

Advertising keeps selling images, doesn't it? For example television beer commercials associate a certain beer with hearty, robust construction workers or other manual blue-collar workers, as if to suggest that drinking that beer puts you in the class of the macho and physical. Usually, it would be fair to say, both our advertising and our passions prefer the types that are poised, assertive, assured, daring, self-sufficient and even a bit cocky.

Perhaps that's why we have trouble understanding the Bible. The Bible is not obsessed, as we are, with our image. In fact, the Bible frequently flies in the face of that mentality. God usually calls servants, not heroes, and many of his servants don't fit the mould that our advertisements teach us to prize. Gideon is a case in point. The weakness of Gideon and of Israel saturates chapters 6-8 of Judges. We saw this last week in chapter 6 in Israel's total helplessness against the marauding Midianites (6: 2-6) in Gideon's lack of status and relative obscurity (6: 15), in his fear of family and the townspeople of Ophrah (6: 27) and in his need for additional assurance from God through the "wool fleece test" (6: 36-40). Indeed, Gideon is not the conventional hero. Instead he - and Israel - are presented in their weakness. This weakness theme functions as a foil for the writer's major point, namely that God's power is made perfect in weakness. This is not some false weakness induced by mere modesty. NO - this is weakness in the sense of being stripped of all human resources and forced to lean upon God alone. F. F. Bruce's paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 12: 9 nicely sums up the main thrust of the Gideon story: "My power is most fully displayed when my people are weak".

1. The Necessity of Weakness (7: 1-8)

First of all, God insists on the necessity of weakness. God teaches this lesson at the spring of Harod. Several miles to the north the Midianite army has spread itself on the hill of Moreh and on into the Valley of Jezreel. Battle can't be far away and our normal human assumption would be that Israel will need every man if the enemy is to be defeated. And yet God wants Gideon to have fewer men, not more! "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands" (v. 2). You won't find that advice in any military manual. Why does God want to reduce the army's strength? "In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her" (v. 2). God's people will either praise him for this victory or they will praise - boast in - themselves. Human nature is such that, if there is the tiniest opportunity to boast in our own work, we will.

And so God tells Gideon to reduce the numbers fighting for him. First, in line with Deuteronomy 20: 8, all the fearful ones were sent home. This reduced Gideon's army from 32,000 to 10,000. But, in God's strange view, there were still too many. So God will "test" them for Gideon as they drink water. There would be two groups - ones who lapped with their tongues like a dog laps and those who got down on their knees to drink (v. 5). And it is the 300 lappers who are chosen to remain. The other 9,700 are dismissed. The Lord said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands" (v. 7). People have differed over why God set the "drinking" test. It is typical for people to conclude that the 300 were being more alert and watchful - perhaps holding on to their weapons and staying on their feet. But the text does not mention anything about being more alert or holding on the weapons. The water-drinking episode was simply God's mechanism for further reducing Gideon's army. If we are rightly to hear this passage, we must hear verse 2, which tells us that, ultimately, both reductions were done "in order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her". Because of the tendency of God's people to boast in their own efforts, to trust in their proven methods, to credit their own contributions, to be proud of their cleverness, God frequently insists that his people be reduced to utter helplessness. Why? So that they have no alternative but to recognize that their deliverance or victory can only be chalked up to God's power and mercy.

Another way to put this principle is found in 2 Corinthians 12: 1-10. Paul had been privileged with a vision of heaven, yet had suffered from some physical illness ("a thorn in my flesh"). Paul had pleaded with the Lord to take it away from him but instead God had taken away Paul's physical health by leaving this "thorn". Why? To keep Paul from

becoming conceited, so that he will not be hungry for his own honour. Instead Paul learns what God wants Gideon to learn - that "my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect (that is, most clearly revealed) in weakness" (v. 9). Paul's response is one of absolute trust, of the humility that is the opposite of conceit. "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.....when I am weak, then I am strong" (vv. 9-10). In other words, Paul says, "Look at how weak I am. All that has been achieved has been achieved by God. Look how strong he is to be able to work through me! Praise him!"

