



Strength of youth

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Lessons from the Judges (2) From 32,000 to 300

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The book of Judges brims with instruction for the church's youth. Last time, we noticed the idea, "...every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 17:6). With this article, we continue drawing lessons from the book of Judges.

We find ourselves in the history of Gideon, following the deaths of judges Shamgar, Deborah, and Barak. Israel had again apostatized. As was repeatedly the case, God's people slid into the sin of idolatry. Jehovah, in chastisement, sent the Midianites, Amalekites, and children of the East to oppress Israel. It is in this context that God called and equipped Gideon as judge.

The Midianites and their allies gathered to fight against Israel. Gideon and certain of Israel—much fewer in number than their opponent—also assembled for battle. Although Israel's army was small to begin with, Jehovah reduced its size even more before delivering the Midianites into Gideon's hand. We will draw out two main lessons from this size reduction.

The vast reduction

Two armies were ready for battle. One army was Gideon and Israel, encamped beside the well of Harod

in central northern Israel. The other army was the Midianites to the north of Gideon's troops, in a valley by the hill of Moreh. Gideon and his men stood on a higher elevation than the Midianites and could see below them the vastness of the Midianite army.

The Midianite troops were, indeed, exceedingly great in number. A careful reading of the context leads to the conclusion that the enemy host was 135,000 men strong. The stadium where Michigan college football is played has a seating capacity of over 115,000 people: imagine this stadium filled to capacity, plus 20,000 people, and you have the size of the Midianite fighting force. No wonder Judges 7:12 says "the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea-side for multitude." This is what Israel saw when they looked down into that valley.

Israel's army, in comparison, was rather small. Doing a little math will tell you that Israel originally had 32,000 men. Thirty-two thousand men against more men than even a massive football stadium can hold!

But the Israelite army of 32,000 was too large.

Jehovah told Gideon that the army was too big and gave direction for how it must be reduced in size. God said plainly, "The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, mine own hand hath saved me" (Judges 7:2). The number of men was shrunk in two ways. First, God told Gideon to proclaim in the ears of the people, that anyone who was fearful about the battle could return. Gideon said this to the people, with the result that 22,000 men left the army. Gideon's group consisted now of 10,000 soldiers. Second, God commanded Gideon to bring the remaining army down to the water, where He would try them. The men, having marched, were thirsty and would drink the water, but the question is *how* they would drink. Those who remained standing and lapped the water from their cupped hands would remain to go into battle. Those who placed themselves on their hands and knees and drank the water directly with their mouths would not go into battle but would leave. Gideon was left with 300 men.

A vast reduction! 32,000 to 300!

The essential lessons

While more could be said, we will limit ourselves to a couple of essential lessons that God was teaching Israel, and is teaching us, in this reduction of Israel's army. One lesson, negatively stated, is that Israel must not vaunt themselves against Jehovah, saying that their own hand

saved them. The other lesson, positively stated, is that Jehovah alone must be glorified for Israel's salvation.

First, God taught Israel in this vast reduction that they must not vaunt themselves against Him, saying that their own hand saved them. Judges 7:2 says, "And the LORD said unto Gideon, the people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against [or "over"] me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me." It is true that Israel had far fewer men than Midian. Even so, if Israel went into battle with thousands of men, they would still be tempted to vaunt themselves against God, as if by their own hand they were saved. Jehovah made the army smaller lest that happen. The lesson Jehovah was teaching is that Israel must not boast in herself.

This vaunting to which Israel was tempted was a boasting in themselves, and would sound like this: "We have saved ourselves from the Midianites, and the power to do so lay in the size of our army. The credit for the victory goes to us and our numbers!" Should Israel vaunt themselves, it would be a boasting *against* God: not merely a glorifying of themselves, but also hostility toward and despising of God. This boasting would also be *over* God, from their perspective, as if they climbed up to God's throne, took Him off it, sat on that throne, and claimed the glory for themselves. Should Israel make this boast in their own strength and numbers, it would be nothing less than ugly, stinking pride; but it would also be idolatry, for the people would be bowing the knee to self—the hands and strength of self.

The temptation to glory in themselves was intensely strong. Just how strong this temptation was for them, the Lord indicates when He says to Gideon, "The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves..." (Judges 7:2). How striking! Any earthly army commander would say, "We need more men! We don't have enough soldiers to go fight against the enemy!" With the Lord, not so. The people that were with Gideon were *too many for the Lord to give the Midianites into their hands!* Just how strong this temptation was, God also shows when He reduces the size of Gideon's army not just once, but *twice*. God decreased the number of soldiers twice in order the more clearly to teach the lesson that this boasting was something to which Israel was so prone.

