

If you mention the name Gideon to people, I guess **most** people would recognise it. But if you asked them who he was or what he'd done, you might get some surprising answers. **Some** might say, 'Oh, yes – he's the guy who wrote the Bible – I got given one of his Bibles when I was a kid at school.' **Others** might say, 'Oh, yes, Gideon – he was the one who invented putting Bibles in hotels, wasn't he?' Well either of those answers may well give you the opportunity to go on and tell them more about the Bible, and its **importance**. But what about **Gideon**? And if you asked a **Christian**, would he or **she** be any better at telling you who he was and what he did?

What about the real Gideon? He's a man who's mentioned in both parts of the Bible, in the Old and New Testaments, so he **must** be important in some way. His historical story is recorded in the Old Testament, in the book of Judges, but he's **also** included in the list of people of faith in the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, where it says these things: *'I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.'*

So why is **Gideon** included there? Well, that's tonight's task, and I'll **test** you on it, next time I preach! (No I won't!)

We find his story in Judges chapters 6 – 8, but I'm concentrating on the events of chapter **7**, with reference to chapters 6 and 8. So let's read chapter 7.

Gideon's story is the longest in the book, just beating Samson. You'll remember that God's people Israel are on this roller-coaster of a ride in their relationship with God. I've never seen the **attraction** of roller-coaster rides, they just make me sick, I'm afraid! But here they are: Israel **disobeys** God, goes her own way and follows **other** gods; their enemies attack and control them; after putting up with it sometimes for years, Israel decides, when they're right down low, to cry out to God for **help**; God responds by providing someone he can use to deliver them; they conquer their enemies, and live happily ever after – until the **next** time they disobey God and go after other gods and the cycle starts all over again.

And doesn't this ring true so often for so **many** of God's people today? We go our own way, neglecting God, we follow other gods – by that I mean anything that we put in the **place** of God in our lives – it could be our home, or our family, or our work, or our sport, TV or a whole host of **other** things. We follow **them** and exclude God. But we're brought down low, when we get into trouble, or we realise just how **meaningless** these things are. **Eventually** we cry out to God for help, and God in his mercy and grace lifts us out of the mess we're in.

And for a time we're truly **grateful** and experience great joy and peace, don't we? But our old nature doesn't go away. We still have the **temptations** of those other things around us, and down we go again. Roller-coaster. How do we avoid it? We must do what Paul encourages in Philippians, '*... whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is admirable ... think about **such** things.*' Philippians 4:8. We must keep our eyes firmly fixed on **God**. Get **off** the roller-coaster before it does you long-lasting damage.

Anyway, Gideon is the latest 'judge' (which here means a leader, a deliverer from enemies): and recently we've had a look at Ehud and Deborah and Barak, as previous deliverers. So what's **Gideon's** story? Throughout chapters 6 – 8, we see weakness, and tonight we're going to see weakness **God made**, weakness **God used**, the **assurance** God gave in weakness, and then finally at the weakness that God **didn't** make.

At the beginning of chapter 7, then, we find Gideon leading the army of Israel, 32,000 men, against their enemies to the **east** - the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples. And it was a huge army. Verse 12 tells us they were '*thick as locusts*' – I assume this refers to their **number** rather than their intelligence! A **ginormous** army! There may be a play on words here in the name of the spring – 'harod' means spring, but 'herod' means trembling, and the Israelite army may be **forgiven** for trembling as they face this huge army.

So it must have come as a terrific shock to Gideon when the Lord said to him, '*You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands.*' God says that Gideon has too **many** soldiers with him, and has to **reduce** the size of the army. We're looking at **weakness God made – how and why**, and this is what verses 1 – 8 tell us.

'You have too many men' God says. The army has to be **smaller**. Britain's army's facing defence cuts, but for **economic** reasons, but **God's** cuts are going to be even **more** drastic cuts. **How** does he do it?