God does not simply work in spite of our weakness but because of it. He says that his saving power does not work when we are strong or think we are strong - but rather, when we are weak, and know we are. How does this work practically? First, this principle is the basis for salvation itself. We cannot be saved if we think we are good or able. God's saving power only works on us when we admit that we have no worthiness or goodness in ourselves. Second, this principle explains how repentance works. It is only as we repent and sorrow over our failures before God - only as we know our own weakness - that his love and grace become more precious and real to us. Third, this principle explains how we almost always grow as Christians. Our problems come because good things have become too important to us. Anger, fear or discouragement come because of "idols" in our lives. Good things have become things we feel (at an emotional level) will really save us and give us a sense of worth. It is only when these things are threatened or removed that we turn from them and find our safety and significance in the Lord Jesus. That makes us stable and mature. The principle is perfectly displayed in Judges 7. Gideon and all Israel were going to be tempted to put their confidence in their fighting men, but God removes virtually all of them so that the victory will lead them to trust in God in new ways. As they prepare for battle against the Midianite troops in their thousands, and look around them at 300 other Israelite soldiers, they will surely feel extremely weak! How will they go into battle? Only if they know that they are weak, and yet that God is stronger than the largest army.

2. The Encouragement in Weakness (vv. 9-23)

In verses 9-15, God himself provides fresh assurance for Gideon. Gideon is a most unheroic hero! In verse 9 God orders him to go down to attack the Midianite camp, but then immediately goes on to offer him a preliminary option: "If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah, and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp" (vv. 10-11a). "If you are afraid....." Was Gideon afraid? Certainly - and who wouldn't be - the Midianites and their allies were "thick as locusts" and their camels "could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore" (v. 12). So Gideon and Purah went down to the outposts of the camp and arrived "just as a man was telling a friend his dream" (v. 13). And their eavesdropping paid off. One can almost hear the conversation: "Hey, I've had a dream. See, a loaf of barley bread comes rolling into the camp of Midian, and it smacks into a tent and turns it upside down". His friend, another Midianite soldier knew what it meant: "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands" (v. 14). Gideon's immediate response was to worship God. God had gone ahead of him in every way. All he can do is praise him. His trust in God to give victory spurs him into action: "He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, "Get up! The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands" (v. 15).

You can trace God's concern for Gideon in his words: "Get up, go down....." (v. 9); "If you are afraid to attack....." (v. 10); "Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack....." (v. 11). The Lord knows the fears of his servants. He knows how scared we can be in our various circumstances. Yet he is not so strict and uncaring as to be harsh when we tremble. He does not ridicule us because we are fragile. No, our God is the great Reassurer. Notice that it is God who takes the initiative here. It is God who tells Gideon he should visit the enemy camp. God goes out of his way to reassure his people. We aren't any different from Gideon, are we? We rarely relax and trust him. No matter what God does for us, our hearts are quite stubborn and find it very hard joyfully and confidently to trust and live by

his promises. We need God's ongoing assurance and reminder that he is with us and for us. How does God assure us? First, he assures us through his word - directly to Gideon in vv. 9-11, and to us through his inspired Scriptures, the Bible. The whole book of 1 John, for instance, is written to assure us that we "know that we have come to know him (God)" (1 John 2: 3). God also assures us through his Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, the living Word. Paul reminds us that the Holy Spirit works in us to assure us that we are God's children (Romans 8: 16). Second, God often assures us through other people. It is important to have others who are close Christian friends who can do this - people we spend time with and allow to encourage us about who we are as God's children, and where we and the world are headed. Third, God often assures us through circumstances of life as in Judges 7. In a sense Gideon just happens to be at the right place at the right time to hear this conversation. But of course, this is not a coincidence. God has brought him to this place to hear these words of these 2 Midianite soldiers to find reassurance.

The good news is that Christ takes uncertain and fearful people, strengthens their hands in the strangest ways, and makes them able to stand for him in home or work or school or university. We must not forget how the writer of the letter to the Hebrews describes those who we sometimes call the "heroes of faith": "Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight" (Hebrews 11: 34).