This vaunting is the common element in every erroneous system of teaching in church history up to today, whether that be Semi-Pelagianism, Arminianism, the well-meant offer of the gospel, Federal Vision, or others. Think of false teaching as if it were a hand with a glove over it. One heretical movement might vary from

another heretical movement in some ways—each wears a different “glove” of teaching. But no matter which glove is worn, always underneath it is the hand of flesh in which man boasts. It is important we understand this and fight against these grievous errors.

But what about *us*? Is this God-dishonoring, man-elevating, proud, and idolatrous vaunting found among *us*?

Think on a church level (after all, it was *Israel* that was tempted to vaunt themselves). A church evangelism committee advertises heavily for an event at church. The committee uses all its members, pools its resources, and works hard. Many people from the surrounding community end up attending that evangelism event, and some of them even become productive and flourishing members in the congregation. The success of the event starts to go to the head:

look what *we* did, what *we* accomplished by our numbers and resources! Such examples can be multiplied.

But application may be made also on a more personal level. Have you ever informally counseled someone in an emotionally or spiritually difficult spot and then taken the credit for their improvement? Have you ever found yourself free from the grip of

an addiction and congratulated yourself on your own strength? Have you ever been in a position where you walked away from a sore temptation and thought highly of just how much resolve you had to do that? When you consider your regular devotional life, your decent outward behavior, your being Protestant Reformed, your spiritually-minded Facebook status update, your regular church attendance, your last name, your father’s influence in the church—has it ever crossed your mind that these things, in their great number, must somehow go toward your salvation? In these ways, and in many others, we boast in the hand of flesh.

Let us learn with Israel that we must not vaunt ourselves against God, saying, “Mine own hand hath saved me (or others).”

Second, in this shrinking down of the Israelite army, Jehovah made plain to His people that He alone must be glorified for their salvation. To be sure, even if God uses *many* as an instrument in His hand, it is still true that salvation belongs to Him and He must be glorified. But Jehovah often *impresses* upon us that He alone saves

and must be praised, and He impresses that upon us by using few, and not many, to accomplish His purposes.

God made Israel’s army very small so that the salvation accomplished by His divine hand would be plainly demonstrated. If there were many thousands of men fighting in this army, God’s glory might have been obscured (from Israel’s point of view). Thus, God reduced the army size. Later on, God’s power radiated brilliantly in the victory over the 135,000 Midianites! How obvious it was that Israel’s salvation was of Jehovah, and not of themselves! God would have Israel boast in His power alone.

Jehovah teaches us this same lesson. Young person, the banner that hangs over your whole life is, “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8, 9). The daily confession on our lips should be, “Jesus...Savior...saveth us, and delivereth us from our sins...we ought not to seek, neither can find salvation in any other” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 29). Consider what power God has, does, and will display in Jesus Christ. Boast in *Him!*

The Lord reminds His church that salvation be-

longs to Him, and He often reminds us of that by using a small “Gideon’s band.” In church history, when reform was needed, it was not usually (or ever) the *many* that God used, but the *few*—a small Gideon’s band. God showed the few, plainly, that credit went not to them but to Him. Perhaps you are part of a small congregation or denomination—a small Gideon’s band. The littleness is a reminder from God that you must not boast in your own hand, but boast in Him. Maybe you look at your work with others in the church, or your personal life, and you notice that the means God uses in His hand is rather small, insignificant, or weak. This is another unmistakably clear reminder that we are not to glory in ourselves, but in *Him*.

The comforting word

The comforting word that came to Gideon, when he was left with only the 300, was “by the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand...” (Judges 7:7). Imagine! Here was Gideon, standing with this tiny group, over against the

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immense army of the foe. How comforting, therefore, was Jehovah's certain word that by the 300 He would save them.

Is that not a comforting word also for us? The enemies are many and strong, but we find that our numbers are small. Quickly we become discouraged. But God's Word comes to us, directing us to the finished

work of Jesus Christ. You have the victory in Him! You have the victory by God's hand! Regarding work in the church, God is pleased to use means—that is true. But these are means in *His hand*, and He will certainly accomplish what He wills. Be encouraged, little Gideon's band! Salvation is of the Lord!