

“By God’s Strength Alone”

Allow me to introduce you to Gideon. Gideon once said this about himself: **“My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”** In other words, out of all the tribes of Israel, my tribe is of no particular consequence. Out of all the clans and families in this tribe, my family is nothing special, and neither am I. But this is what God said about Gideon: **“The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”**

Gideon saw very clearly his own weaknesses and shortcomings. He knew his limitations. But God told Gideon that God had big plans for him. Along the way, Gideon learned many lessons, and still today, those lessons teach and inform others. That is why it is appropriate for us to pause today and to consider Gideon and one particular chapter in his life. We, who know all too well our own weaknesses, better than we usually want to admit, who are sometimes painfully aware of our shortcomings, just heard Jesus warn that the door to heaven is narrow and that many will never enter it. But we have also heard Jesus’ promise that many **“will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.”** Considering together these warnings and promises helps us to take away the proper lesson, a lesson similar to the one Gideon learned in our sermon text today.

The book of Judges describes how God’s chosen people went through a repeated cycle, learning a similar lesson over and over. They needed that lesson each time that they became lax in observing the laws God had given them. They chased after other gods, worshiping idols, often those of the Canaanite people around them. They stopped offering sacrifices and in other ways worshiping the true God. So God would teach them a lesson. He would allow one of their neighbors, their enemies, to have the upper hand. Nations around Israel would invade, enslave, exact tribute, and otherwise make life difficult for God’s chosen people. The people would get the message and would eventually repent of their wickedness.

In response to the repentance of the people, God would raise up a Judge, a leader who would help them defeat or overthrow the enemy that was harassing them. And, in most cases, as the Judge ruled, the people remained faithful to God and his laws. But some time after he passed away, the cycle would repeat itself.

One such cycle found the Israelites tormented by the Midianites. The Israelites hid in caves and camped in the mountains because they were so afraid of the Midianites. When the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites would come through again and ruin them. In absolute poverty and despair, the Israelites turned to God. God’s answer for them was to raise up Gideon to lead them against the Midianites. Gideon did rally the people, and a battle appeared imminent between Gideon and his forces and the Midianites and their allies.

That’s where our text begins. God had another lesson that he wanted learned, a lesson that showed Gideon and his soldiers a proper perspective. God said, essentially, “You have too many men. If you go and fight and win, some might think that it was due to your leadership or the talents of your soldiers. That is not the case.” So God proposed a way to reduce the number of troops available to Gideon. He could just tell them that it was OK to leave. Let everyone know that if they are afraid, they don’t need to be there.

As you might imagine, the prospect of a major battle did frighten some of the men who had gathered. 22,000 of them decided to take Gideon up on his offer, and they left. 10,000 either weren’t afraid or weren’t willing to admit it, and they stayed. Now, that may seem to have solved the issue, especially as we know from later parts of the Bible’s account that the Midianites were gathered 135,000 strong. Against 10,000 that seems like a lopsided battle.

But God determined to sift even further. And he did so in a fascinating way. He had Gideon take the men to a stream to have a drink. As they did, Gideon monitored their drinking method. There were two primary ways that the men drank. Most, in fact the vast majority, knelt down so they could lean close to the stream to drink the water directly. Three hundred men handled it differently. They scooped water

from the stream and brought it up to their mouths in their hands. Now, some have suggested that these three hundred were clearly the best soldiers. They didn't want to put themselves in any more danger by kneeling down. They wanted to stay alert, able to watch for danger even as they drank. But that doesn't quite fit what God was accomplishing. God was looking to reduce drastically the number of men with Gideon, not trying to cull out the special forces from the rest of the army. This was a more or less arbitrary way of getting the number of men down to where God wanted it to be. 9,700 men were dismissed, and 300 remained.

That's where our text ends. In case you don't know it, I will share with you how the story ends. While it seemed like the odds were insurmountable, 135,000 to 300, the Israelite army with Gideon at their head miraculously defeated the Midianite army.

Of course, God had told Gideon beforehand of his reason for doing this, the lesson that was to be taken from this account. God said that he handled things this way, **"In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her."** 10,000 soldiers or 32,000 soldiers defeating the Midianites would have been an impressive feat, an amazing result. But just 300 soldiers left no doubt. This was impossible for the soldiers, no matter their bravery or their skill. This couldn't have been due to the strength of the people. That left them only one option: this victory was due to God's strength and God's strength alone.

Now, we are not facing an army like that of the Midianites. We aren't being called on to take up arms and to prepare for battle. But the lesson of Gideon and his men applies very definitely to our lives today. It is our very nature to take credit for whatever we can and to lay the blame at someone else's feet. When Jesus says that only a few will enter heaven's narrow door, our natural reaction is to say, "OK, what do I have to do? I better get busy. I better keep working." And we even face the temptation as Christians to think or to say that we are responsible for our being Christian. We must be smarter or savvier or somehow more clever than those who are not Christians. And at the very bottom of that idea is this concept that we deserve what we are going to get.

That's the attitude Jesus was speaking against when he talked about all of those supposedly religious people, the ones with the right pedigree and family, the ones whom everyone always looked to as the religious people and saying, "the door is going to be closed to them, to you." The battle is won by God's strength alone. The few that enter through the narrow door do so by God's grace alone.

You and I do not want what we deserve. If we need to open the door to heaven for ourselves or even be responsible for walking through, we are going to be shut out. What we deserve is the absolute opposite of heaven, it is the torment of hell. Even this desire to be responsible is at its heart a reflection of our own sinful selfishness. By nature, we are turned completely to ourselves. And our sinful natures are constantly fed and encouraged by the sinful world around us. Is it any wonder that the door to heaven is narrow? Is it any wonder, given the temptations that surround us, the dangers to our spiritual lives and selves, that many will be turned away?

So that we would not all get what we deserve, Jesus came. He gave up all that was rightly his, all that he could have boasted of, to take what we deserve. He suffered and he died for us. He gave us what he had earned by a perfect life, heaven. His was the ultimate battle, and he was the only one who could fight it, true God and true man, perfect and holy, sacrificing himself.

Just as Gideon and his men needed to focus not on themselves, but on God and his Word and his strength, Jesus calls on us not to focus on our own works, our own efforts, or our own strength, but on him and his grace. Making every effort to enter through the narrow door means to fight against anything that takes our focus off of Jesus, our Savior. It means striving against our natural inclinations, indeed, our sinful natures themselves. It means giving up on ourselves so that there is only Jesus.

By nature, you are the least of the least, just as Gideon admitted he was. But God has made you in this life into his mighty warrior. Rely on him to lead you past all your enemies and into heaven.

The Text: Judges 7:1–8 (NIV84)

⁷ Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. ² The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, ³ announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’ ” So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

⁴ But the Lord said to Gideon, “There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go; but if I say, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go.”

⁵ So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the Lord told him, “Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink.” ⁶ Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.

⁷ The Lord said to Gideon, “With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place.” ⁸ So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others.