

Judges: When All Hell Breaks Loose

"The Surprise of Weakness"

Judges 7

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We've been looking at the Old Testament book of Judges. A book that is one of a kind. There is nothing like it in the Bible. It's almost like an anthology TV series, that tells similarly themed stories each season... and they build and get more intense and disturbing along the way.... And here we are, thousands of years later, trying to make sense of this, and find the ways it's speaking directly into our lives now, in 2019.

It's a timely book for our current world, especially for the Christian and how he or she can live faithfully in a culture that is finding it increasingly difficult to see faith in God as credible.... Each week, we've pointed out the cycle that exists in Judges... The people didn't follow the commands of the LORD to rid the land of foreign gods and worship, over time they become intertwined with these gods and practices... then they become oppressed... they cry out to the Lord, the Lord raises up a redeemer, a judge to save and then rule for a time.... And then soon after the cycle begins again.

It's a familiar cycle whether we recognize it immediately or not, because as we've said, *it's the cycle of our own lives*. Sometimes the cycle happens daily... sometimes it lasts for seasons. There are times when we live dependent on the Lord, and there are times when we revert back to a life of self-dependence... Seemingly incapable of trusting the LORD, trusting His ways over ours... And, that is very much the story of Gideon...

Gideon is one of the Judges of Israel... We began his story last week, and along with Samson, later in the book, Gideon and Samson are the two judges with the longest accounts in the book. Today's passage brings us to the part of Gideon's story we often learn in Sunday school... But within this story of "the mighty man of valor," is the common cycle of the book of Judges. Gideon trusts the Lord, then he trusts himself... he doubts, he fears, he trusts, he doubts again.... And ultimately by the end of this... God will once again demonstrate that His ways are different, and BETTER than ours... and that the glory of the LORD is shown through weakness...

So, I want to look at this today in 3 ways- I want us to look at:

- 1) The Method and the Model – when it comes to the battle plans of God
- 2) A confused Confidence – how does Gideon experience and respond to all this.... And finally....
- 3) The Surprise of Weakness – a theme we find throughout the story, and throughout Judges.

The Method and the Model, A confused confidence, and the surprise of weakness.... This is the story of a battle... it's Gideon's moment of victory over the Midianites. Last week we talked of how Midian had completely overwhelmed and driven the Israelites into poverty and homelessness. And battle stories are often stories of glory, and valor... and heroes! We love that kind of stuff! We always have! I think it would be fair to say that our interests, our passions, and desires prefer people be poised, assertive, attractive, assured, self-sufficient, confident... even brash perhaps?

There was a series on PBS called, "The Great American Read" on America's 100 best-loved novels. One episode featured heroic characters and why we love them. Books like *1984*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Don Quixote*, *The Hunger Games*, and *The Invisible Man*. Literary experts, authors and everyday readers discussed why our favorite heroes are complex and relatable, from the everyday hero to the tragic and unlikely or anti-hero. Here's what some of them said:

----- "*A hero is who we all wish we were if we didn't have our own personal limitations.*" ----- "*I think when we hear heroes or see them or read about them, we think about qualities we wish we had. Courage, strength, fortitude, bravery.*" ----- "*Reading about everyday heroes gives us hope and lets you know that you're not alone in the good fight.*" ----- "*I think we aspire to everyday heroes because we wish to be them... In moments of great tragedy, we see people drawn to firefighters or emergency workers or the people who went beyond their job. They rushed in where angels fear to tread.*" ----- "*The hero lifts us. It redeems what we try to do. The hero provides us an archetype that gives us a direction. 'Let's go this way. And we'll be okay.'*" ----- "*We'd like to believe there's like a hero gene in all of us.*"

That last one is so telling... "Let's go this way, and we'll be OK." We all want to believe we can be that hero... Courage. Bravery. Passion. Sounds like a Mighty man of valor! However, this is where we run into a problem with the Bible... The Bible does not seem to care about those things AT ALL... All of our conceptions of heroism, and the hero, rarely ever line up with how we see God at work in the scriptures... and most likely, how we see him at work in the world today, and at work in us. Remember who Gideon is? Where he comes from? The smallest and weakest of the clans? Remember his cowardly nature, his constant need for reassurance.? This is not "man's man" ... no hero's hero.

