,000 soldiers. So there's a very strong possibility that Gideon is going to walk into this battle thinking, "Thank you, God. I can take it from here." in other words, his self-confidence is running high.
- ❖ So the LORD intentionally deflates it. I know that's hard to hear because we're often in Gideon's shoes, and it's uncomfortable to think that God might do the same to us. But I think that's the lesson we're suppose to learn.
 - ▶ **Many of us are fairly risk averse. We're hesitant to take on any big risks for God and his kingdom – unless we're fairly confident of a successful outcome.** Unless we have all the contingencies worked out. Whatever God is calling us to do, we don't want to move until we're fairly sure that we've got it handled. **But every time you're running high on self-confidence, don't put it past God to deflate you.** And know that he has a good reason.
- ❖ Let's consider it by looking more closely in our text. Look in v1 we see the two camps of the Israelite and Midianite armies in place and ready for battle. And then in v2 the LORD says the unexpected. The last thing Gideon expected to hear. "You have too many men. You need fewer men." Come again?
 - ▶ Can you imagine Eisenhower on the eve of D-Day telling his lieutenants, "You know I think we have too many men for this invasion of Normandy. How about we just send one squadron over the Channel and let them take care of it?" That's silly.

- ❖ And yet that's what God said. Look at v2 again, *“The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying. ‘My own hand has saved me.’”* There it is. That’s God’s good reason. You need fewer men, lest the 32,001 of you think you won the battle. **God is deflating their self-confidence before it turns into self-arrogance.**
 - ▶ The first trimming brings the number down to 10,000. In v3 says all the fearful and trembling should just go home. And 22,000 men take up the offer. 22,000 tremblers. That’s over two-thirds of the army. Gone.

- ❖ Gideon was probably reaching for another fleece when hears God say in v4, *“Still too many men.”* So the LORD sets up this scenario to trim it down some more. He tells Gideon to take them to the water and tell them to get a drink. And the LORD says to notice those who kneel down and put their mouths into the river to drink and set them apart from the who scoop up water into their hands and lap it with their tongues. And in the end, only 300 used their hands to lap. Then God said I’m going to save you all with these 300 lappers.
 - ▶ **Now some commentators try to identify some sort of rationale in this test. They argue that these 300 lappers were apparently more vigilant than the rest.** They were more alert because they were mindful to keep their eyes forward watching for the enemy as they drank versus the careless soldiers who were facedown in the water.

- ❖ I think that’s a bit of a stretch. I don’t think we’re suppose to discern a rationale. **I don’t think there’s anything particularly special about these 300 soldiers.** It’s not as if Gideon is suppose to think, *“Whew, well if we have to go small, at least I have these 300 – my best and smartest soldiers.”* No, this is nothing like the Battle of Thermopylae with Leonidas and his brave 300. This is not the Alamo, and these aren’t the 300 who courageously stepped over the line. **These are just 300 random guys.**

- ❖ **The whole point is that Gideon and his 300 should be scared and confused, considering how small they are compared to the Midianites.** All self-confidence, all considerations to boast in victory, should be out the window right now. And so if there’s going to be victory, God has left no room for doubt that salvation belongs exclusively to the LORD.

- ❖ I wonder if – in your life, in your experiences – if you could say the same. **Are you living in such a way that there’s no doubt that your victories belong to God?** I think most of the time, we’ve hedged our bets. We’ve removed the risks. We don’t step out in faith until we’re fairly confident that we’ve got this. But then there’s always the possibility (temptation) to claim victory for ourselves – or at least partial victory.
 - ▶ This passage is a challenge to each of us. **Have you ever stepped out in faith and followed God into a situation where success is so unlikely by human standards that victory can only be attributed to the LORD?**

- ❖ I think some of us are setting our goals too low. They're too easily attainable – by our own strength, our own ingenuity, our own ability. Let's live by faith and not by sight. **Let's challenge each other to step out in faith and take some holy risks for the LORD.** To live in such a way that he gets the glory whenever we succeed.

