

Gideon's Small Army Is Victorious

Judges 7:2-23

(Nominated by Jim Hearn)

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At first Gideon seems like an unlikely hero. He was timid, appears to be weak, and was hiding in a winepress. But the Lord found Gideon and called him a “mighty warrior.” God believed in Gideon before Gideon did. And as a result, Gideon became one of Israel’s heroes of faith and was remembered as a mighty warrior. Much later the prophet Isaiah recalled Gideon’s great victory over the Midianites (9:4). The psalmist likewise remembered it. And much later the writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews remembered Gideon, the unlikely hero, and named him among the Jewish heroes of faith (11:32).

I appreciate Jim Hearn nominating this text because I suspect many people will identify with Gideon. When God first calls us to some task, we may not feel adequate to do it. It’s above our pay grade, as we sometimes say. But if we’re willing to respond to God’s call and trust God’s leadership, then we, like Gideon, will do something great for God.

The story of Gideon goes back to an early time in Jewish history. It was a transitional time for the people of Israel. They had crossed the Jordan River and taken possession of the Promised Land, but they did not yet have a well-defined government. Their great leaders; Moses and Joshua who led them out of Egypt, through the wilderness and into the Promised Land; had both died. There was not yet a king of Israel. They were loosely organized around the twelve tribes of Israel. Without effective central leadership, though, the people of Israel’s hearts wandered, and they turned their backs on God. Right after the death of Joshua, their last great leader, this is what happened:

Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and worshiped the Baals; and they abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the

*peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them;
and they provoked the Lord to anger. (2:11-12)*

Without effective leadership, the people of Israel returned to the worship of idols, doing what was evil in God's sight. So God raised up a series of judges to lead the people. Ehud was one of these judges, as were Deborah and Barak. But the one we remember the most is Gideon. The judges were not legal authorities, as we think of a judge today. They were more like tribal leaders, deliverers, men and women who filled the leadership vacuum and led the people of Israel back to God. By the time God called Gideon, a rogue desert people called the Midianites were oppressing the people of Israel. Gideon's calling was twofold: first, defeat the Midianites, and then return the people to God.

Now, let me say this. I know that some of you have been nominated to serve as a deacon. You've been thinking about it, pondering, praying about it. You may feel a bit ambivalent about it, maybe fearing that you don't have the skill set needed to be a deacon. Maybe you don't have the time. You may have a hundred reasons to feel ambivalent, but I bet you don't have as many as Gideon had.

Gideon felt overwhelmed by the tasks God was calling him to do, but he finally said "yes." The "yes" was all God needed to use Gideon to do something great. I didn't read this section, but do you remember the story of Gideon putting out the fleece? He may have said "yes," but Gideon still had a lot of uncertainty. Gideon was so uncertain about what God wanted him to do that Gideon asked for a miracle to confirm it. He took a sheep's skin, a fleece, and placed it on the floor at night. He told God that on the next morning if there was dew on the fleece and not the ground around it, then that would be a sign from God that he should fight the Midianites. So Gideon got up the next morning and the fleece was wet, and the ground was not. That was his sign, right? He should have been ready to rally the troops and go to war. Well, Gideon was so unsure of himself that he put out the fleece again, this time in reverse. The next morning if there was dew on the ground but not the fleece, then that would be his sign from God. The next morning the fleece was dry, and the floor was wet, a clear sign from God.

So Gideon began to make plans to go to war. He had an army of 32,000 troops, which would have been an enormous army in that day. But the Midianites had a large army too. Later we learn that they had 120,000

troops! They are described as being “as thick as locusts; and their camels were without number, countless as the sand on the seashore.” So Gideon needed a large army. He had 32,000, so he needed to be in recruiting mode, right?

Not according to God. God told Gideon to reduce the size of his army. God told Gideon to go to the troops and tell them that if any of them were afraid they could go home. This is actually a provision of war recorded in the book of Deuteronomy (20:8). Guess what? They took the offer. Twenty-two thousand troops went home. Now with an army of only 10,000, I suspect Gideon was ready to put the fleece back out! Lord, are you sure this is what you want me to do?

It wasn't. God told Gideon that the army was still too big. God told him to take the men to a watering station at a river and watch the way the men drank water. The ones who knelt down and drank out of the river were to be sent home. The ones who took the water in their hands and lapped it like a dog were to be his army. Gideon ended up with an army of 300 men. From 32,000 to 300! And they were to engage an army of 120,000!

Now why would God want Gideon to take only 300 men against an army “as thick as locusts”? Here's what the Lord said to Gideon: “The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, ‘My own hand has delivered me.’”

God knew that if they went to war with a large army and won, then the people of Israel would boast of what *they* had done. However, if they went to war with only 300 men and won, they boast of what God did through them. Remember, Gideon's calling was two-fold: defeat the Midianites and return the people to God.

This is what Gideon did. After a reconnaissance trip to inspect the Midianite army, he gave each of the 300 men in his army a trumpet and a jar with a torch inside it. He gave explicit instructions to follow his lead. It was nighttime. They could see the unsuspecting Midianite army below. At just the right time, Gideon blew his trumpet, smashed the jar, and lifted high the torch that was inside the jar. All the sudden, Gideon's 300 men did the same thing. They all blew their trumpets, smashed the jars, lifted high their torches, and cried out, “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” Their

sudden and unexpected attack created so much confusion and chaos among the Midianites that Gideon's 300 men were able to rout the great Midianite army.

When it was all over, the people praised Gideon. They wanted to make him their ruler. Then when Gideon died, they said that they wanted his son to be their ruler, then Gideon's grandson. But Gideon remembered his call and told the people, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; *the Lord will rule over you.*"

He had defeated the Midianites, and now he returned the people to God.

You can see now why Isaiah still remembered Gideon. And the psalmist. And why Gideon is listed among the heroes of faith in the book of Hebrews. He was an unlikely hero, timid in the beginning, hiding from God. But God believed in him. God believed in Gideon and called him to be a mighty warrior. Gideon said yes to God, and God used him to do something great. In reality, it wasn't something Gideon did. It was something God did through Gideon. He was willing to respond to God's call and trust God's leadership, and as a result he did something great for God.

I wonder, do we have any Gideons among us this morning, some unlikely heroes who are willing to say yes to God? You may sense that God is calling you to some task. You may have a hundred and one reasons to feel ambivalent. You may fear that you don't have the needed skill set or the time or something else. The message of Gideon is that God believes in us more than we believe in ourselves. And when God calls us to a task, God will give us everything we need to be effective. What God needs is not a perfect candidate. What God needs is a willing candidate. Whether it's to be a deacon or to launch an entirely new ministry of some type. Be a Gideon and do something great for God.

Closing Prayer

Lord, we make no claims to greatness. We're certainly not mighty Christians, much less mighty warriors. But we give you what and who we are and ask that you would use us for your Kingdom's work. Have your way with us, Lord. Amen.