Deuteronomy 20:8 says, *'Then the officers shall add, "Is any man afraid or faint-hearted? Let him go home so that his brothers will not become disheartened too."* There was provision for soldiers to be allowed to go home if they were **afraid**. The thinking behind **this** was that if they were afraid, this may have a bad effect on the **rest** of the soldiers, they may get disheartened, and the army may disintegrate. So the officers can send them home. But I wonder what Gideon's thoughts were when 22,000 of the 32,000 went **home!** We're not told, but Gideon **does** what God says.

But then the Lord tells Gideon that he's **still** got too many men in verse 4 and we read the strange way of choosing men to fight: he's to take the 10,000 remaining soldiers to have a **drink** and watch how they drink. Again Gideon obeys without **question**. He saw that some men lapped from their hands, others knelt **down** to drink.

Now, **some** commentators have made a lot of the way they drank, and said that those who lapped were more alert, able to look around, be ready to fight, and so they would be more **useful** to Gideon. But I don't think that there **is** anything special about the way they drank, it was just a way of whittling down the numbers. It was just a means of getting the right number of **men**.

We have to beware seeing meaning where there **is** none in Scripture. We had a lecturer at university who talked about poetry, but every time an apple was mentioned, he related it to the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, and every snake we came across was linked to the devil. He read more into it than was **there**. Very annoying. But we **mustn't** do this with the Bible.

God was making the army weak by cutting numbers **down**, and this was the means of **doing** it. This **wasn't** an example of how you should drink if you're a soldier, it **wasn't** an indication of who would be the best soldiers for Gideon, because this would defeat the **object** of the whole **exercise** of reducing the numbers. Which brings us onto **why** God was doing this, **why** God was making his army weak in the face of such a massive enemy. Why was God determined to bring **weakness** to the army of his people? Did he want them to **fail**?

No. The complete **opposite**, in fact. Look back to verse 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, announce ... etc.'* God's people at this time were **far** from being in an ideal place with God, and if there was any reason for them to say 'Look how great **we** are, we did this in **our** strength, aren't we **powerful**', they'd **take** it, they'd take all the glory for themselves. So to stop this happening, God made the army weak and helpless, and then they'd recognise that it was the **Lord** who'd done this, it was only through the power and mercy of **God** that they'd gain the victory.

And that's why I don't think there's any significance in the way these men drank, God wasn't looking for mighty **fighters**, he was looking possibly for the **weakest** of all of them, so that they'd know **God** made them strong. God makes the army **weak**, so he can make them **strong**. **He uses their weakness.**

Paul talks in 2 Corinthians 12 about a weakness **he** had, a thorn in his flesh, we're not told what it was. He asked the Lord to take it **away**, but God said to him '*My **grace** is sufficient for you, for my power is made **perfect** in weakness.*' 2 Corinthians 12:9. And then Paul goes on to say that he boasts gladly about his weaknesses, and he **delights** in weaknesses, so that he can experience God's power being shown **through** him.

Biblical scholar FF Bruce wrote this expanded paraphrase of this verse: 'My power is most fully displayed when my people are weak; not just **feeling** weak, but **are** weak – stripped of all human resources and are forced to lean on God alone.' And that's what God's doing here in Judges 7 – he's making his army weak and helpless, with no hope of victory **humanly** speaking, so that they're forced to rely on God alone.

Sometimes God has to put us in a position of **weakness**, so that we learn to lean on his power alone. How **often** we rob God of the glory he deserves, because we think it was our **own** strength that achieved great things. How **quickly** we boast about our achievements, don't we? How **quick** we are to glorify **ourselves**, to be proud of ourselves, and say (as in the words of the latest B & Q ad) '**I did that!**' God sometimes **makes** us weak, so that we recognise that his power is making us **strong**, and we give **him** the glory.

Paul says, '*When I am weak, then I am strong.*' When we are at our **weakest**, then God can be at his **strongest**. We lean on **him**, he gives the strength we need, his power works **through** us, and we can give him the glory and praise. 4

So God says in verse 7, *'With the 300 men who lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands.'* Let's move on. In verse 9 we read, *'During that night the Lord said to Gideon, "Get up, go down against the camp because I am going to give it into your hands. If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah ...'* 'If you are afraid,' God says to Gideon. **If** he's afraid? Of **course** he's afraid! He's got 300 men against an army of all the eastern **peoples**, as thick as **locusts**, and God's asking him to attack! Gideon **is** afraid!

