

RUF Bible Study – Judges  
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Judges 7 – Gideon Part 2 – Gideon’s 300

*The Lord said to Gideon, “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.’”*  
Judges 7:2

*But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*  
2 Corinthians 12:9-10

What do you think is the greatest sports upset in history? It’s been quite a year (2008) of football upsets, culminating in the stunning Superbowl victory of the Giants over the Patriots. But there were plenty of others, starting off with the first week of the season amazing win of Division II Appalachian State over mighty Michigan. It seemed like the top three teams lost every week, and USC lost to Stanford despite being favored to win by 41 points.

Closer to home, I walked into the stadium in Lubbock, Texas with my friend Dan. OU was in the top five and had only lost one game. I turned to him and said, “There is no way OU loses this game.” On the first offensive play for OU, Allen Patrick fumbled and quarterback Sam Bradford had to tackle the player who picked up the ball. Bradford’s own guy fell on him and gave him a concussion, so he was out. OU floundered, and they lost 27-34.

But the consensus is that the greatest upset title belongs to the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team’s defeat in the semifinals over the Soviet team. This just wasn’t supposed to happen. Excellently chronicled by Disney’s *Miracle* movie, we follow the team as it’s put together by coach Herb Brooks, and as they struggle to find any cohesion. The Soviet team had played together for years and years, but the U.S. was formed from college students. The U.S. team had lost to this same Soviet team only a month beforehand by the score of 10-3. The U.S. was seeded seventh out of the twelve teams in the final round. Somehow, against all odds, they win; then they go on and defeat Finland to win the gold medal. Do you believe in miracles? Yes!

Where in your life do you feel like you’re against the Soviet 1980 hockey team? Are you overwhelmed and outnumbered in an area of your life? Do feel like you have a lack of skill or experience to handle a situation?

Do you believe in miracles? We love a good comeback story, and Hollywood is full of them. We’ve got another one today, as God’s people are hopelessly outnumbered. Let’s see if they can pull out a dramatic victory, and we can root for them along the way. So our points will be *Gideon’s Awesome, God’s Humbling Arrangement and God’s Assuring Assistance.*

### ***Gideon’s Awesome Upset***

Let’s start with Gideon’s victory. This is like watching the very U.S. – Soviet game without any lead up. In verse 19, Gideon takes his 300 men to the outskirts of the Midianite camp at the beginning of the middle watch. Since night time would have been from approximately 6pm to 6am, this would be at 10pm. One third of the Midianites would be watching, while the other two thirds would be sleeping. One of those sleeping thirds would be about to be woken up so they could take over their watch stations.

Gideon’s men “blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands.” They held up their torches, blew the trumpets and yelled out, “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!”

The Midianites freaked out. They had already been irrationally afraid of Gideon, so when they heard and saw this display from a distance, they must have thought Gideon had somehow rallied a huge army. It may have seemed that each of these 300 trumpeting, yelling, torch-bearing men led a whole army behind them. Thus, they could be facing 300,000 soldiers.

So you can imagine the scene. One-third of the soldiers are walking back to their tents. The trumpets blow. Two thirds of the soldiers wake up – and they see soldiers walking among their camp! They also have a herd of camels stampeding

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For this series, I used commentaries on Judges from Block, Wilcock, Redeemer Pres, Davis, Cundall/Morris, Jordan, and listened to sermons from Brandon Barrett, Shaynor Newseome, and Pete Hatton. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

through the camp, which can't be good. The Midianites are so afraid they start killing each other, and the army actually wiped itself out.

There were 9,700 Israelite soldiers waiting in the wings, and they, at Gideon's command came down and chased after the left-over Midianites until they were all gone.

Whoa. We find out in chapter 8 that there were 135,000 Midianites in this army. Gideon had 300 and then another 9,700 after the first action had been taken. 300 versus 135,000.

It's an absolutely incredible victory for Israel. There was no way this should have happened, but it did.