Defending his Glory from Us

- ❖ That leads to our second point. The second thing we see God doing in this story is defending his glory from us. That's what's being stressed in v2. God planned to trim down the army, "*lest Israel boast over me*", and claim that they saved themselves by their own hands. **Notice the problem is not just boasting. It's boasting over God. Taking credit away from God.** That's the big concern here.
- ❖ The point is that when we rely on ourselves, if we lean on our own understanding, we're not just being faithless. We're not just being doubtful and self-reliant. **We're actually robbing God of his due glory. We're glory-robbers.**
 - ▶ As you continue on in this story, it becomes clear that glory is reserved for God and not for Gideon and his 300. When they actually go to battle, we're told that the soldiers are equipped – not with swords and shields – but trumpet, torches and clay jars. I'm sure it was not only confusing but demoralizing.
- ❖ And they're directed to divide into three groups of a hundred, flank the Midianite campsite, and when Gideon gives the signal to start the attack, all the men... stand in place. In v21 it says, "*Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the [Midianite] army ran.*"
 - ▶ **Could it be any clearer as to who deserves all the credit?** They literally stood there while God routed their enemies. It goes on to say that the 300 eventually attacked. But they weren't charging at another charging army. They were pursuing a fleeing, diminished army in complete disarray. **Clearly God deserves all the glory here.**
- ❖ And yet Gideon tries to take a little for himself. In v18, Gideon is giving instructions and he knows how crazy it all sounds. **He realizes this battle will be won in such a way that God gets the glory. But that doesn't stop him from trying to sneak in a little for himself.**
 - ▶ He tells them in v18, "*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.'*" **Gideon agrees that this fight is for the LORD. But can it be for him as well – just a little?** God first and foremost – no argument with that. But can I have a little credit, a little bit of glory?
 - But the answer we're given in Scripture is No. The LORD says, "*My glory I will not give to another.*" (Isa. 48:11) He is zealous for this Name. Jealous for his glory. Thou shall have no other gods before me (Ex. 20:3).

- ❖ Now don't misunderstand his intentions. **God is not jealous for glory and unwilling to share it with us because he's selfish.** Or because he has low self-esteem, and he's trying to compensate. Or as C.S. Lewis put it, the LORD's not self-conscious and just seeking compliments like a vain woman.
 - ▶ No, God is perfectly satisfied and perfectly glorified within this own Triune existence. **And even if humans never gave him glory from now on, Jesus say that the rocks will cry out praise and give glory to their Creator** (Lk. 19:40). All of creation glorifies the LORD. So he doesn't condemn glory-robbing because it creates some sort of insufficiency in him.
 - **No, he's against glory-robbing because when we rob God's glory and take some for ourselves, we end up hurting ourselves.** When we take just a bit of glory for ourselves, we become just a bit more boastful, just a bit more prideful. And then what happens? **We become a lot less dependent on God – to our own detriment, to our own destruction.**

- ❖ Later in Israel's history there would be this king named Uzziah, who was overall a good king of Judah. He was known to have amassed a powerful military. In **2 Chronicles 26**, we read that he had "*an army of 307,500, who could make war with mighty power; to help the king against the enemy.* ¹⁴*And Uzziah prepared for all the army shields, spears, helmets, coats of mail, bows, and stones for slinging.* ¹⁵*In Jerusalem he made machines, invented by skillful men, to be on the towers and the corners, to shoot arrows and great stones. And his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped, till he was strong.* ¹⁶*But when he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was unfaithful to the LORD his God and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense.*"
 - ▶ **His fame spread afar. When he was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction.** You see, there's a good reason why God aims to keep all the glory to himself. To allow us to receive the glory – even just a little bit of glory – will inflate our confidence in ourselves, grow our pride, and lead to our destruction.

- ❖ This is why God trimmed down the army. "*Lest Israel boast over me, saying. 'My own hand has saved me.'*" **One of the greatest spiritual dangers is thinking you can save yourself.** Thinking the quality of your life, the performance of your life, is what commends you before God. If you think your own hand had any part in saving you, that kind of thinking leads to destruction. God, in his mercy, will deflate you in order to dispel you of that false notion.
 - ▶ Salvation belongs to our God. He alone saves. He does the fighting. He secures the victory. **Like Gideon and his 300, we just stand there, cry out in faith, and trust in the salvation he accomplishes.**
 - And this is why when God was ready to save his people – not just temporarily from bondage to another nation but eternally from bondage to sin – this is why he trimmed his army all the way down. Less than 300. Less than 100. Less than even 10. Down to just 1.

