

Heroes of the Faith

Gideon and the Three Hundred (Judges 7:1-23)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on July 4, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ **I think it would be a fair generalization to say that we are a risk-averse people.** We like to play it safe. I think that's been evident in our church's overall response to the pandemic. And I don't mean that as a critique. I appreciate – as many of you do – our church's careful and incremental approach to reopening the building and restarting in-person ministries.
 - What I mean by risk-averse is that we generally don't like to take risks in life. We hedge our bets. **We're hesitant to step out in faith – to make a tough decision, to take a big risk – without there being a safety net or back up plan.** And that's because a good many of us grew up with a bubble around us and a safety net underneath us. Put there graciously by our parents.

- ❖ **For many of us, it's our parents (or our grandparents) who took the big risks.** Who left the safety and comfort of a village or hometown. Who moved to a new city or new country with everything they owned fit into a couple suitcases. Who had to study hard while paying for their own tuition by working harder. They didn't have a safety net or a back up plan.
 - But because of their hard work and their willingness to take a risk, their children grew up in a very different environment. **Many of us grew up in a sheltered environment, a secure environment.** We never worried about there being food in the fridge or on the table. Leaving home, going off to college, moving to a new city or country – wasn't as risky or frightening. Because either our parents were paying for our tuition or rent, or if we couldn't make ends meet, we knew they were always a phone call away and ready to help.

- ❖ **So for many of us, we have rarely – if ever – made a decision in life that would rightly be described as risky.** Which means we have rarely – if ever – stepped out in faith and followed God into a life situation where success would be considered unlikely by human standards. **We have been playing it safe for most of our lives.** We've had “being practical” and “being realistic” drilled into our heads. Some of us were outright discouraged to chase our dreams. Or at least strongly encouraged to make sure we had a back up plan.
 - “You feel like God is calling you to pursue the arts or vocational ministry? Well at least be pre-med, just in case. You feel a strong calling to make a career change but into one that is less financially lucrative or stable? Why don't you wait until your kids are grown up (and hopefully married off) before chasing those dreams. Be realistic. Don't take too many risks.” These kinds of conversations are all too familiar.

- ❖ And I'm not surprised if these conversations were with your parents. But just understand, that from their point of view, they took the big risks in life so that you wouldn't have to. So that you could grow up with a safety net and a back up plan. Securities they never had.
 - I hope you understand that I'm not trying to criticize the way our parents raised us to be risk-averse. I think it's understandable coming from their experience and point of view. **But what I am trying to point out is that this tendency within us – towards risk aversion – is going to limit us from experiencing the depths of our faith and the heights of God's glory and power at work in our lives.**

- ❖ God wants to grow your faith. **He wants to display his glory and demonstrate his all-sufficient power in your life. But according to God’s design, that typically happens in a context where risk is involved.** Where we have stepped out in faith and by necessity must trust in the Lord to pull through for us.
- ❖ That’s where Gideon found himself in our text. Gideon and his army are on the cusp of victory over the Midianites. **But lest they miss God’s mighty hand at work – lest they take credit for themselves – God rearranges the situation so that they face extremely long odds.** Gideon and his men can’t play it safe. They have to take a risk and step out in faith. But once they do, there is no question that victory belongs to the LORD. All glory be to God!
 - This morning as we walk through Judges 7, I want to show you three things that God was doing in Gideon’s life, and by extension, what he’s doing all the time in all of our lives. (1) The Lord is stacking the odds against us. (2) Securing the glory for himself. (3) Supplying the assurance we lack.

Stacking the Odds Against Us

- ❖ The first thing God often does is that he tends to stack the odds against us. That’s clearly demonstrated in the way he trimmed down Gideon’s army to less than one percent of its original size. He had no intention of letting Gideon walk into battle with his head held up high feeling very confident and secure in his chances. **The Lord’s intent was to stack the odds of success against his own people.**
- ❖ Let’s consider the context first. **This was during a time in Israel’s history where they experienced a cyclical pattern of idolatry and theological compromise.** Which led to outside nations oppressing them and enslaving them. Which led to Israel crying out in repentance and the LORD raising up a deliverer – a judge who would lead Israel to throw off the oppression and return to the LORD.
 - In this particular cycle, Israel was under Midianite oppression (6:1-2). And Gideon was called by God to save Israel from the hand of Midian (6:14). But Gideon was skeptical and hesitant to step out in faith. **At the end of chapter 6, he tests God’s promises by throwing out that fleece** (6:36-40). I don’t have time to get into the details, but essentially he was trying to confirm that the LORD really meant what he said when he promised victory of Midian. This episode with the fleece is not prescriptive for how we should interact with God. Rather, it’s illustrative of Gideon’s weak faith and God’s merciful compassion to still give him a sign.
- ❖ So at the start of chapter 7, Gideon is leading an army of 32,000 soldiers, and he was just given a sign – not once but twice! – of God’s commitment to achieve victory. So Gideon must be feeling pretty good about his chances. He must like his odds.
 - But God doesn’t. The odds are too much in Gideon’s favor. There is not enough risk involved. **So the LORD intentionally stacks the odds against Gideon by shrinking the size of his army.**