The text doesn't give any indication that God told Gideon to employ this strategy. So it appears Gideon must have come up with it on his own. If so, it's sheer brilliance. Good job, Gideon!

I'm probably not the only one who thinks of the King Leonidas' army of 300, who fought the vast Persian army at Themopolae in 480 B.C. Against all odds, this army stood their ground for days and days, thereby proving their bravery on the battlefield and dying as true soldiers for their cause.

Do you have something you feel is a battle against all odds? Maybe you are battling pornography, and it doesn't feel like you can win. The odds just feel too great, so you don't even try.

Or maybe you have someone you can't forgive. You know in your head that you should, but it's just too daunting of a task when you face it.

Or perhaps you are trying to gain control over some addiction like an eating disorder. How could I ever defeat this enemy? What strategies could ever work?

You wonder if, like King Leonidas' men, you're going to go and get slaughtered. It may be a good fight for awhile, even inspiring for a time. But it will end in death. The Spartan women would say, "Come back with your shield or on it." So you're not sure you want to go into battle after all. What if you lose?

But Gideon's 300 actually won the battle. They won. Hooray for God's people! They defeated the enemy despite 450:1 odds. God was at work and defeated his and their enemies. There is hope for you.

### ***God's Humbling Arrangement***

It was an awesome upset. You can imagine the soldiers coming home and being hailed as heroes by their families.

But later, alone with their wives, the men would tell the true story. And that story was a very strange one.

You see, this episode of Israel's amazing victory is really more about God's working through a weak and helpless people.

Let's try to discern how we can see that. The controlling verse for this chapter is verse 2: *The Lord said to Gideon, "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.'*

God has already planned to save his people. He had heard their cry (back in chapter 6), and he had sent a deliverer in Gideon. Remember that Gideon's faith was fragile in the first place. He's not exactly King Leonidas here, but more of a stumbling, unsure leader thrust into the spotlight by the angel of the Lord.

But he does make it through, and he does lead. So we do give him credit for obeying. Even before this battle, Gideon had asked again for another sign through the fleece experiment. Surprisingly, God gives it to him.

Armed with these assurances, with having seen God and having God accommodate him, he's ready for battle. He assembles his men. He counts out 32,000. Against a force of 135,000 these are 10:1 odds, but he knows Yahweh is with him, so he's feeling okay. God will come through. He's heard the stories of Ehud and Barak and thinks Yahweh can do it.

But then the winnowing process begins. As per 7:2, God thinks there are too many. In Deuteronomy 20 we read of the process for determining them men qualified for Israel's warfare:

*2 And when you draw near to the battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the people 3 and shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel, today you are drawing near for battle against your enemies: let not your heart faint. Do not fear or panic or be in dread of them, 4 for the Lord your God is he who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory.'* *5 Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, 'Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it. 6 And is there any man who has planted a vineyard and has not enjoyed its fruit? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man enjoy its fruit. 7 And is there any man who has betrothed a wife and has not taken her? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man take her.'* *8 And the officers shall speak further to the people, and say, 'Is there any man who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go back to his house, lest he make the heart of his fellows melt like his own.'* *9 And when the officers have finished speaking to the people, then commanders shall be appointed at the head of the people.* God wants good fighters in his army. He doesn't want men who are distracted. He directs men who haven't had children yet to go home and try to get some children going (this stipulation is also mentioned in the movie *300*).

And if you don't want to fight – if you're too scared – you can go home. It's not good to have fearful or faint-hearted men in your army. They won't charge when you tell them too. They'll retreat in the face of the enemy. They'll head for the hills, and you'll be overrun and defeated. So send them home.

This is sound warfare advice, though it makes you wonder if people were really honest, if you'd ever have anyone else. I suppose there are men who are not afraid to die for their country or cause.

Gideon sends the scared ones home. He has 10,000 left. We're now to 13.5:1 odds. That's not too far off 10:1, and besides, now Gideon has a better mix of men.

