

DHW

BIBLE STUDY CLASS

LESSON 6

JUDGES 7

INTRODUCTION

The children of Israel cried to the LORD for deliverance from the oppression of the Midianites. The LORD, who had been gracious and merciful, called Gideon to save His people from the Midianites. Gideon was initially timid and fearful but the LORD patiently built his confidence and trust in Him. Having doubly ascertained his mission and that the LORD would be with him as promised, Gideon raised an army to go to war against the Midianites.

Chapter 7 continues from here. There are valuable truths and principles that can be drawn and learned in this chapter. God's sovereign control of the affairs of men is never in doubt, and this is well illustrated in the way God dealt with Gideon. God often does things differently from the way men do. In order to defeat a powerful enemy, one's army must be much more powerful to ensure victory. But that is not God's way—to be a chief he must first learn to be a servant; in order for him to keep his life, he must lose it. The thoughts and ways of God often run counter to men's thinking and methods. God has a good purpose for doing things in His ways. God desires that His people learn to trust and

depend on Him more. But that does not mean that the people do nothing and wait for things to happen. Gideon had to be willing to be the instrument which God could use. God's people must live by faith and faith means to act upon the Word of God, believing what it is not as if it is. It is also interesting and instructive to observe how God changed and used Gideon from being fearful to having faith in Him, and ultimately to finish the work God had called him to do. We need to learn the way God changes us to be what we are capable of becoming to fulfil His will. Someone puts it thus: "The task ahead of you is never greater than the power behind you."

The approach to the study of this chapter can be made easier with the following divisions:

1. The LORD reduces the number of soldiers in Gideon's army (vv. 1-8);
2. The LORD assures Gideon of victory in a special way (vv. 9-14);
3. Gideon prepares his men to attack the Midianites (vv. 15-18);
4. Gideon miraculously defeats the powerful Midianites (vv. 19-23);
5. Gideon appeals to his fellow Israelites to mop up the remainder of the enemies (vv. 24-25).

STUDY THE WORD

The LORD Reduces the Number of Soldiers in Gideon's Army

Jerubbaal was another name which was given to Gideon by his father. Gideon led the army of Israel and pitched at the spring of Harod by Mount Gilead (or Gilboa), where there was water for his soldiers to drink. The Midianites camped just north of the Israeli camp by the hill of Moreh in the valley of Jezreel. The Midianites were confident of carrying out what they had been doing for the past seven years in plundering, pillaging, and destroying the farms and the cities of the Israelites. Gideon had amassed an army of 32,000 men. From their camp on Mount Gilead they could see a great part of the army camp of the Midianites, who numbered 135,000 (8:10). The LORD said to Gideon that his army had too many men for Him to give the Midianites to Israel. The LORD was telling Gideon to reduce the number of soldiers. This proposal might have initially surprised Gideon because the present ratio of their strength with that of the Midianites was one to four, which was not too bad. The reason which the LORD gave was that Israel might boast and glorify herself by claiming: "Mine own hand hath saved me" (7:2).¹

The LORD instructed Gideon the way to reduce the number of soldiers. He told Gideon to announce to all the 32,000 soldiers that those who were "fearful and afraid" could return to their homes. 22,000 soldiers

opted to return home, leaving 10,000 who were brave and willing to go to war. Gideon could have been shocked. The ratio now between Israel and the Midianites dropped to almost one to fourteen. The LORD knew best because He could see the hearts of Gideon's soldiers. Fear of the soldiers who were going to war would present a greater problem of morale among the soldiers. It was better for these soldiers to return home. Then the LORD said to Gideon that the army was still too big! This time the LORD did not give the reason for a further reduction of the number of soldiers. Gideon was simply told to take the soldiers "down" to the springs of Harod. The word "down" signifies that the Israeli soldiers camped on a higher ground (Mount Gilead). Their going down to the water would then be in full view of the Midianites. Nevertheless, it was the LORD'S instructions, and Gideon obeyed. The LORD said that He would choose the soldiers who should or should not go to war. When the soldiers were at the edge of the water to drink, the LORD told Gideon to choose the soldiers who scooped with their hands and "lappeth of the water with his tongue as a dog lappeth." The soldiers who knelt down to drink the water directly would not be chosen. The number of soldiers who lapped the water with their hands was 300. The LORD said that with these three hundred men, He would save Gideon and deliver the Midianites into his hand. The rest of the men, 9,700, were to "go every man unto his place" which would probably be back to their camp.