- ❖ Let's look at our text. In v1, we see the two camps of the Israelite and Midianite armies in place and ready for battle. And then in v2 the LORD says the unexpected. The last thing Gideon expected to hear. "You have too many men. You need fewer men."
 - Look at v2, "*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.'*" There it is. That's God's rationale. **You need fewer men, lest you think you won the battle.** Lest you assume you saved yourself. To keep you all from drawing such a faulty conclusion, let's trim down your army.
 - So the first trimming brings the number down to 10,000. In v3 says whoever is fearful and trembling should just go home. And 22,000 men take up the offer. 22,000 tremblers. That's over two-thirds of the army. Gone.

- ❖ Then God says in v4, "That's still too many men." So the LORD sets up this scenario to trim it down some more. He tells Gideon to take them to the water and tell them to get a drink. And the LORD says to take notice of those who kneel down and put their mouths into the river to drink and set them apart from the ones who scoop up water into their hands and lap it with their tongues. And in the end, only three hundred use their hands to lap. Then God said, "I'm going to save you all with these three hundred lappers."
 - **Now some commentators try to identify some sort of rhyme or reason in this test. These three hundred lappers were apparently more vigilant than the rest.** They were more alert because they were mindful to keep their eyes forward watching for the enemy as they drank versus the careless soldiers who were facedown in the water.

- ❖ Honestly, I think that's a stretch. I don't think we're supposed to discern any rhyme or reason. **I don't think there's anything particularly special about these three hundred soldiers.** It's not like Gideon is meant to think, "Whew, well if we have to go small, at least I have these 300 – my best and smartest soldiers."
 - No, this is nothing like the Battle of Thermopylae. It's not like King Leonidas and his brave 300. This is not like the Alamo, and these aren't the 300 who courageously stepped over the line that William Travis supposedly drew in the sand. **These are just 300 random guys.**
 - The point is that Gideon and his three hundred should be scared and confused, considering how small they are compared to the Midianite army. Considering how they're staring down long odds. This is a huge risk.

- ❖ Now why would God do this? Why would he stack the odds against his own people? It goes back to v2, "*Lest Israel boast over me, saying. 'My own hand has saved me.'*" **God is trying to preemptively undercut any temptation to boast – any thought that victory could've come by your own hands.** That's what God does. He will often lead us into difficult situations, risky situations, where – if there is going to be victory – he has left no room for doubt that victory comes by his strong hand.

- ❖ As a risk-averse people, let's ask some hard questions. **Will you step out in faith – beyond the safety net, without a back up plan – following God into situations where success is so unlikely by human standards that victory can only be credited to the LORD?**
 - I think many of us are not taking enough risks in life. We're setting our goals too low. They're too easily attainable. We can achieve them by our own strength or ingenuity. Let's live by faith and not by sight. **Let's challenge each other to step out in faith and take some holy risks for the LORD.** To live in such a way that he gets the glory whenever we do succeed.

Securing the Glory for Himself

- ❖ That leads to our second point. **The second thing we see God doing in this story is securing the glory for himself.** That's what's being stressed in v2. God trimmed down the army, *“lest Israel boast over me,”* and claim that they saved themselves by their own hands.
 - Notice the problem was not just that Israel might boast, but that they might boast over God. They might take credit away from God. They might rob him of his due glory.

- ❖ When we don't trust in the Lord, but instead lean on our own understanding and rely on ourselves to secure victories in life – we're not just being self-reliant. **We're not just being risk-averse. We're actually robbing God. We're glory-robbers.**
 - But as we read on, we see God making sure to secure glory for himself. He won't share it with Gideon and the three hundred. The instructions he gives for how the Israelites should dress for battle says it all. The three hundred are dressed – not with swords and shields – but with trumpets, torches, and clay jars.