Good. So now he's ready to devise a strategy. But God isn't ready. *He still thinks Gideon and Israel have too many* (7:4) He knows they'll still take the credit for the victory. So he gets rid of some more.

This time he tells Gideon to take his men to the water and prepares Gideon for what is about to come. "Sure," Gideon thinks. "I'm still trusting you." Next we read about a vetting process, determined by the method in which the men drink their water. It seems we have the lappers versus the kneelers. I would think Nalgene bottles would have been better, but those didn't come along for quite awhile.

The lappers number 300, while the kneelers amount to 9,700. It seems obvious to Gideon that, whatever the reason, the lappers have to go and Gideon will go into battle with the remaining 9,700.

But no. God picks the 300. This is absolutely insane. God just took the odds from 13.5:1 to 450:1 based on – the way you drink water.

Commentators and preachers have made a lot about the qualities of the lappers over those of the kneelers. The general consensus seems to be that the kneelers stooped to drink water, and thus, they stopped watching for attackers. The lappers were more alert – the lesson is alertness.

Are you alert in your faith? Are you ready for attack? Are you prepared?

I'm not. And I don't think this is even close to the point of this passage. It's the moralistic approach we default to, and which robs us of the gospel. How am I supposed to follow the model of the alert lappers? I just don't know.

Instead, let's remember the point of the whole chapter – God wants Israel to bow and worship him as The Deliverer of his people. He knows they'll tend to take credit (for instance, by thinking they were "alert enough"), so he keeps on telling them they have "too many." He decreases their number until there is simply no way they can give credit to anyone else but Yahweh in this battle.

Friends, the point then is weakness, not strength. The men who were chosen for the 300 weren't chosen for their fighting prowess like they were in King Leonidas' band. All they did in the end was blow a trumpet, break a glass jar, hold up a torch and scream. I suppose the hardest part about that, after getting up the courage to be that close to a menacing army, would be blowing the trumpet. I'm not sure if God knew who had the best embouchures or not. It appears the men swapped around their gear so the 300 would have the right supplies.

This was a rag tag group of trumpet-blowing, torch-raising yellers. Even you might be able to do that. These men aren't impressive. Bob Dole's injuries were impressive. John McCain's injuries and imprisonment are impressive. Great generals are impressive. These men were like you and me. I don't have much courage, but I think I might be able to blow a trumpet, hold a torch and yell for awhile.

That's what it took. A great display of God's power in the midst of man's weakness.

God delights in such weakness and trust in him. In Jeremiah 9, we read this:

*Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, 24 but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."*

God delights in people who follow him, who love him, and who remain devoted to him and his ways. This is the opposite of the people who go after other gods and their values like the Israelites were doing.

But God goes further than that. He says he doesn't delight in boasting. Often the wise man will boast in his learning, and the strong man will boast in his might and the rich man will boast in this wealth. We see this all the time. You should listen to me because I'm smarter than you.

In the coffee shop where I study and hang out, there is a lawyer who talks loudly with some of his clients. I suppose he uses the coffee shop as an office annex (like I do), but he can't keep his voice down, and it's hard not to listen to him. I spoke of him to the barista the other day, and she told me that the first time she talked to him he brought up his I.Q. with her. Apparently, he thinks he's smarter than most everyone in Norman.

We don't often see such blatant boasting in our wisdom, but we have it all around us. In the college culture, it's important to get grades. We pride ourselves in our ranking in class. We want to know things. We have libraries filled with books. More and more students are planning on getting graduate degrees even when they're freshmen. We love to get degrees, and to fill ourselves with knowledge.

But God isn't impressed. All the knowledge in the world is nothing compared to understanding and knowing him. That does entail an aspect of knowledge. We aren't to be an ignorant people. One of the critiques of Christians in the book *unChristian* is that Christians are a mile wide an inch deep, meaning their knowledge and doctrine are incredibly inadequate. So we should study and pursue knowing God. But we must not boast in our worldly wisdom. I'd recommend reading the short book *The Outrageous Idea of Academic Faithfulness: A Guide for Students* by Derek J. Melleby and Donald Opitz for help on how to handle the calling of a college student in the midst of a life of faithfulness to God.