¹ Isaiah 42:8 I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.

This was an even greater shock to Gideon than the first reduction. The ratio was now reduced to four hundred and fifty to one in favour of the Midianites. It would take a miracle to defeat the Midianites! Nevertheless, the LORD encouraged Gideon by repeating His promise that He would save Gideon and win the war against the Midianites. Bible commentators are divided in understanding the rationale in choosing the 300 men. One can understand the reason for the first reduction exercise. But for this test, there are two schools of thoughts. One school says that there was nothing special or different about the manner of drinking the water. The LORD arbitrarily wanted to choose the lesser number. The other school says that the 300 men were more alert and aware of the danger at the spring. By using one hand to scoop the water and the other hand probably holding on to their weapon, they were prepared for any surprise attack by the Midianites, unlike the rest of them. However, the important thing was that the LORD chose the 300 men who would be His instruments to defeat the Midianites. The LORD made it doubly sure that the Israelites could not be tempted to boast of themselves for defeating the Midianites thus putting themselves in the place of God and committing the sin of idolatry.

The LORD Assures Gideon of Victory in a Special Way

That same night the LORD said to Gideon: "Arise, get thee down unto the host for I have delivered it unto thine hand" (v.9). After reducing the number of the soldiers to three hundred, the LORD knew Gideon's

heart. Gideon must have been terribly fearful that it was impossible to defeat the Midianites. The LORD knew his heart and assured him again that He would deliver the Midianites into his hand. This time the LORD commanded him to go into the camp of the Midianites and he could hear their conversations. After that he would be strong and ready to confront the Midianites. And if he was afraid to go alone, he could take his servant Purah with him. The interesting part here is that Gideon obeyed implicitly. He did not ask any question at all. He could have asked the spot where they should go, or whether they would be detected and be killed; or whether they could return safely.

The divine writer simply recorded that Gideon and Purah made their way to the fringe of the camp of the Midianites (v.11b). The strength of the enemy camp is described. The combined forces of the Midianites and the Amalekites and the soldiers from the east were numerous "like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number as the sand by the sea side for multitude" (v.12). Gideon and Purah could have thought that it was suicidal to defeat this vast and strong army with three hundred men! And when Gideon came to a spot, he heard a Midianite soldier telling his fellow soldier a dream that he dreamt. He dreamt that "a cake of barley bread tumbled into the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along" (v.13). And the astonishing part is that the other Midianite guard interpreted the dream as nothing else but that "the sword of

Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host” (14). This incident was not accidental or a coincidence. God’s sovereign control of the affairs of men was evident. The LORD protected Gideon and Purah as they entered into the camp of the enemies. The LORD kept them from being detected. He guided the path to the very place where the two Midian guards were sharing about the dream at the exact moment. God must have provided the dream for the Midianite guard and its interpretation too. By His sovereign wisdom and control, the LORD used the enemy to encourage Gideon, His fearful military general.

Gideon Prepares His Men to Attack the Midianites

This incident completely convinced Gideon that the promise of the LORD to deliver the Midianites to him was certain. Gideon’s immediate response was that he worshipped the LORD. Gideon was now a changed man! He turned his faith to the LORD. He returned to his camp to prepare his men to attack and now he himself said to his men that the LORD had delivered the Midianites into their hands. This God-given confidence gave him a brilliant strategy to defeat the enemy. He divided the three hundred men into three companies; each naturally comprised one hundred men. He gave to each of his three hundred men a trumpet (Hebrew, *shofar*, a ram’s horn), and an empty pitcher in which a lamp was put. Then he instructed them to watch him for the signal to do as he would do. His aim seemed not to engage the enemy on a

man to man combat but to launch a kind of psychological tactic to frighten the Midianites, who were already demoralized.