- ❖ Then they're directed to divide into three groups of a hundred and to flank the Midianite campsite. And when Gideon gives the signal to start the attack, all the men are to ... stand in place. That's what it says in v21. It says, *“Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the [Midianite] army ran.”*
 - **Could it be any clearer as to who deserves all the credit?** They literally stood there and watched God rout their enemies. God threw the Midianite army into disarray. They turned the sword on each other and cried out and fled. The Israelites eventually attacked. But they weren't charging at another charging army. They were pursuing a fleeing, diminished army in complete disarray. **God deserves all the glory here.**

- ❖ But that didn't stop Gideon from trying to take a little credit for himself. Look at v18. Gideon is passing along these battle plans, and he knows how risky and how strange it all sounds. **He realizes this battle will be won in such a way that God gets the glory. But that doesn't stop him from trying to sneak in a little for himself.**
 - He tells them in v18, *“When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the trumpets also on every side of all the camp and shout, ‘For the LORD and for Gideon.’”* **Gideon agrees that this fight is for the LORD. But can it be for him as well – just a little?** Can I have a little credit, a little bit of glory? Lord, you can be the headliner. I'm okay with my name being in smaller print.

- ❖ But the answer we're given in Scripture is No. The LORD says, "*My glory I will not give to another.*" (Isa 48:11) **He is zealous for this Name. Jealous for his glory.** Thou shall have no other gods before me (Ex 20:3).
 - Now let's not misunderstand his intentions. **God is not jealous for his glory and unwilling to share it because he's selfish or insecure.** No, God is perfectly glorified within his own Triune existence. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit glorify one another in perfect harmony. All the angels and the host of heaven highly exalt his Name. So God lacks nothing. He is perfectly satisfied.
 - So he doesn't condemn our glory-robbing because it leaves him wanting for more. **No, God is against glory-robbing because, when we take glory for ourselves, we end up hurting ourselves.** When we take a bit of glory for ourselves, we become a bit more boastful, a bit more prideful. Then what happens? **We become a lot less dependent on God – to our detriment.**

- ❖ This is why God trimmed down Gideon's army. "*Lest Israel boast over me, saying. 'My own hand has saved me.'*" **In the same way, in all of our victories, in all of our successes, God wants to keep us from boasting and to secure the glory for himself.** He wants to receive all the credit. And that's with our best interest in mind. Because if you start taking some credit for yourself and receiving some glory for yourself, then you start relying on yourself more and depending on God less.
 - So if you have not developed the spiritual habit of giving all glory to God and deflecting all credit to him, then he might trim you down like he did to Gideon. He might lead you on a path where you're faced with impossible odds. He might put you in a situation where you feel in over your head and out of your depth.
 - I know it's hard or confusing or scary. I'm sure Gideon felt the same. **But like Gideon, could it be that the Lord is trimming you down and humbling you – because you're right on the cusp of battle?** Right before he achieves a mighty victory in your life? Maybe he's not making it easy because he doesn't want you boasting, thinking that you saved yourself by your own hand.

- ❖ And this is especially true when it comes to your spiritual salvation from sin. **One of the greatest spiritual dangers is thinking you can contribute to your salvation.** Thinking the quality of your life, the performance of your life, commends you before God.
 - God, in his mercy, will stack the odds against you in order to dispel you of that false notion. Salvation belongs to our God. He alone saves. He does the fighting. He secures the victory. **Like Gideon and his three hundred, we just stand there. We cry out in faith, and trust in the salvation he brings.**

- ❖ And this is why when God was ready to save his people from our greater enemy – from spiritual bondage to sin – he trimmed his army all the way down. Less than 300. Less than 100. Less than 10. Down to just 1.

- ❖ One man. One hero who will fight the battle on behalf of God's people. **This one man, the Lord Jesus, took on your sin and bore the wrath of God alone.** He defeated the devil and trampled on death alone. He did it all by himself.
 - Some of you have yet to share in the benefits of Jesus's solo act of salvation. The odds of saving yourself are stacked against you. Stop trying to save yourself, and instead be like an Israelite who stands there and shouts. Shout out your great need for Jesus to be your Deliverer, to be your Savior, to be your Lord. He stands ready to save. **And there will be no doubt who gets the glory.** The battle cry of salvation is not "For the Lord mostly – and a little for us." No, salvation belongs to the Lord.

