

Judges 7. Bethesda Bible Teaching. 25 October 2009.

First, the story so far. Last week, David covered chapter 6 and dealt briefly with :

- (i) the annual invasion of Israel by the Midianites;
- (ii) the people's cry to the Lord after seven years of oppression;
- (iii) the message of a prophet who, in God's name, denounced their idolatry;
- (iv) the appearance of the angel of the Lord to Gideon¹ and Gideon's commission, with God's presence and help, to save Israel 'from the hand of Midian';
- (v) Gideon's destruction of his father's altar to Ba'al and its consequences;
- (vi) the arrival of the Midianites – for the seventh year running - and Gideon's summons to four of Israel's tribes to form an army to defend themselves, and, finally,
- (vii) God's confirmation – by way of two 'fleece' signs – that He would indeed deliver Israel by the 'hand' of Gideon.

Our chapter for this morning takes up the story, but first verse 33 of chapter 6 :

All the Midianites and Amalekites and the people of the East came together; and, crossing over, they encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.

Now, chapter 7 verse 1 :

Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod. And the camp of the Midianites was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley.

And the Lord said to Gideon, 'The people who are with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast themselves against me, saying, "My own hand has saved me". Now therefore, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, "Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead".' And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.

And the Lord said to Gideon, 'The people are still too many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. And it will be, that of whom I say to you, "This one shall go with you", the same shall go with you; and of whomever I say to you, "This one shall not go with you", the same shall not go'.

So he brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gideon, 'Everyone who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; likewise everyone who kneels down to drink'.

And the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water.

And the Lord said to Gideon, 'By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the people go, every man to his place'.

So they took the people's provisions and trumpets in their hands. And he sent all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent, but retained the three hundred men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

That same night the Lord said to him, 'Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand. But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Phurah your servant, and you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp'. Then he went down with Phurah his servant to the outskirts of the military camp.

And the Midianites and Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts in abundance; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude.

And when Gideon had come, behold, there was a man telling a dream to his companion, and said, 'Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, behold, a round loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent and struck it so that it fell and turned upside down, that the tent fell flat'.

And his companion answered and said, 'This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp'.

And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshipped. And he returned to the camp of Israel, and said, 'Arise, for the Lord has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand'.

And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put trumpets into the hands of all, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers.

And he said to them, 'Look at me, and do likewise; and, behold, when I come to the outskirts of the camp you shall do as I do: when I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, "For the Lord and for Gideon!"'

So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers which were in their hands.

And the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers, and held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing, and cried, 'The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!'

And every man stood in his place around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled.

And they blew the three hundred trumpets, and the Lord set every man's sword against his companion, even throughout the whole camp; and the army fled to Beth-Shittah, towards Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah, by Tabbath.

And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites.

And Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, 'Come down against the Midianites, and seize the waters of Jordan ahead of them as far as Beth-barah'. So all the men of Ephraim gathered together and seized the watering places as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan.

And they took two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. And they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. And they pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon beyond the Jordan.

It may be that, by the use of Gideon's name 'Jeru-Ba'al' in the opening verse, the Holy Spirit is connecting the public victory of chapter 7 with the 'home' victory recorded in chapter 6.

But, if in chapter 6 we read of a so-called god who needed his followers to plead for and to save him, now in chapter 7 we read of the true and living God who is able to save His people.

In the opening scene, Gideon and Israel's army were pitched about four miles south of the huge Midianite army – beside a spring later known, in memory of this occasion, as 'The Spring of Trembling'. And who can blame many in the Israelite army for 'trembling'. For, although in total they numbered 32,000, the Midianite army numbered well over four times their size; namely, 135,000 – and were clearly visible from Israel's chosen vantage point on the lower slopes of Mount Gilboa.

Then came the bombshell! It is at this point that the Lord spoke to Gideon about there being 'too many'. But not, as a spectator might have thought, 'too many' Midianites. True, in normal warfare conditions, as our Lord Himself observed, any leader would think very carefully before tackling forces twice the size of his own – let alone four times the size. But here the Lord told Gideon, 'The people *who are with you* are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast themselves against me, saying, "My own hand has saved me"'.¹

For in this case the Lord wanted the odds stacked so badly against Israel that all would agree that their victory must be chalked up to His credit and honour – for, with our eye on Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 12, His (the Lord's) 'strength is made perfect in (human) weakness'. He is prepared to give His people the victory ... but not the glory!

And so God instructs Gideon to pare down his army by two simple tests.

First, to allow all who were fearful to return homeward. God's law itself had prescribed, 'When you go out to battle against your enemies ... the officers shall speak ... to the people, and say, 'What man is there who is fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest his brethren's heart melt as his heart'.² But here the object was not to fortify the spirit of the remaining troops, but to prevent the people from glorying in themselves. This proclamation resulted in over two-thirds of the original army heading for home. And Gideon was left with only 10,000.