You see, it wasn't only the **army** that was weak; we read about the weakness of Gideon **himself**, weakness that God **uses** in chapter 6, when the Lord tells him to save Israel from the Midianites. Look at verse 15 of chapter 6: *'But Lord' Gideon asked, 'how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.'* **Perfect!** Says God. 'When you are weak, I am strong.' Gideon says he's the weakest man on the **planet!** God can't possibly use **him**. Well, God's got **news** for him! God chooses **unlikely** servants, those who **realize** they're inadequate to do the task, **then** he can use them as his instruments.

Servants of God are not **always** extrovert, sure of themselves, dynamic and confident. And that gives me **heart**, because even if I don't have those qualities, maybe **because** I don't have those qualities, I'm still **useable** to God. Be encouraged.

How can Gideon deliver his people? Because – chapter 6:16, God says to him, *'I will be with you,'* And **this** is the key – God's **presence**. If we're weak and try to do things in our **own** strength, we'll **still** be weak. *'I will be with you,'* God tells Gideon.

It was the same for Moses given the task of leading his people out of Egypt: God says, *'I will be with you.'* Exodus 3:12.

It was the same when God told Joshua to lead his people into the Promised land: God says, *'I will be with you.'* Joshua 1:5.

It was the same when Jesus told his followers to go into the world to spread the gospel: he says, *'I will be with you.'* Matthew 28:20.

It was the same when Paul faced opposition in Corinth: the Lord says, *'I am with you.'* Acts 18:10.

All weak, all made **strong** because their God, **our** God was with them.

Feeling **weak**? That may be **great** for you, because God can **use** the weak, the helpless, the hopeless, the inadequate. He says, *'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'* Does he have a task for **you** to do? Of **course** he does. Does it matter that you're weak and **inadequate**? Not in the least – we do God's work in **his** adequacy – we're inadequate but we rely on **his** adequacy. How **encouraging** is that? God uses the weak.

God says in verse 10, *'If you're afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah and listen to what they are saying.'* God is so **gracious** and **understands** Gideon's weakness. He doesn't make **fun** of his fear – God **knows** how we are formed, Psalm 103 tells us – he understands how Gideon's feeling, and gives him this chance to go to the camp to listen to what the enemy is saying. **God reassures** Gideon **in** his **weakness** that what he's said is right. Gideon overhears soldiers discussing a **dream** which they interpret as telling that Gideon will **storm** through the camp with his army and **destroy** them.

God's understanding, gracious, compassionate, encouraging. He doesn't say 'I know you're weak, get **over** it, do what you're **told!**' He says to Gideon 'I understand your weakness, I **know** you're afraid; but I'm going to give you **strength** and I'm going to give you the **victory**, and to help you **see** this, you're going to hear it from the enemy's **mouth**.' Notice he doesn't let Gideon **off** the task because he feels weak; he assures him of his **presence** and **victory** and then sends him into battle.

God sends each of **us** into battle each day as we serve him; it's not **easy** to stand and serve the Lord, and we're **weak**. God **knows** that. God **understands**. He still sends us out like sheep among wolves, but we have Jesus' words to reassure us: he said, *'In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.'* John 16:33. Just as **Gideon** was convinced that God was his **strength** and that the Lord's victory was **assured**, so **we** should be convinced that God is **with** us – no matter how **helpless** we may be – and that the victory **will** be his.

In verse 15 Gideon returns to the Israelite camp, wakes them up and calls out, *'Get **up!** The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands.'* God's encouragement has strengthened him to such an **extent**, that he divides the army still **further** into 3 groups of 100. He's **empowered** in his weakness through God's **encouragement**. Remember Hebrews 11:34, *Gideon's 'weakness was turned to **strength**; and [he] became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.'*

Gideon obeys God and we read of the battle in verses 19 - 25. All the soldiers need to be able to **do** is blow a trumpet, smash pots and shout! My 4-year old neighbours can do that! They don't even need to be able to **fight** – they only fight when reinforcements arrive in verse 24. Another reason why I don't think the way they **drank** in any way showed they were the more useful to Gideon as fighters. God did it **all**. God turned the enemy on **itself**, so there was no **need** to fight. God wins the victory using a weak **leader** and a helpless **army**.

