

March 15, 2009

God Chooses and Empowers

To remind us that our redemption and our deliverance from things that burden us in life come from God alone

Key Bible reference: Judges 6.1-8.21

Key Verse: Judges 7.15

Biblical Background

The story of Gideon in Judges 6:1-8:21 begins with the pattern of behavior introduced in Judges 2: apostasy / oppression / cry for help. "The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (Judges 6:1), prompting God to allow the Midianites to oppress them for seven years.

The Midianites swept over the Israelites like a swarm of locusts. They stole livestock and destroyed cultivated fields by camping on them and allowing their animals to feed freely. The Israelites saw their crops destroyed and their very means of subsistence threatened. The Midianite invasion forced them to hide themselves and their crops. As the text records, "Israel was greatly impoverished because of Midian" (Judges 6:6).

True to the pattern of behavior seen in the stories throughout Judges, "the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help" (Judges 6:6). God chose Gideon to deliver Israel; the account of Gideon's call is found in Judges 6:11-24.

In the story of Gideon the Deuteronomistic view of history again emerges: Israel's sinful actions bring tragic consequences. A nameless prophet sent to the Israelites after they cried out to God makes this clear. The prophet recited a mini-history of God's saving acts on Israel's behalf, reminding the people in God's name that "I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians,

and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you, and gave you their land" (Judges 6:9).

All that God asked in return was that "you ... not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live." But Israel did not "heed" God's voice (Judges 6:10). The result? Oppression by the Midianites.

Judges 7:2-7. The religious significance of the story of Gideon is expressed in a declaration by God to Gideon at the very beginning of this passage. In verse 2, God tells Gideon that "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.'"

The story of Gideon focuses attention on the truth that human redemption and deliverance come from God alone, not from anything we do ourselves. Remind class members of the well-known New Testament expression of this truth: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The scriptural idea of divine warfare is that the Lord fought on Israel's behalf and gave Israel the Promised Land. Exodus 14:14 states the basic premise of this understanding of divine

warfare: "The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."

Now, of course, there are occasions, as in the story of the fall of Jericho recorded in Joshua 6 and in the story of Gideon, when the people of Israel are specifically told by God to do more than just "keep still." But, when God does tell the Israelites to do more than "keep still," God does not instruct them to engage in traditional battle tactics. For example, God's instructions to the Israelites in the story of the fall of Jericho (Joshua 6) were to worship, not to fight; God instructed the people to have a week-long liturgical processional around the city, offering praise to God. Consistently in Scripture passages dealing with divine warfare, if Israel is told to do anything, it is to carry out activities contrary to normal military strategy.

In fact, it appears from some texts, including the story of Gideon, that the more unrealistic God's commands to Israel regarding the battle strategy—and therefore the greater Israel's dependence on God's power to save—the better. Israel is not supposed to do anything that will detract from the realization that it is God's power, not human power and military might, that saves the people of God and delivers them. As Deuteronomy 8:14a, 17 explains, "Do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God. ... Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.'" All glory had to go to the Lord for Israel's redemption and deliverance, not to Israel itself.

And so, as today's Bible Lesson begins, Gideon shows up on the battlefield next to the spring of Harod [HAIR-uhd] (see Judges 7:1) with a massive military force—seemingly the wise thing to do militarily. But God says, in effect,

"Your troops are too numerous. If you go into battle with that many soldiers, it won't be clear whose power won the fight: yours or mine, human or divine." In Judges 7:2, God firmly declares to Gideon that the human army of Israel will not be permitted to take credit for the deliverance from the Midianite oppression. All glory of victory had to be the Lord's.

As strange as it may have seemed to Gideon, he had been told by divine command to reduce the size of his fighting force. There were two means by which Gideon was to do this. First, he was to let anyone who was "fearful and trembling ... return home" (Judges 7:3). It may seem odd to us today, but the law code of Deuteronomy (20:8) in its rules for warfare instructed field commanders to give soldiers who were "afraid or disheartened" the chance to return home. So God's first means of reducing the size of Gideon's militia was to put the provisions of Deuteronomy 20:8 into effect. The result was that about two thirds of Gideon's fighting force returned home.

But Gideon's militia remained too large. Therefore God outlined a second means by which the size of the Israelite militia was to be reduced (Judges 7:47). Gideon was to take the troops to the spring to drink; then, on the basis of how each soldier drank the water, he was to determine whether that particular soldier should remain or be sent home. If a soldier threw himself on the ground and lapped at the water with his tongue, he was to stay. If, on the other hand, a soldier knelt down to drink, cupped some water in his hand, and brought the water to his mouth in his hand, that soldier was to be sent home.

The significance of this particular test is not clear. But, as several interpreters have

suggested, the test may have to do with vigilance on the battlefield, with a soldier's readiness and alertness. A soldier who kneels down to drink, cups water in his hand, and brings the water to his mouth in his hand is more watchful and ready to ward off sudden attack from the rear than is the soldier who is lying down by the stream, lapping the water with his tongue. If this interpretation of the test is correct, even greater credit is to be given to the Lord for victory over the Midianites. That is, Gideon was not only going to field a small militia, his troops were also going to be those least accustomed to battlefield practices. After the test was completed, three hundred soldiers remained in Gideon's militia.

Verse 15. This is Gideon's battle cry to the troops. Its close parallels with Deborah's challenge to Barak in Judges 4:14 suggests that there was a standard battle cry: "[Get] Up! For [today] the LORD has given [name of enemy] into your hand!"

Further, the battle cry emphasizes the Lord's role in the battle and affirms the basic principle of divine warfare that was discussed earlier: It is the Lord who fights the battle and not the human warriors; it is the Lord who redeems and delivers, not human agents.

Finally, the battle cry prepares those reading the narrative for a dramatic and exciting description of combat. But what follows is something quite different!

Verses 19-21. These verses record the rout of the Midianites. Gideon divided his three hundred soldiers into three groups of one hundred (verse 16) and surrounded the Midianite camp. But, as is typical in divine warfare, the humans did no fighting in the

proper sense of the term. The Lord brought victory to Israel. Gideon's troops were equipped with ram's horns and with jars with torches in them; these were their "weapons." In Old Testament times, the night was divided into three watches of four hours each. So, an "attack" at the beginning of the middle watch would have begun around ten P.M., shortly after the change of sentries. The Israelite warriors blew their ram's horns, cried a battle cry—"A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!"—and broke their jars, thereby revealing the burning torches. However, the Israelites did not charge: "Every man stood in his place all around the camp" (verse 21). This description emphasizes the non-activity of the human warriors; God alone brought about the flight of the enemy.

And flee they did. The sound of three hundred ram's horns being blown and the sight of three hundred torches flaming into view threw the Midianite warriors into a panic. The Midianites tried to escape, but in their terror they turned their weapons on themselves (verse 22).

In the text, all credit for the victory is given to the Lord. Verse 22 affirms that it was the power of the Lord that "set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army." No warfare was waged by the small Israelite force. It was the power of the Lord that brought redemption to Israel land deliverance from oppression, not the strength of the Israelite warriors themselves.

Prayer

O God, help us to be willing to take risks for the sake of what is right and to acknowledge your grace and power. We pray in the name of the

One who helps us carry our every burden, Jesus
the Christ. Amen.