'But no cause for alarm', he may have felt. After all, had not Deborah and Barak defeated the mighty Canaanite army of Jabin and Sisera – together with their 900 iron chariots – back in chapter 4, with just that – namely, with an army of only 10,000 men?³

Ah, but there was a second winnowing test to be applied. It was what we might call 'The Test of the Lappers and the Kneelers'. I know of many who extol the merit of 'lapping' as opposed to 'kneeling' here in terms of self-control, and of remaining alert and ready to respond to the sudden demands of battle. I am by no means satisfied that the Lord had any such distinction in mind.⁴ He certainly gave no hint of it to Gideon. The purpose of the test seems rather simply to split down the 10,000 troops into two groups. And it certainly did that. The final score was 300 'lappers' and 9,700 'kneelers'.

God told Gideon that He would save Israel with 'the three hundred men who lapped'. The rest were sent home. Back in chapter 5, Deborah and Barak had come down heavily on those in Israel who had refused to offer their

services in the time of crisis. But now 9,700 willing and courageous men – who had refused to return home with the 22,000 – were told, in effect, that their services were not required! I suspect that Gideon didn't find telling them that particularly easy.⁵

When we read in verse 8 that Gideon 'retained' the 300 men, the word implies that they had a strong urge to join their former comrades and vanish homewards.⁶

With just a handful of men, Gideon faced an army of 135,000 Midianites less than an hour's march from him. The odds were now 450 to 1 against – identical to those faced about 250 years later by Elijah on Mount Carmel.

We can well understand why, with less than 1 percent of his original fighting force, Gideon's faith now wavered a little. I suppose that, strictly speaking, since Gideon was undoubtedly afraid, he should have returned home – as had the 22,000 earlier. But the Lord graciously encouraged him – 'strengthened his hands' in biblical language – in two ways.

First, with His promise – not, I note, that He *would* deliver the Midianite camp into Gideon's hand, but that He *had already done so!*⁷ In God's purpose – and who can thwart that? – Midian was already a defeated foe.

And second, by telling Gideon to make a secret and stealthy visit to the Midianite military camp. There, by preserving Gideon from being spotted, by directing Gideon's feet to the right men, by a dream which He (the Lord) put in the one man's head, and an interpretation He put in the other man's mouth – with providentially everything timed to perfection, He gave Gideon all the reassurance he needed.

Barley bread, as the food of the poor, and doubtless the staple food of the Israelites during the Midianite oppression, was a fitting symbol of Gideon, a man of humble origin and station. 'The tent', as the text of verse 13 properly reads, was probably the most important tent in the camp – that of the captain of the army.

Clearly, even the common soldiers of the Midianite army had heard of Gideon's plans to engage them in battle – though, I guess, not of his greatly depleted forces.

The words at the end of verse 13 are heaped up to stress the complete overthrow of the tent, symbolic of the utter destruction of the Midianite host.

A rock thundering down the hillside might have sufficient mass and momentum to level a tent, but a small barley loaf certainly wouldn't! The second soldier, with a skill to match Joseph as an interpreter of dreams, concluded that it was God Himself who would deliver the whole Midianite army into Gideon's hand.⁸

Having taken the time to prostrate himself before the Lord in grateful worship, Gideon called his 300 troops to attention – and, in faith, assured them, in the words he had heard from both the Lord Himself and the second Midianite soldier, that the Lord had delivered the army of Midian into their hand.

No longer is Gideon concerned about the size of the enemy army. What are 135,000 men against 300 – if the 300 have God as their ally?

Back in Joshua 7, it had been self-confidence and ignorance which had led Israel to field a small force in battle – to their great cost! But here in *Judges 7* it was *faith*.

By dividing his men into three groups, by spreading them around the Midianites, and by his great night-time multimedia performance – with deafening sound effects (blaring ram's horn trumpets and bellowing war cry) and blinding lights in every direction (torches flaring up with a sudden blaze as the earthenware pitchers were smashed) – by these means Gideon was able to create the impression of vast columns of invading troops.

And his timing was as carefully chosen as was his strategy – the action began 'at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch' – which has nothing to do with the clock going back, Mr Farr. But at that key moment, when most of the Midianites would be deep in sleep, when the first shift had just fallen asleep, and the second shift were not yet fully awake, the fireworks went off ...

Three hundred trumpets blasted ... three hundred torches lit up the darkness ... and then, to add to the nightmare, a ringing battle cry pierced the night air.