As we've seen in Judges, God works with the helpless and the weak. We'll return to this point at the end of the chapter.

### ***God's Assuring Assistance***

But first, let's look at our last point. God does something before he sends this weak army in to defeat the Midianites. He has made Gideon and his army weak. But then he assures him in the midst of the weakness before the battle.

Read verses 9-11: *That same night the Lord said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. 10 But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant. 11 And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp."*

God knows Gideon is afraid. He goes ahead and brings it up: "If you are afraid." And he is. God knows what Gideon needs even before he does. Gideon doesn't even bring this up, but God takes the initiative. So God sends him and a buddy on a mission into the camp of the Midianites. Gulp.

But Gideon goes because he really is afraid, and he wants to know what the foreign army is saying. So he goes. In the recounting of this incident we're reminded of just how many are in this army – they're like locusts! He sneaks up and just then he eavesdrops on a soldier telling another soldier about a dream he had where a piece of bread came rolling through the camp, striking a tent and knocking it down. That may seem like a pretty innocuous dream to us, and one I might not remember to comment on after I woke up, but the soldier seems worried about it. I wonder if he's been keeping a dream journal next to his sleeping bag, and talking with his friend about every night's dreams. Last night, he dreamt of a frightening clown. Tonight it was the barley bread again.

Regardless of the situation, his comrade knows exactly what it means: *"This is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp."*

Wow. It's astounding that the Midianite soldier would have even heard of Gideon, who after all is an obscure nobody who has no status and has won no wars as of yet. And yet, the soldiers are afraid of him.

As soon as Gideon heard this, what did he do? The text says in verse 15 that he worshipped. Right there, he praised his creator, deliverer and sustainer, Yahweh. Then he snuck back to his camp and, emboldened by God's word and through worship, he declares victory to his assembled 300 soldiers.

Gideon isn't a great warrior like King Leonidas. He's frail and weak. On King Leonidas' last night (as depicted in the movie) he makes love with his wife, and appears strong, confident and assured.

On Gideon's last night, he's trembling with fear. And yet God comes to him with a word of confidence. This is a picture of God's kindness to Gideon.

I think most of us are a lot like Gideon. We should relate to him. Too often we only see a kind of leader like Gideon appears to be starting in verse 15 when he speaks boldly to his men. We think we should be strong, confident and like a rock. No fear. And, since we aren't like that, we figure we will never be a leader. We eschew roles that might place us in tough positions.

But, as Ralph Davis writes, "We may need to alter our current stereotype of what a servant of Christ is (or is like). We sometimes dupe ourselves into thinking that a real servant of Christ is only someone who is dynamic, assured, confident, brash, fearless, witty, adventuresome or glamorous... Don't think you are unusable because you don't have that air about you. Christ takes uncertain and fearful folk, strengthens their hands in the oddest ways, and makes them able to stand for him in school or home or work."<sup>2</sup> God, as shown in this passage, in Judges, and in the Bible, seems to work best with weakness. He takes someone with such a fragile faith as Gideon and *makes him* strong. Gideon did something great in the end, but the whole point of the passage is to show it was God who was strong and mighty to save.

You may become a great leader. You may do great things for the kingdom of God. You may rally the troops and fight against God's enemies. You may extend God's kingdom and proclaim his rule. God may ask you to take some risks in your life, and on your way to knowing him more.