Gideon's new-found confidence leads him into battle. He comes up with his battle plan, dividing his tiny army into 3 groups and equipping them with trumpets and torches hidden inside jars. Reaching the camp at the changing of the guard (the beginning of the middle watch of the night), they blow their trumpets, break their jars to reveal their lights, and shout. It is a brilliant plan. First, it makes the Israelites appear and sound far greater in size than they really are. Second, it makes the camels a non-factor. In fact, the camels may have increased the confusion and mayhem in the camp. Third, it took advantage of the time when the enemy were weakest. At the changing of the guard, one third of the army would have been walking back to their tents, while another third would have been asleep. So, when those who were asleep heard the noise and rushed out of their tents, they would have discovered the camp full of armed men walking toward them. In the dark, the truth that they were fellow Midianites would have been unclear until it was too late. Gideon's plan works perfectly. All the 300 Israelites need to do is to hold their position. In the end, the 300 don't even kill any enemy soldiers. None of them could return home singing of what they had done, but only of what the Lord had done as they stood on and watched - "The Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords" (v. 22). The victory is made complete as the Midianites run, pursued by soldiers from Naphtali, Asher and Manasseh.

3. The Cause of Weakness (7: 24-8: 17)

However, God's people can also be the cause of weakness. Weakness is brought about by fragmentation among God's people. Gideon had called upon the tribe of Ephraim to race to the Jordan River, control access to it as far as Beth Barah, and thus preventing the Midianites from escaping eastward (7: 24). They successfully did this and also captured 2 of the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb. Then they vent their anger on Gideon. Who did he think he was, initiating war with Midian without consulting Ephraim. Ephraim was a prima donna among the tribes. After all wasn't Joshua one of them and weren't they situated in the middle of Israel with prime cities like Shiloh where the Tent of Meeting, the Tabernacle, was located (Joshua 18: 1; Judges 18: 31)? But Gideon's quick-witted proverb (18: 2) and common-sense psychology (18:3) have the desired effect and calm the Ephraimites down. It is nothing but Ephraim's pride that causes the dispute.

In the case of Sukkoth (8: 4-7) and Peniel (or Penuel) (8: 8-9), resistance was more passive than active, generated by fear rather than pride. When Gideon asks Sukkoth for provisions for his exhausted men, the town leaders reply, "Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your troops?" In other words, produce the hands of the Midianite kings as proof of your victory, then we will give you food. Perhaps we can partly understand their refusal to help. If the leaders of

Sukkoth (or Peniel) give help to Gideon and if Gideon fails, for whatever reason, to deal decisively with the Midianite menace, they might find themselves under Midianite attack. Unlike the tribes west of the Jordan River, these towns were directly exposed to Midianite attack - they had no Jordan River valley as at least a partial buffer from swift Midianite attack. They would have said that it was prudent to refuse Gideon's request for help. Or was it faithlessness? It can be difficult to distinguish the two. Must our safety always be the ultimate consideration? Couldn't Sukkoth and Peniel see that God had granted Israel a truly remarkable victory and that they could assist in completing it? The story is ironic: the 2 towns avoid Midian's anger but suffer under Gideon's wrath (8: 13-17). Since they sided with Israel's enemies, they were treated as Israel's enemies. It is tragic when judgment must include God's people. With a remarkable victory needing to be clinched, the pride of Ephraim and the fear of Sukkoth and Peniel are both stupid and wrong. A passion for recognition and safety destroys the cohesion Israel needed.

The message is clear for us: sometimes the people of God are a great disappointment. Don't allow God's people to disillusion you - at least be prepared for it. And watch out that it is not your passion for status or recognition or your pursuit of security that disturbs the unity and saps the energy of the church. It is easy to give in to pride and say "I could have done a much better job than he did" or "I am more gifted for that ministry than she is" or "No, I can't do that job or take up that ministry - it will take me out of my comfort zone and I can't risk failing and be criticized". Though Christ's power is "most fully displayed when his people are weak", we must take care that we ourselves are not the cause of such weakness through our passion for our status or recognition or our pursuit of our safety.

Amen

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