The Method and the Model of victory here in Judges 7, and throughout the OT is not about a hero rising against incredible odds. The Method and Model of God's victory is only ever, God himself. And this shouldn't be surprising to us.... Or to Gideon and the Israelites. If they know their history, which Gideon told us last week that he did, when he objected to what the Angel said... What God does in this battle here, is always how God fought for them....

Remember the crossing of the Red Sea, in the Exodus from Egypt? Moses' words to the people were this... "*And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work FOR YOU today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."*"

And the LORD did just that... pulled back the waters of the sea... nothing of the people's doing... and as they moved from there.... "*A pillar of cloud moved from before them and*

stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness. And it lit up the night..."

So, how is the glory of the LORD on display in this battle? How does the battle plan and victory develop? *I think, the deliverance of the people from under the oppression of the Midianites, shows us the Method and the Model of how God always works...*

Remember, Gideon is God's man... called out to lead... albeit, not very convincingly as we saw with Gideon's cowardice, and with his constant need to be reassured with the fleece... So, the people of Israel and all the tribes begin to assemble and they are ready to fight for him... to defeat the Midianites... But then God interrupts the plans... And he begins to work on Gideon's, and our, obsession with power....

Look at v. 1 "*Then Jerubbaal (that is Gideon)*" – very interesting there... Gideon and his dual persona's – man of Baal, man of YHWH – "*and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod....*" V. 2 – "*The LORD said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me saying, "My own hand has saved me."*" We are clearly seeing the mind of God here... If I just let you go off against Midian with all your military might now... *You will think of yourselves only... you will continue to live according to your own power... So, no... we're not gonna do that...* and God proceeds to tell Gideon to send men home... What!? Send men away from the battle!??

So how does he do it? Well, first, he cuts to the heart and says – "*whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home...*" And you know many take him up on that offer? A LOT! 22,000! Most of the men leave, from fear. Now, I'm not a military man... but to me, that seems bad. That seems like a low morale. Only 10,000 remain! But hey, Maybe Gideon is thinking... maybe we're thinking... no, I think that's actually a good thing... at least now we know who's in and who's out. We got rid of the weak ones. We have true believers here now with us. True warriors. No, this is good! OK, we're ready.... 10,000. Let's go.

Then, what does God do? V. 4 – *And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there, and anyone of whom I say to you, "This one shall go with you, shall go, and anyone of whom I say to you, "This one shall not go with you," shall not go."* And the test that God then gives... is about how the men drink the water. Kind of strange right? Tell them all to go down to get a drink from the stream... Those that cupped the water with their hands, and lapped from their hands, were 300, but all the others knelt down to drink the water straight from the stream.... Guess who God chooses? The 300! 300 of 10,000!! OK, now, Gideon has to be thinking... this is ridiculous. 300!?? v. 7 – *"And the Lord said to Gideon, "With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home."* So, what is happening here? What is God up to?

So many biblical commentators have tried to speculate as to why this particular test was used... perhaps it was a way for God to discover the best 300, but how does this test do that? You see commentators bending over backwards to try and make a case for the

lappers, that there is some greater morality that they have.... Or perhaps it's the fact that they're still standing... and they're showing they're more battle ready in case the enemy surprises them... forgetting that they are still miles away from the battle front here.... In other words, even with bible commentators, and with preachers and teachers... it seems that there is still some human need in all of us to try and discover a meritorious reason for why these 300 were chosen...