If you will do this and be a leader for God, I am confident it will be through weakness and not strength. God will take you through a dark night of your soul. It may be physically or it may be metaphysically (meaning: spiritually), but it will happen. Rest assured that there is something in your life where God's assessment is "Too many" and he will strip that down to where it seems like you have nothing left. He doesn't want you to rob him of his glory by thinking too highly of yourself and your abilities. "Because of the tendency of God's people to glorify their own efforts, to trust in their proven methods, to credit their own contributions, to think well of their cleverness, Yahweh frequently insists that his people be reduced to utter helplessness, so that they *must* recognize that their deliverance can only be chalked up to Yahweh's power and mercy."<sup>3</sup>

Remember – even your salvation is from him. You love him because he first loved you. That's how God works. If we read the Bible, we aren't surprised by this. One place where this is made abundantly clear is 2 Corinthians 9:9-10: *But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of

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<sup>2</sup> Davis, 107

<sup>3</sup> Davis, 104

*my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

God's power is made perfect in weakness. Therefore, Paul boasts in weakness. For when he is weak, then he [Jesus] is strong.

It's easy to read those works and comprehend them. But we really do hate them. If Christ is to be strong, I have to be weak? I'm much more comfortable with a me-strong, Christ-strong arrangement. Not with me-weak, Christ strong.

We hate being weak. Weakness seems to mean being out of control. It's being trampled on. Being taken advantage of. It means losing our way.

Yes. It does. And God says he works with people like that. Read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 again and hear how God is near and close to the meek, the humble, the thirsty and the poor in spirit (brokenhearted).

This can do two things. The first response is the one we have if we feel strong. We bow our backs and wonder at God's goodness and justice. We hate being told we have to be weak. We are winners, and we will remain winners and there must be a mistake here. So we reject this sort of teaching.

The other response comes from people who feel weak. If you feel poor in spirit, if you feel brokenhearted or weak, then you are intrigued by this teaching. It is so abnormal, that it doesn't seem like it could be true or right. But what if it is – then there's hope for someone like me.

Do you feel strong or weak? Are you a leader like King Leonidas and his army of 300? Ready to die, armed and trained. Steeled and proficient. Or are you a person like Gideon and his 300? Thrown into things for strange reasons. Holding a trumpet, a pot and a torch. Told to yell. Confused and scared.

This is how salvation works, but this is also how repentance works. When we repent in sorrow for our failures, God's love and grace are made known to us. We grow when we recognize that good things have become too important to us. When our idols are threatened or removed, we are able to turn and find our safety and significance in God and become stable and strong again. Victory comes here not in Gideon's strength, but in God's.

As you sort this out in your own life – as you fight your Midianites – you may need some confidence boosters. God may need to send some people your way to assure you of his goodness and his words to you that he will fight your battles. Make sure you're listening to them. They will normally come from the places he usually uses as signs – the Bible, the sacraments, the church, your Christian friends. But sometimes his words may come from unlikely sources, as God proves he can use the words of people who don't even know him. Listen for his words.

As we go into battle, we proclaim not our own strength but Christ's. We yell "A sword for the Lord and for the Messiah!" because we know, or at least we hope, our God will win the battle. In our weakness he is made strong. As we hold out the sword of truth and proclaim the light of the word, and as we say Jesus is Lord because he is the Messiah of the world, we are assured of victory. Not by our might, but by God's. Not for our glory, but for God's.

The night may seem dark, but God will prevail. In our weakness, he is made strong. You see, the 1980 U.S. Hockey team prevailed because they worked together and finally formed a team. If you watch the movie, the lesson is that hard work pays off despite great odds. Talent doesn't always win.

But the lesson of our text of Judges 7 is different. It is this – God prevails, and he won't share his glory with anyone else. He works with losers like Gideon. And like you and me. God uses our gifts, but not like we think. He works in weakness, and proves himself strong and might to save.

### ***I Boast No More, by Isaac Watts***

*No more, my God, I boast no more Of all the duties I have done;  
I quit the hopes I held before, To trust the merits of Thy Son.*

*Chorus: No more my God, I boast no more.*

*Now, for the loss I bear His name, What was my gain I count my loss;  
My former pride I call my shame, And nail my glory to His cross.*

*Yes, and I must and will esteem All things but loss for Jesus' sake;  
O may my soul be found in Him, And of His righteousness partake!*

*The best obedience of my hands Dares not appear before Thy throne;  
But faith can answer Thy demands, By pleading what my Lord has done.*