Gideon Miraculously Defeats the Powerful Midianites

Accordingly, Gideon led his three companies of men to the edge of the enemy camp, surrounding them and positioning each company of one hundred men on each side of the camp. He moved his men “in the beginning of the middle watch”—about 10.00 p.m. to 2 a.m.² The moment they were in position, Gideon did not waste any time. He signalled his men, and they followed him as instructed. They blew their horns holding them with their right hands, smashed the pitchers, held the lamps in their left hands, and gave a loud victory cry: “Sword of the LORD, and of Gideon” (v.20).

It was a surprise raid on the camp of the Midianites. Suddenly they panicked, ran in different directions, cried out among themselves, and fled. They were surrounded, they heard the sounds of ram’s horn blowing, the lights all around them, and the initial sound of smashed pitchers created the sense that a huge army had descended on them. Gideon used to great effectiveness his “surround-sound.” The state of sheer panic engendered in the hearts of the Midianites by God caused them to massacre one another in the night as they fought to escape from Gideon’s “army.” The enemies fled to their own territories of Beth-

² There are three watches in the night: first watch, 6.00 p.m. – 10.00 p.m.; second watch, 10.00 pm.- 2.00 a.m.; and third watch, 2.00 a.m. – 6.00 a.m.

shittah in Zererath and to the border of Abel-meholah up to Tabbath.³ And probably the 9,700 from the three tribes who were in nearby camp came out and pursued the fleeing Midianites.

Gideon Appeals to His Fellow Israelites to Mop Up the Remainder of the Enemies

Gideon also sent messengers to the tribe of Ephraim calling them to join in mopping up the Midianites. The Ephraimites joined the fray and took Beth-barah and Jordan. They also captured two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. They slew both of them and brought their heads to Gideon on the other side of Jordan. The LORD did what He had promised Gideon.

PRACTICAL VALUE

The LORD was merciful and gracious to His people who cried to Him in times of dire need and oppression. The Israelites should repent and obey God. It is very sad that the Israelites turned away from the LORD God to worship worthless and useless idols. And those who worship idols would be like them, worthless and useless. This is a valuable lesson for us to know how great the LORD God our Creator and Redeemer is. He loves and cares for His people. Nothing is impossible for Him. In His sovereign wisdom and power, He controls all the affairs of men for the good of His people. With His intention to encourage Gideon to fulfil the call to save Israel from the

powerful Midianites, God led him into the enemy camp to hear at the precise moment the testimony of a Midianite guard that God would deliver the Midianites into the hand of Gideon (14). Gideon's victory over the Midianites was miraculous when the Midianites in their panic to defend themselves massacred one another. We should be encouraged and be motivated to serve the LORD and do His will.

God required that Gideon should exercise implicit faith in Him by trusting and believing His Word. It is ironical that the words of the Midianite guard convinced Gideon more than the word of God. In doing God's will we must exercise faith, for without faith it is impossible to please God and believe that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6). If God is on our side, we should not fear what man can do to us. Humanly speaking, the Israelites were no match at all against the Midianites who outnumbered the Israelites in the ratio of 450 to 1! But Israel with God was more powerful. We can and must trust God in our daily living when doing God's will.

When Gideon finally was convinced that victory was assured, he drew out brilliant strategy to defeat the enemy. There is a valuable principle to be learned here. We cannot expect to be fruitful in advancing the kingdom of God if we as individuals or the churches merely wait for things to happen. We need to make plans, set goals, follow them through and trust the LORD to honour His promise, and most importantly let God have all the praise and the glory.
AMEN

³ Refer *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*, (Macmillan Publishing Inc. New York, & Collier Macmillan Publishers, London, 1968), maps 74, 75, & 76.