

JUDGES Triumph in Weakness

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 September 2018

Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] cavalry commander in the American Civil Wars and the Indian Wars. Today he is remembered for the disastrous military engagement known as the Battle of the Little Bighorn on the 25th of June 1876, where he died along with 260 soldiers, all of them, the whole company was wiped out, included Custer, his two brothers, a nephew, so a bunch of his family members were killed there as well. This is a man who had quite humble origins. He was born into a poor and obscure family somewhere in the Midwest. Throughout his life, Custer was known as someone to test the boundaries and the rules consistently. In his four years as a West Point cadet, he amassed a record.

This day, it's a record to this day. It's a record of 726 demerit points. The worst conduct recorded in the history of the academy. And during his rocky tenure at the academy, Custer came close to expulsion on every single year he was there due to the excessive amounts of his demerits. There were 34 cadets in his year at West Point and at graduation, he ranked number 34.

This is a man who had origins, both humble origins, both in life and in his career. During the American Civil War, he was regarded by soldiers as a great leader, always willing to do the toughest jobs. His reputation spread at the age of 23. He became the youngest major general in American military history. And it was during his rise to fame as a leader that he fell in love with publicity of himself, about himself. For those who knew him, those who served under him or with him, particularly in his latter years, he became known for his vanity and his desire for personal glory.

Some historians even suggest that it's because of his pride and his vanity and his desire for personal glory that 260 men died with him at the little bighorn. All too often, this is the case, is it not, where success leads to pride, leads to boasting, it leads to conceit, it leads to downfall.

Boasting, encouraging others, and in fact, even our own hearts, to give us glory, is opposed to, and even saps life out of true faith. Conceit, being hungry for honour and glory, is the cousin of boasting. So there's three things I want us to see today in this text. I want to see, first of all, the strength in weakness. I want to see, secondly, triumphant weakness. And thirdly, how to finish with triumphant weakness. So firstly, strength in weakness. Judges 6, as we saw last week, Gideon is chosen by God to save Israel from the Midianites, who have been oppressing them for seven years. At the beginning of chapter 7, we now get battle time, and two armies are facing each other off.

[3 : 47] Before he goes into battle, God wants to teach Gideon and the rest of his people, who actually deserves glory for the salvation that they're about to receive.

And it starts with advice that Gideon gets in verse 2, and you won't find this advice in any military manual. Now, this is the verse that interprets the rest of chapter 7 and into chapter 8.

God's people will either praise God for their victory, or they will praise, they will boast in themselves. Gideon will either give the honour to his Lord, or he will seek it for himself.

Human nature is such that if there is the tiniest opportunity for us to boast in our own work, we will. Notice that God says in verse 2, that any such boasting is against me.

As soon as we begin to believe that we deserve the credit for rescuing or for delivering ourselves, what we do in that moment is we take glory from God for delivering us, a glory that he deserves alone. And as soon as we rob glory from God, it's called idolatry.

[5 : 43] And we set ourselves up as alternative saviors. And this has to be the greatest spiritual danger there is, that we should believe that we can save ourselves or have saved ourselves in any way.

And Christianity is so clear on this. Salvation is by God's gracious action. We don't earn it with our own actions at all. And so what God does here is he reduces the number of soldiers because he

knows that the men are too many. There's too many for Israel to see clearly where the praise and the glory is going to go for the victory that's about to come.

And so God decreases their numbers in two ways. Firstly, Gideon says that anyone here anyone here at all who's too scared to fight, you can go home. And that shaves his army by two thirds. 22,000 go home. You know, imagine being the first person. That's me, guys. I'm out of here. Imagine being the one, you know, walking home to your family, to your community, and they're thinking, what, it's over already? Nah, it's not over yet. I was just too scared. So I've just come home.

And imagine being there when the rest who do fight the battle come home. Like, you know, pin a yellow ribbon on them all. These guys publicly admit that they have no heart for the battle.

[7 : 30] But 10,000 who were either too scared to go home or too scared to stay. The 10,000 stayed anyway. And in verse 4, that's still too many. And so the second group were sent home after, well, for obscure reasons.

The way that they drank water. Now, the text does not say why God picked the drinking test. It isn't about the quality of the fighting men.

The first test potentially was, if you're too scared, go home because you're useless to us anyway.

But the second test was not about the quality of the fighting men. And they separate out 9,700 who knelt down and put their mouths to the water to drink.

The 300 who cut the water into their hands, these are the ones chosen for the battle. And if you're one of the 300, you have to go, oh my goodness. We start the day with 32,000 men.