Every man of Gideon's 300 'stood' we are told 'in his place'.⁹ But the Midianites certainly didn't 'stand'! They 'fled' – or at least those still able to flee did. For in the confusion and mayhem, with men from three different nations running to and fro, unable to distinguish friend from foe in the darkness, vast numbers had died as they fought among themselves, thinking that enemy forces had broken through into the camp. Although we know, of course, that, in the final analysis, it was the Lord who 'set every man's sword against his companion'.

And so a chapter which began with subtraction in the army of Israel ends with division in the camp of the Midianites.

And men from several tribes of Israel set off in hot pursuit of the Midianite survivors – including, it seems, those who had been sent away earlier.

At Gideon's request, the fighting men of the tribe of Ephraim joined in and took possession of the fords of Jordan before the Midianites, who could only move slowly with their flocks and herds, were able to reach there.

The rock known afterwards as the *Rock of Oreb*, and the wine-press known as the *Wine-press of Zeeb*, were so named on account of being the places where these two princes were taken and slain.

I recall that the story began with Israel hiding from the Midianites in caves and rocks,¹⁰ and with Gideon threshing wheat at a winepress.¹¹ And now the story ends, ironically, with two Midianite leaders slain, one at a Rock, and the other at a winepress.

In later days, the events of Judges 7 became proverbial in Israel. 'Deal with them (your enemies, Lord) as with Midian ... make their nobles like Oreb and like Zeeb', pleads the psalmist in Psalm 83. For his part, Isaiah says of Assyria in chapter 10 of his book, 'The Lord of hosts will stir up a scourge for him like the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb'.

I know that Gideon's death, 'at a good old age', isn't recorded until verse 32 of the following chapter, but if we ever wanted an epitaph to go on his tombstone, I guess we couldn't do better than engrave the words of Hebrews 11 : ... 'Time would fail me to tell of Gideon' etc. 'who through faith ... were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight'.¹²

In all, Gideon was involved in three separate conflicts: with Ba'al in chapter 6; with Midian in chapter 7; and, sadly, with some of his own nation in chapter 8. But I must leave you to read that final section for yourselves.

For my part, in the light of our brief study, I cannot do better than leave the last words with the apostle Paul :

First, from 2 Corinthians chapter 3, 'Not that we are competent of ourselves ... our competence is from God'; and then from chapter 4, 'God ... has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us'.¹³

Footnotes

¹ Gideon was the only judge to whom God spoke directly. He was probably nearing middle age as he had a son in his teens, Judges 8. 20.

² Deut. 20. 8.

³ Judges 4. 2-3, 13-14.

⁴ It is not clear whether God's test and choice were arbitrary – having no other significance than that most people drank in one way and fewer in the other. It is just possibly that God designed the test to distinguish the more alert soldiers from the less alert, because getting down on all fours certainly leaves a man more vulnerable than if he remains upright while drinking. 'The normal way to drink from a stream was to get down on one's hands and knees and put his mouth to the water. This is what most of the soldiers did. A smaller number simply remained standing or kneeled, reached down, dipped one hand into the water, and brought the water to their lips. God told Gideon that he should send the majority home and that He would deliver Israel with the 300 men who remained', Thomas Constable.

⁵ 'So they (the 300 picked men) took the provision of the people in their hand, and their (the people's) trumpets (the suffix points back to 'the people'). The 300 men took the provision of the people, i.e., provision for the war, from the people who had been sent away, and the war-trumpets; so that every one of the 300 had a trumpet now, and as the provision of the people was also probably kept in vessels or pitchers, a jug as well' Keil and Delitzsch.

⁶ When v.8a says that Gideon "kept" (*heheziq be* lit., "to take fast hold") the 300, it implies that they too had a strong urge to vanish with their colleagues. This idiom is used again in 19:4, where a man is detained against his will, and in Exodus 9:2 Pharaoh forcibly "held on to" (NIV, "continue to hold") his Hebrew slaves. The idiom occurs also in Job 2:9, where Job's wife asks, "Are you still holding on to your integrity?"

⁷ Judges 7. 9; compare Judges 4. 14, and contrast Judges 6. 16.

⁸ Bread 'turning' may well suggest interpretation of sword, v. 13. The key to the interpretation of the dream is that the word translated "tumbling" (*mith happek*) can be applied also to swords. It literally means "overturning," and the feminine form is used of the flaming sword, "which turned every direction" (NASB), wielded by the angel at the entrance to the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:24). The verb "overturned" in v.13 is from the same root (*hapak*) and describes the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:21, 25, 29). The "overturning" or "overthrow" of the tent represented the collapse of the nomadic forces.

⁹ Judges 7. 21.

¹⁰ Judges 6. 2.

¹¹ Judges 6. 11.

¹² Heb. 11. 32-34.

¹³ 2 Cor. 3. 5; 4. 6-7.