We can't accept there wasn't some reason that they deserved to stay! But let me offer to you today, that I don't think there is any reason at all... except for reason that it's the way God chose. It was a mechanism to make the army very small. In other words, God is showing there's nothing special about these 300. It's simply, "*Gideon, I'm only giving you 300... And guess what... we're only getting started....*" God then says to Gideon, "*OK... now you're ready... take the 300, and go and deliver the people. I will give them into your hand...*"

But, what does God know about Gideon?? He's already a fearful guy... cowardly... full of doubt... Yes, God has said he will do this... BUT.... Can he be certain?? And then he just took away all his men!?? So God says, "*listen, Gideon... if you are afraid... if you need further assurance... then go down to the Midianite camp... Take a servant... sneak around, and you will hear what they are saying....*" So, Gideon takes him up on this and he goes down there.... and he sees the sheer number of Midianites and Amalekites that have joined them and he's overwhelmed... but then as he's close by the camp, he hears a Midianite soldier, a private perhaps... telling another soldier about a dream he had. Look at v. 13 – the Midianite soldier says, "*Behold, I dreamed a dream, and behold, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian and came to the tent and struck it so that it fell and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat.*" And his comrade answered, "*This is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given into this hand Midian and all the camp.*"

Gideon hears this... and right there, he gets the assurance he needs...He comes back to the Israelite camp and he's full of confidence. He believes. And here's the plan...The 300 are going to split into three companies... All of them are going to carry trumpets and empty jars with torches inside them... and surround the camp... So, 300 men... and no weapons in their hands... And when I blow the trumpet, you all blow the trumpets and shout out, "*For the LORD and for Gideon.*"

So that's what happens... Gideon gets to the edge of the camp, they're surrounding it... he blows the trumpet and smashed the jar which reveals the brightness of the torch inside... and then all 300 do it... And in that moment, we're told that the Lord set such a confusion upon the Midianites... that they began to fight against themselves... and they began to kill themselves... and the armies are waging war with each other and they're fleeing.... And at that point, Gideon calls on the rest of Israel to pursue them and finish the job. *And the people are delivered... The Method and the Model of God's Victory...* Completely removes the power of their military might – Gideon's been called a mighty man of valor, but this battle plan doesn't give him any opportunity to display his military might – his sword play.... His abilities. God reduces their power... and in the end, displays his own power...

It is the LORD who has done this... Not the people. The Method and the Model of God is that he will always bring us to a place to see that we live dependently upon him. He fights for us. We do not fight for him. And in Him alone, comes our deliverance.

But we will test that... always... And this is the second point today, 2) A confused confidence... Gideon is a confusing character... We can't quite figure him out... we say that about others often, don't we? Wow, he really surprised me... I just can't quite figure her out!

Gideon is having all of his military power stripped away from him... Not his idea, mind you... and even though he's seen the Angel of the LORD, even though God performed the miracles with the Fleece.... His confidence is so shaky that God has to reassure him that he will indeed pull through... Gideon is the most un-heroic hero... He is not a warrior who takes the order and runs into the breach... *He can't take God at his own word; he goes for the reassurance... And how familiar does that feel to us?*

We live a life of trusting God, and then not trusting him... How many times have we experienced something and then said to ourselves or others, "I'll never not trust God again..."? Only to seek every single reassurance again the next time... Reassurances that lead to worry, anxiety, fear. No matter what God does for us... the unbelieving heart drives us to doubt him. Even if we have tasted the goodness of the LORD in our lives before... even if his track record of provision and taking care of us is proven... we still worry, and we fear, that he will do it again... and it leads all of us to live with a confused confidence...

And I want to tease out a few things here about how this works out in Gideon's story, and how I think the same things work out in our stories... Because Gideon can't seem to cement in his heart and mind that the LORD will indeed, always be with him... he needs constant reassurance. His fear mounts and overwhelms him... think about Gideon watching his army dwindle down from 22,000, to 300! His fear and anxiety and worry must be overwhelming...