And now we've got 300, a reduction of over 99% of our numbers. And the reduction in numbers, as verse 2 says, is that they will not boast about the victory.

[8 : 53] Gideon and the army with him should look back and say, oh, this is clear. This victory is clearly God's, not mine.

My only part in this was to trust and obey. The glory is God's. The privilege is mine. God has allowed me, allowed us to be part of what he's doing.

It's our privilege, but the glory is his. And the rest of Israel, including the 31,700 who went home, should praise God.

We weren't even there. God rescued us without us even doing anything. Praise God.

We see this principle of salvation right through the book of Judges, and we see it in the rest of the Bible. God's power is most clearly displayed through weakness.

[9 : 56] In 2 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul has been privileged with a vision of heaven.

And yet he suffers from what he calls a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan that was sent to torment me. And Paul pleads with God several times to take it away, but God doesn't do it.

And he doesn't do it. And Paul says, this is the reason why he didn't do it. In order to keep me from becoming conceited because of the vision of greatness and splendor that I saw.

In other words, God is keeping Paul from being hungry for his own honor, hungry for his own glory, boasting about his own strength, his own experiences.

And so therefore he has this thorn. And Paul learns here in 2 Corinthians what God wants Gideon to learn, what he wants his 300 to learn, what he wants Israel to learn, what he wants us to learn.

[11 : 00] It's in 2 Corinthians 12 verse 9. God's power is most clearly displayed in our weakness, our frailty.

And Paul went on to write this, Therefore I will boast all the more gladly because of my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why for Christ's sake I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. God does not work despite our weaknesses, but because of our weaknesses.

He says that his saving power does not work when we are strong or when we think we're strong, but rather when we are weak and when we know that we are weak.

So let me just push that point a little bit further and tease out some principles. This is so important because we exist in a culture which is hungry for power.

[12 : 15] It's a success-driven culture that is hungry for power. Firstly, this principle is the basis of salvation in the Christian faith. We cannot be saved if we think that we are good and we are able.

God's saving power only works on us when we admit that we are not worthy. We have got no goodness in ourselves. It also explains how repentance works in the Christian life.

It is only as we repent and express sorrow over sin and failures before God that his love and his grace become so much more precious to us, so much more real for us.

If someone says to you, or says to me, Hey Steve, I've paid a debt for you. I don't know how overjoyed I should be in that moment until I understand which debt it is and how big it is.

You see, jumping up at a cafe and paying for my coffee and coming back and say I've just paid for everything, well, that's fantastic.

[13:30] That does not compare to the hugs from me and the kisses you'll receive from me if you've just paid out my entire mortgage.

There's a different level of gratitude at that point. Always grateful for you to buy me a coffee, but the bigger we understand our debt to be, the greater the joy in its payment will be.

It is only as we see our weakness and our frailty and our failure and our sin that the strength of knowing God's grace and his love comes to us. Jesus made the same point, Luke 7 verse 47, where someone who thinks there is little in them that needs forgiving will in fact love little.

And this is the principle on display here in Judges 7. Gideon and Israel with him were going to be tempted to put their confidence in their fighting men, but God removes virtually all of them so that they will trust in God in new ways.

As they prepare to fight the Midianite army and look around at the 300, just a few extra than what's sitting in this room, they should feel weak.

[15:03] They should feel extremely weak. In the same way we should feel weak when we look at the mission field that God has given us and the many number of people that are yet to know Christ.

They will only go into battle if they know that while they are weak, so is the strongest army against their God.

So secondly, triumphant weakness. It's at this point, as Gideon is grappling with his weakness, that God gives Gideon assurance of victory.

It's such wonderful thoughtfulness at this point that the sovereign God here says to Gideon in verse 10, if you are afraid to attack, which I'd imagined you would be in this moment, go down to the camp with your servant, servant Pera, and listen to what they are saying, and afterwards you'll be encouraged to attack the camp.

So he heads down to the camp and the first sight of this camp must have been terrifying. Verse 12, the Midianites, the Amalekites, and all their mates from the eastern peoples have settled in the valley and thick as locusts, their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.

[16:45] He's like, well, that's good. We've got 300. And it's of no coincidence at all that he sets up, you know, in the darkness beside the tent of a Midianite who's just woken up from a nightmare.

A loaf of bread has just rolled through the camp and flattened the tents. Nightmare stuff.

Like, can you just imagine it? No kid of mine has ever run into my bedroom crying with tears. I've just been attacked by a loaf of bread. I mean, this guy's just so scared of a loaf of bread on a rampage and he's woken his mate up and his mate wakes up and goes, oh my goodness, that must be Gideon.