- ❖ One man. One hero who will fight the battle on behalf of God's people. **This one man, the Lord Jesus Christ, took on your sin and bore the wrath of God alone.** He defeated the devil and trampled on death alone. He did it all by himself.
 - ▶ **And because of that, there's now no doubt who gets the glory and who gets the credit.** There was no Gideon, no 300. There was no one else who might get the impression that they contributed just a bit to their salvation. That they deserve just a bit of the glory.
 - And now if you want to share in the benefits of Jesus's solo act of salvation, you just need to stand there and shout. Shout out your great need for Jesus to be your Deliverer, to be your Savior, to be your King. He stands ready to save.

Deepening our Trust in Him

- ❖ So we've seen so far that God is deflating our confidence in us, and in so doing he's defending his glory from us. And lastly in this story we see him deepening our trust in him. That's what we see him doing for Gideon in vv9-14.
 - ▶ Look at v9, "*9That same night the LORD said to him, 'Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. 10But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant. 11And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.'*"
- ❖ God can tell that Gideon is still scared even after God promised him victory. **Yet instead of chiding him for being so faithless, the LORD condescends and gives assurance.** He strengthens Gideon's feeble hands.
 - ▶ Specifically, he arranges for Gideon to sneak up to the Midianite camp at night and to overhear a conversation between two soldiers that reveals the fear that's been gripping the entire camp.
- ❖ One soldier tells another that he had a dream about a cake of barley bread tumbling into camp and knocking over a tent. And his friend immediately provides the interpretation. In those days, barley was considered the food of the very poor (which perfectly describes Israel at this point). And a tent was symbolic of the Midianites since they were known to be nomadic tent-dwellers. So it's pretty clear: God has given Midian and all the camp into the hands of Gideon and the Israelites.
 - ▶ The Midianites were known to be the biggest and baddest nation around in those days. But here they are shaking with fear over the barley bread we know as Israel. **What it suggests is that our enemies are never as strong as they might appear.** They're not as invulnerable as they might appear.
 - **Remember, greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world** (1 Jn. 4:4). Satan can't make you sin. Idols are not irresistible. If you're in Christ, then sin has no ultimate sway over you. There's always a way of escape (1 Cor. 10:13).

- ❖ I love that story in Acts 19 where we're told that, while the Apostle Paul was ministering in Ephesus, the seven sons of Sceva, these itinerant Jewish exorcists, we're try to cast out evil spirits from people by invoking the name of the Lord Jesus. One time they said to an evil spirit, "*I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims. But the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?"*"
 - ▶ The evil spirit feared the name of Jesus and it even trembled at the name of Paul, but it wasn't intimidated by some frauds who didn't know or trust in the Lord Jesus. **But the point I'd like to highlight is that evil spirits actually knew about Paul, and they shook in their boots.**
 - I know you might be thinking, "*But of course. It's the Apostle Paul after all.*" No, you're missing the point. The demons don't fear Paul because it's Paul. Because he's so holy. Because he's so faithful. No, they fear Paul because he's a man in Christ. He'd be the first to tell you that. **So, Christian, don't take lightly the glorious truth that Christ is in you. Demons know your name. They tremble before you.**

- ❖ **The last thing I want to point out is how God's means of giving Gideon assurance of his power and presence required him to step out in faith and put himself in a risky situation.** He had to crawl down to the Midianite camp. He could've been detected and captured. The battle would've been over before it even began. But that's where you meet God. That's where he meets you and reveals to you his power and presence. Not in your comfort zone. But when you step out of it.
 - ▶ We often expect God to give us assurance from the comfort of our couch. And until he makes it crystal clear that he wants us to go in a certain direction, we won't move an inch in obedience.

- ❖ What this passage demonstrates is that if you want the surety of God's power and presence in your life – then step out of what's safe and comfortable and find God there. **I believe God is asking some of you to do some amazing deeds for him and for the sake of his gospel.**
 - ▶ In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if God wants some of you to quit your job or change your major and answer the call to serve the nations. To take the gospel to unreached peoples in hard to reach places. Or for others, God wants you to serve the local church in a full-time capacity as a preacher, a pastor, a minister.
 - I know it's a scary prospect. I've been there. **You want assurance to know this is really from God and not just in your head.** Well you're not going to get that assurance while sitting on your couch bingeing Netflix or playing video games or just playing with your kids. **Take smaller but still significant steps of faith now.** Get out of your comfort zone. Take risks. And there I believe you'll meet the LORD, and he'll graciously strengthen your feeble hands.