And let me tell you... I think you and I have been there too. I have... There have been times in my life where circumstances have been difficult. Seemingly turned against me.... And even though I know the track record of God in my life, it seems as if he is doing everything in his power to strip me of my power! He keeps peeling off resources from me... He's dwindling down my armies... Have you been there? And what is that like? It often leads us to intense worry and fear... And yet, all along.... It is God at work in us to FREE us from our constant desire to self-save... to be self-dependent... And he keeps peeling more things off. Until, finally... we're left with 300 men, if you will.... And with a confused confidence.

God knows this about Gideon, and he knows this about you and me... and again, he condescends... he's overly gracious to Gideon... just like the Fleece, he provides relief for Gideon...he tells him to go down to the camp, and Gideon hears the dream of an obscure Midianite.... God often uses the oddest channels to change our situation, to awaken us... And for Gideon, this random Midianite is the reassurance... and it leads him to do something that he hasn't done yet really, and something he won't do again, at least in the

text... He worships. Right there we're told he worshipped God. And from that worship, from that moment... his confidence is reassured, he goes back to the camp and leads the charge with a new battle plan of the LORD's.

And remember, worship... was always a part of God's battle plan with his people... As TJ has already told us... it was the priests that led the Israelites into battle always... The Levites led the people and Joshua against Jericho.... And it was the blowing of the trumpet that brought the walls down.

Then, remember just a few weeks ago... Barak, was the reluctant priest... he did not want to go to battle with the woman judge, Deborah... so, again, we're seeing that the people are slowly deteriorating... worship is less and less a part of their corporate life... and here with Gideon... there's no sign of any priest at all... anywhere! Only, when Gideon himself stops, and worships the Lord, do we get a glimpse of it.

But this is not Gideon's battle... in that moment of worship, it becomes the LORD's battle. Gideon is a spectator. A worshipper.... And his 300 men, surrounding the enemy camp, with their torches alight... become like the glory cloud of God in the darkness....

But there is something for us here as well... What will it take for us to move from a Confused Confidence-- To a Secure Confidence? For Israel, it was to trust that the Battle was the LORD's. It was to trust that His ways, his plans were better than theirs... and it was to worship their way through the battle, watching the LORD at work....

And the same is true for us... Except our secure confidence comes not from battle plans with armies, or torches... our secure confidence comes in the fact that we follow not a group of priests, we follow the Great high priest, Jesus Christ into battle... who is himself the Glory of God in the flesh... Who wins for us the battle against sin and death...?

Now, living faithfully in this world looks like the follower of Jesus moving about with a secure confidence... not a confused confidence about how things will turn out, or what strategy will be best to win this particular situation or battle... We now come to God, we are accepted by God, and boldly come to him without confusion, or doubt.... Secure in what he has won for us. We have seen it before... We will see it time and time again.

Unfortunately, for Gideon... and with us... If we don't continue to worship from that position... loved and accepted by God... secure in our confidence... then we slip back into living with a confused confidence... Which is exactly what happens to Gideon...

I won't get into this much this morning... but the story doesn't end well for Gideon... TJ perhaps will explore some of that next week... Gideon in chapter 8, finds himself becoming overwhelmed with very human desires and problems... The people are fracturing under his leadership... He becomes overwhelmed not with the deliverance that God has provided, but with revenge against his own people.... He is the man of Baal, the man of Yahweh... A confused confidence. And the confusion sets in for him, and it sets in for us... when we begin to take the gifts, and situations of our lives... and think that it has been done by our own hands... it is why v. 2 is the key to this entire story...

"You are too many...lest you boast saying you saved yourself..."

Thinking we have saved ourselves, only leads us to confusion, not security.

But, finally, for us today... this story reinforces a recurring biblical theme... a theme the Bible will not let us get away from, and it is...

3) The Surprise of Weakness –

When we start to talk about weakness, we almost always do a comparison with strengths... What are my weaknesses and strengths?