Gideon. The loaf of bread must be Gideon. What? How did you make that connection? Should be his next question.

the Midianites would have been no more concerned of 32,000 men than they would be of a loaf of bread.

[18:10] These are the 32,000 men who they've oppressed beautifully for seven years. Why would they be scared of them? unless God has put fear in their hearts.

God's working on them as well. It reveals something very significant.

Underneath underneath the armor of this vast army are trembling hearts fearful hearts weak hearts and Gideon has heard the assurance of God through the oddest of channels and now we see Gideon in his finest moment.

This is him in his finest moment in all three chapters of Judges. He's on his knees in worship. This is his Gethsemane moment.

He's now surrendered to the will of God. He goes back to his men with this message in verse 15.

Get up. The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands.

[19:37] Notice two things about that statement. Notice he doesn't say my hand God promised him I'm going to give the Midianite army into your hand and now he says it's not my hand it's your hands.

He wants his men these 300 to have the same confidence that he has in this God. And secondly that confidence is in the fact that God has given them into his hands.

It's past tense. The battle has been won even though the fight has yet to begin. the plan is executed.

The chosen weapons are torches in jars of clay and horns. That's it.

Jar of clay throw a torch in there put a light in the jar of clay and a horn to make a racket. they surrounded the camp and the 300 blew their horns they smashed their jars of clay the lamps illuminated and the Midians ran out crying out in fear and it says in verse 22 that the Lord caused there to be such a panic in the darkness that they were killing each other.

[21 : 10] How many men did the 300 kill? Not a single one. Not a single one. None of them could return home and say hey did you see me you know with my sword and how skilled I was with it.

None of them could go home and cry about what they've done but only what they had watched God do in that moment with this vast army. This is God's battle and he alone claimed the victory.

Gideon is mentioned in Hebrews chapter 11 verses 32 to 34 as a man of faith. That's what he's known for as a man of faith and this is the most impressive thing about Gideon.

When Gideon rises from his knees after hearing the dream that the enemy of his enemy hasn't he hasn't seen God do anything at this point.

He hasn't seen a Midianite die. He has however seen the awesome power of God and he isn't afraid anymore in that moment.

[22 : 28] and he is set free to attempt the impossible relying on the promise of God alone.

As Hebrews 11 says of Gideon weakness was turned to strength who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. His weakness was turned to strength by faith in the sovereign saving God.

Now this whole passage in Judges 7 has so many arms into the New Testament but it does recall to me one to mind one passage that's in fact encouraging Christians to not lose heart when they see their weakness to Corinthians 4 for what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your servants for Jesus sake for God who said let light shine out of darkness made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ God's but we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not of ourselves now I don't know whether

Paul had Judges 7 in mind when he wrote that but it resonates with it these verses are about the fight that the Christian is involved in one that we will lose heart if we rely upon our own power and our own strength and our own enabling instead of God's enabling and God uses the same strategy here strength in weakness we are according to 2 Corinthians the breakable jar clays with something precious on the inside it's the light that shines in the darkness that expels the darkness it's the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ the magnificence of God's glory is displayed in the face of Christ and that glory is displayed in all its brilliance when

Jesus is on the cross in all his weakness there's nothing impressive about the Lord Jesus as Isaiah tells us he came into this world in obscurity he was rejected and maligned by virtually everyone accused of wrongdoing died the death of a hardened criminal he who as we seen often around Christmas time he who hung the starry skies surrendered his hands to cruel nails he who wore the crown as creator and ruler of all allowed a crude crown of thorns to be twisted and placed on his head mocked with the words you who saved others save yourself in other words display your strength and save yourself and the great irony is that if he had chosen strength over weakness in that moment we would be the ones who would be crushed placed in a tomb but on the third day rose triumphant and he now has the name as