Supplying the Assurance We Lack

- ❖ So we've seen God stacking the odds against us, and that's because he's securing the glory for himself. But by the end of v8, God could tell that Gideon was still dealing with a lot of doubt, plagued by unbelief, and in need of assurance. And that's what he supplies in vv9-14. **This is the third thing we see God doing in this story – supplying the assurance we lack.**
- ❖ The LORD graciously arranges for Gideon to overhear a conversation between two Midianite soldiers. Look at v9, *"That same night the LORD said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. ¹⁰But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant. ¹¹And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.""*
 - **So God arranges for Gideon to sneak up to the Midianite camp at night and to overhear a conversation between two soldiers that reveals the fear that's been gripping the entire camp.** One soldier tells another that he had a dream about a cake of barley bread tumbling into camp and knocking over a tent. And his friend immediately provides the interpretation.
 - In those days, barley was considered the food of the very poor (which perfectly describes Israel at this point). And a tent was symbolic of the Midianites since they were known to be nomadic tent-dwellers. So the message behind the dream is clear: God has given Midian and all the camp into the hands of Gideon and the Israelites.
- ❖ The Midianites were the biggest and baddest nation around in those days. But here they are shaking with fear over the barley bread we call Israel. **That suggests that our enemies are never as strong as they might appear.** They're not as invulnerable as they might seem.
 - Remember, greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world (1 Jn 4:4). Satan can't make you sin. Idols are not irresistible. If you're in Christ, then sin has no ultimate sway over you. There's always a way of escape (1 Cor 10:13).
- ❖ **The way the Midianites were trembling at the name of Gideon reminds me of that episode in Acts 19 when the Apostle Paul was in Ephesus.** There were these seven sons of Sceva, these itinerant Jewish exorcists, were try to cast out an evil spirit from a man by invoking the name of Jesus.

- ❖ In **Acts 19:13**, they said to an evil spirit, *“I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims. But the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?”* The evil spirit feared the name of Jesus and even trembled at the name of Paul, but it wasn't intimidated by some frauds who didn't know or trust in the Lord. The possessed man goes on to beat up the seven sons of Sceva, and they flee the house naked. It's rather humorous.
 - **But the point I'm trying to highlight is that evil spirits actually knew Paul's name, and they trembled at the sound of it.** Just like the Midianites trembled at the sound of Gideon's name. I know you might be thinking, *“Well sure, it's the Apostle Paul after all.”* No, you're missing the point. The demons don't fear Paul because it's Paul. Because he's so holy. No, they fear Paul because he's a man in Christ. He'd be the first to tell you that. **So, Christian, don't take lightly this glorious truth that Christ is in you. That demons know your name and tremble at the sound of it.**
 - Brothers and sisters, there is greater power in us than we realize. We are stronger than we think we are. But not by a strength native to us. But by the power of the Spirit who lives in us.

- ❖ **I hope you feel a greater sense assurance knowing the kind of power that resides in you – if Christ is in you.** God knows that he's stacked the odds against you. He knows you're being asked to step out in faith without a safety net. He knows it's a big risk for you, and you feel apprehensive. He knows how you feel, and he cares. And so he wants to supply you with the assurance you currently lack.
 - **But notice how this assurance was not supplied to Gideon while he waited safely in the comfort of his tent.** I wouldn't be surprised if he took out his fleece, hoping God would confirm and reaffirm his promises. But this time, assurance did not come until Gideon stepped out in faith and put himself in a risky situation.
 - He had to crawl down to the Midianite camp where he could've been detected and captured. **But in the risky situation is where you meet God.** That's where he meets you and assures you. It typically doesn't happen when you're safe and secure in your comfort zone. It's when you step out of it.

- ❖ **We expect God to supply us with assurances while we're resting in the comfort of our couch.** Until he makes it clear that he wants us to go in a certain direction; until he confirm and reaffirms; until he clears away every obstacle – we won't move an inch in obedience. **But what this passage demonstrates is that if you want his assurances, then you'll have to step out of what's safe and comfortable and find God there.**
 - I believe God wants you to do some amazing things for him and for the sake of his gospel. I believe he wants the same for our church. I'm excited about the new vision we embraced as an urban Chinese-heritage church strategically located in central Houston next to key institutions that draw people from around the country and world. We want to be **a training ground** for equipping its people to become disciple-making disciples; and **a launching pad** for sending its people out to do kingdom work as pastors, missionaries, or faithful disciples in the marketplace; and **a nesting ground** for new or potential church plants.

- ❖ That's a big vision. That's going to call us out of our comfort zones. **Pursuing this vision is going to call each of us to take a big risk.** It's going to be scary. It's going to feel like the odds are stacked against us. But when we step out in faith – that's where we meet God, and that's where he's prepared to surprise us with a glorious display of his all-sufficient power.