What are the strengths and weaknesses of this organization? And, of course the goal is to somehow lessen the weaknesses, and turn them into strengths... But sometimes we're confused about what exactly is a weakness, and what is a strength... *It reminds me of that scene from the show, The Office...* Michael Scott, the lead character who is the epitome of someone with a Confused confidence... is sitting down for an interview at corporate headquarters, and he's asked... David: What do you think are your greatest strengths as a manager? And he replies famously... "*Why don't I tell you what my greatest weaknesses are? I work too hard. I care too much. And sometimes I can be too invested in my job.*" David: Okay. And your strengths? Michael: Well, my weaknesses are actually ... strengths. David: Oh. Yes. Very good. Michael: Thank you.

We live with a confused understanding of weakness, because its not something our culture celebrates at all... we feint at humility... but weakness is not something we reward at all... and yet, its exactly what God requires of us. To fully understand and own our weakness... Elisa Morgan, president of MOPS (Mothers of Preschoolers) International, writes: *I'm probably the least likely person to head a mothering organization. I grew up in a broken home. My parents were divorced when I was 5. My older sister, younger brother, and I were raised by my alcoholic mother. Most of my memories are of my mothering her rather than her mothering me. Alcohol altered her love, turning it into something that wasn't love. I remember her weaving down the hall, glass of scotch in hand. She would wake me at 2 a.m. just to make sure I was asleep. I would wake her at 7 a.m. to try to get her off to work. Sure, there were good times like Christmas and birthdays when she went all out and celebrated us as children. But even those days ended with the warped glow of alcohol. What she did right was lost in what she did wrong. Ten years ago, when I was asked to consider leading MOPS International, a vital ministry that nurtures mothers, I went straight to my knees—and then to the therapist's office. How could God use me—who had never been mothered—to nurture other mothers? The answer came as I gazed into the eyes of other moms around me and saw their needs mirroring my own. God seemed to take my deficits and make them my offering—"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).*

In Gideon's best moments, this is what he understands... That God does indeed choose the weak things of the world to shame the strong... And when we live from our weakness, we are made strong in Christ...that we live in his strength... fully dependent on him... And this is the posture we are meant to take up in the world... A few years ago, I read an article written by my mentor, that set me on the current course of study and research I'm focused on... In the article, he describes a *Roman Catholic woman, who is an assistant in a L'Arche community in Belfast in Northern Ireland... L'Arche is a community where people with*

intellectual disabilities live with typical residents in community together. She said that when she walks as a catholic woman in Belfast, she is in genuine danger and feels it... But, when she does that with people from L'Arche, she knows that she is always safe. Indeed, when she has people with developmental disabilities with her, she, a Catholic woman, has even been allowed to speak in Protestant churches which is extremely unusual. In the article she makes this profound and provocative comment... "When I am with people with profound developmental disabilities I can go anywhere and say anything. The barriers come down on both sides of the divide, Protestant and Catholic. Wherever they go, they seem to bring peace and reconciliation and if I am with them, I can share in that peace. You know, I sometimes wonder if Jesus had Down's syndrome." Swinton comments... She wasn't joking. She wasn't using metaphorical language; her question was wistful but genuine. Her encounters with people with profound developmental disability had changed the way she saw the world and the ways in which she understood God to be at work in the world.... Gone were images of God as the bringer of liberation and peace through God's great power and might. Instead the possibility of God being very different from assumed norms, incarnating God's self within the body of a person with Down's syndrome opened up new vistas of hope, reconciliation and revelation.

To live a faithful life in the world today... is to live a life of weakness, that is firmly rooted in the strength of the LORD... and when we do that... we actually begin to display a new type of hope to the world... Hope that looks like weakness. Hope that trusts in the LORD. Hope that looks like a man handing on a cross... and an empty tomb.

This is the only way we break the cycle... and so we live in it...
We own it... not with a confused confidence...
But with the surprising power and strength of weakness.

Let's Pray.