[26 : 12] Philippians 2 says it is above every name every name and everyone will one day surrender to this lamb who sits on the throne of the universe as 2 corinthians 13 3 and 4 say jesus was crucified in weakness but he lives by the power of god now strength in weakness is the gospel the son of god who laid aside all of his glory surrendered himself to death for our sakes displays the magnificent glory of god to this world the great encouragement of these verses in 2 corinthians 4 is that this god uses weakness he uses weary people he uses ordinary jars of clay to display to this world the light of the glory of god in the face of christ our weakness is not a hindrance weakness is the way of the gospel and 2 corinthians calls christians in the midst of a world where they're seeing the gospel rejected do not lose heart do not lose heart in the vision in the mission let us press on in the task of proclaiming christ as lord out of hearts of love and lives of service while looking to god to

push out darkness with the light of the glory of the gospel of the lord jesus in the hearts of so many losing heart is where we forget the gospel where we forget that we are weak and unimpressive and the real treasure is the gospel of the lord jesus christ losing heart is starting to think more of ourselves and less of the gospel starting to claim victory for ourselves starting to be impressed with ourselves and so thirdly finishing in triumphant weakness it's calling us to finish our course in triumphant weakness and it's tragic to see how gideon finished there is something really unusual in this judges cycle with gideon in the previous cycles if you remember the only details that are given after the battle after the victory is the length of peace that there was under the judge's rule and then the judge dies and then we see it all happens again new cycle starts not this time what we see this time is that the people start to back slide under the judge's rule not after it this is while the judge is still alive and we start to see some deep flaws in gideon's rule and the writer here dedicates two chapters to it in chapter eight we see gideon's need for respect and honour and his violent bitter rage when he fails to be given the honour that he thinks he deserves success against the midianites was the worst thing for gideon there is a terrible spiritual danger receiving

any blessing success can easily cause us to forget god's good grace because our hearts are so desperate to believe that we can save ourselves failure causes us to evaluate our hearts and our priorities success just affirms what we already thought was true of ourselves that we can fulfill and we can control ourselves and in chapter eight gideon has forgotten who called him who equipped him who reassured him and won the battle for him and gideon's ego is stroked when israel asked him to be their king in verse 22 rule over us you your son and your grandson because you have saved us from the hand of midian and the very next verse is the last time gideon remembers the gracious actions of god on his behalf it's the last time he mentions god but gideon told them i will not rule over you nor will your son my son rule over you the lord will rule over you now ironically and tragically he almost immediately contradicts himself when he starts acting like a king he asks for financial reward for delivering them in verse 24 in the very next verse and he becomes a very rich man through it he takes the riches he makes an ephod like the ones worn by the high priest and in doing so what he does is he creates an alternative option for worship for

Israel he creates a new option for worship creates a new center for worship Gideon has used God in this moment to consolidate his own position instead of using his position to be served and to be used of God in order that he might serve and be used of God the judge is meant to turn people from false worship to true worship and here Gideon leads them in a totally different direction he even calls his illegitimate son Abilamech which means my father is the king what Gideon has rejected out of his mouth he harbors in his heart he knew a true he knew the truth intellectually but it had not gripped his heart he had a mental grasp of the doctrine of

God's grace and his rule and he could give the right answer at the right time but his heart hadn't been broken it is so essential that we keep remembering the gospel and allowing it to humble our hearts that the normal pattern of our Christian walk is one of constant repentance that that is why we have this cultural value at St.

Paul's called humble authenticity it states that as a church here at St. Paul's we seek to declare war on the daily tendency towards self-sufficiency and the desire to live independently of God the promise of James 4 6 is that he gives grace to the humble we are convinced that no effective growth in ministry or mission happens without the cultivation humility in the heart and the weakening of pride in the life we therefore seek our words and our actions to be what we believe and teach from God's word we are committed to being vulnerable with our imperfections in such a way that candor is encouraged rather than concealment how wonderful it is for us to gather week after week in corporate worship and be reminded of our imperfections and our frailty and Jesus purity and strength that's that's one of the goals of corporate worship is the breaking of our hearts as we look to the magnificence and strength of

[35 : 05] God in Christ how wonderful it is to look again today to the one to the one each of the judges is just a mere shadow of Gideon is just a mere shadow of let us not forget the God who saves us how wonderful it is to see again how he used his position he had every single right to demand service as the king of kings his father is the king and yet in Luke 4 verses 5 and 8 Jesus resisted the temptation to rule in power over the nations because he came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many he has ransomed us from our self honoring reactions to success and our self hating responses to failure he used his position as the son of

God to give us freedom from needing respect or being crushed by lack of it we must keep looking keep looking to the author and the perfecter of Gideon's faith and our faith if we are to finish with triumphant weakness in spiritual matters we are all weak and we are all inadequate and we need to face it and corporate worship helps us do that week in and week out sin has disabled us right across the board we need to understand our limitations and let this awareness work in us humility and self distrust and in this we may learn to depend on Jesus our Savior our Lord and practice that dependence as one of the habits of our hearts every single day and therefore discover what the apostle Paul discovered when I am weak then I am strong God of you