So we've seen that God **creates** weakness so that the glory goes rightfully to **him**; he takes and **uses** weak instruments – that is you and me – to fulfil his **purposes**; he **understands** our weakness and encourages us and assures us of his presence **with** us.

But very quickly, I want us to see that there is **weakness that God doesn't make**, take, use, or encourage. And that's weakness deliberately caused by **man, us**. Remember we're talking here about God's **people**. At the beginning of chapter 8, God's people are the **cause** of weakness that is **detrimental** to the purposes of God.

In chapter 7 verse 24, Gideon calls the Ephraimite tribe to **help**, but in 8:1 they ask why he didn't call them out at the **start** of the conflict, and they **criticised** him sharply. You see, **they** felt that they were the **superior** tribe in Israel – **Joshua** had been an Ephraimite – and so they thought they were the best **fighters**, so should be involved in **every** battle. Gideon should have consulted them **first**. They were a **proud** tribe and were concerned about their **status** among God's people.

Look secondly at what happens when in verse 4 when Gideon's army arrives at Succoth, and asks them for bread: [read verses 4 – 6]. They **refuse** to help, because they live right next to the enemy, and if Gideon's army **fails** to defeat them, the Midianites will come to Succoth for **revenge**. They're concerned for their **safety**, and so don't help their fellow God's people.

Concern for **status** (the Ephraimites) and concern for **safety** (Succoth) **both** put victory at risk. The togetherness of God's people was now destroyed. Chapter 8:28 says that *'During Gideon's lifetime, the land enjoyed peace.'* But we don't read this **again** in the book of Judges. They gradually get further and **further** from God, until at the **end** of Judges we read, *'everyone did as he saw fit.'*

Here's a warning for the church: we must make sure that the desire for status – to be somebody important – doesn't disturb the **unity** and **effectiveness** of the church. It does **happen**, sadly. Remember, even the disciples James and **John** wanted to be the ones who sat next to Jesus in heaven, didn't they? And the other ten disciples were **cross** with them. And don't let the desire for **security** take priority over doing God's will. Paul says to Timothy, *'Command those who are rich in this **present** world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in **God**, who richly provides us with **everything** for our enjoyment.'* 1 Timothy 6:17. We have to avoid this creeping in and causing weakness which is **displeasing** to God.

As we round this off then, I hope we're **encouraged** and **inspired** by what God did for and through Gideon, the weakest member of the weakest clan, and his army weak except in knowing how to shout and make a noise; all made strong and powerful by God to save his people from their enemies.

But as a postscript, before we **leave** this, we can't fail to mention the **greatest** example of God using the weak and making it powerful to save. We're talking, of course, about the cross. We see **Jesus** dying on the cross. The weakest point man can experience, **seemingly** defeated, **seemingly destroyed**, you can't get any weaker than **that**. But as he was raised from the dead by the power of God, he rose **triumphant, victorious, conquering** the power of sin, death and the devil. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:4, *'For to be sure, he was crucified in weakness, yet he **lives** by God's power.'*

And the greatest thing for **us** is that it was **us** he was **saving**, it was **us** he was delivering. He left behind his glory to take on human form and become poor for us. The almighty one suffered weakness on a cross for us. But he revealed his power as he rose from the dead, for us; so we that are weak can be strong in him, as we **believe** in him, **trust** him, **live** for him, **serve** him in obedience, just like Gideon.

'When I am weak, then I am strong.' **Gideon** knew it. **Paul** knew it. In and through Jesus Christ, Lord and Saviour, **we** can know it too. Be **encouraged**. Be **inspired**. Despite **weaknesses**, we can do **everything** for God's glory through **him** who gives us **strength**.