

Whose Strength?

Judges 7:1-18

Dr. Joel Baker

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Worship at 9 and 10:45 a.m.

In her latest book, the slightly irreverent but very insightful Annie Lamott, says this, "The problem with God – or at any rate, one of the top five most annoying things about God – is that [God] rarely answers right away. It can take days, weeks. Some people seem to understand this – that life and change take time. When Chou En Lai was once asked what he thought of the French Revolution he took a long drag on his cigarette, and then replied, 'Too soon to tell.'

I, on the other hand, am an instant-message type." 1

Don't you wish sometimes that God would talk to us as directly, clearly, and quickly as we read about in the pages of the Old Testament? When we first meet Gideon, back in chapter 6, verse 13, of Judges, an angel of the LORD speaks to him and says, "The LORD is with you mighty warrior." And you have to love his response, "Oh yeah, if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."

I hear echoes of Tevye in Fiddler on the Roof, "God, I know we're the chosen people, but couldn't you choose someone else once in a while?"

Well, the LORD spoke to Gideon, telling him that he was to go and defeat the Midianites. Gideon complained that his was the smallest clan, he couldn't do it, and when the LORD's assurance that He would be with Gideon wasn't enough, Gideon asked for signs and he got them. "Gideon's fleece" is still a phrase some Christians use today to describe the discerning of God's will.

Now, what is so interesting about Bible stories is how they can impress us with different truths over time.

When I was a youngster, I think that I liked the story of Gideon's defeat of the Midianites because I played the trumpet. (A kid that I went to band camp with is now the first chair, New York Philharmonic . . . he practiced . . . I didn't.) But I thought it was so cool that they threw the enemy's camp into chaos in the middle of the night by blowing trumpets and smashing clay pots, creating such bedlam that the Midianites started killing each other in the dark.

As a young adult, I remember liking this story because God pared down the army of several thousand, especially the end result of having just three hundred. Wow! There is no apparent reason for the test of either lapping the water or drinking from a cupped hand being significant, unless those who suggest that the ones with cupped hands would have been more ready to fight a surprise attack are right. We don't really know. The point is that God did it with JUST the 300, using a brilliant strategy, and I wanted, as a young adult, I still want, to be part of those whom God uses. Sign me up; I want to fight in "Gideon's army".

But what really intrigues me at this point in my life is the earlier part of the story, where God begins the troop reduction. Can you imagine? "We interrupt this program to bring you the following special announcement: Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced today that anyone in the Armed Services in Iraq who were afraid could just go home. Over two-thirds have decided to leave." We are told that the Israelite army was reduced from 32,000 to 10,000 that day. 22,000 decided that they would sit this one out. God did not want Israel to boast later that the battle had been won by their superior strength.

Whose strength did God want Israel to see and boast about?

God's strength.

It is generally agreed that the lesson of Judges is, above all, that those who are dedicated to God can be used by God. Aspects of their lives may not be in keeping with the Lord's will. Their methods may not stand up as being the best model of behavior. But change is possible. Again and again God's servants fall short in their private and public thoughts and acts. You can find something to criticize in almost everyone mentioned in Judges – or for that matter, the whole Old Testament.

But, because of their dedication – God could always use them. 2

Now, I've been wondering . How many dedicated warriors does God have available to fight in . . . Gareth's army? Are you AWOL . . . because you are afraid?

I pastored churches for over 30 years. I've seen my share of Christians afraid to engage, and from what I have observed, there are a few basic reasons.

One reason is this: they don't feel that they are good enough, worthy enough, equipped well enough, and no one has ever been there to help them with that.

My daughter Alex is about to return to college for her sophomore year. Last year, one of her friends was having a very difficult time. She had extremely low self-esteem and carried a lot of guilt for some activities she had done while in high school. One night, she was terribly depressed and Alex wrote me this e-mail, "So I busted out the trusty verses about how God knit her, etc. and has a plan for

her life (a la Jeremiah), etc. But her questions were, 'How do you know the plan? What do you do to make it come about? Why did God let her go through that awful relationship?' "The room was dark, so I got out my flashlight and my books (almost all Christmas presents from Mom from middle school years). One of the books was Prayers That Avail Much for Teens .and I read aloud the prayers about priorities (one of her biggest concerns) about knowing God's will, about her future spouse, and finally that she would have peaceful sleep. Then I scratched her head like mom does mine because it puts her to sleep pretty instantly and I didn't want her lying in bed crying by herself...with her roommate gone.

"I know that this is a HUGE problem, and I certainly am not about to try to fix it for her, but even though I've been in a pretty dry place myself...my immediate reaction to all of her worries was the Right Stuff. Even if the tools were a bit rusty, they were still in my toolbox...I know she has a toolbox, but the tools seemed to have gone out with the Old Testament 'nursery rhyme' stories (as they are so commonly reduced to now days) and if she wants to even come close to getting on her feet she's going to need help.

"After we were done praying she thanked me and said that no one had ever done that for her ... prayed for her I guess (no friends anyway). I know she's prayed about all of that, but you know as well as I do it's not the same when you're alone crying in your bed.

"Phew! Well, I need to go finish my explication of Edna St. Vincent Millet sonnets . . . ironically appropriate. Geesh, how many lovelorn women do I have to deal with in one night?

"I'm not having daughters."

In my opinion, far too many of us Christians are neutralized, kept from really being used by God, because we've never gotten over some very basic fears. We hear voices that tell us we are not spiritual enough, not good enough, not capable enough. We are confused . . . and just plain scared. No one has gently come alongside with a flashlight and a book of prayers in the darkness of our souls . . . and scratched our heads, and prayed for us, and loved us into wholeness.

Whose strength do we need?

God's strength.

A second reason I believe many Christians are afraid to engage, based on my observations over the years, is this: they don't realize that it is precisely when we allow ourselves to trust God in the midst of our greatest fears that God shows up.

John Claypool once wrote, "The loveliest truth I know" (I just love that phrase), "the loveliest truth I know is that God lives at the end of our ropes. The medieval mystics were fond of saying that our situations of extremities are often God's opportunities.

Most of the people who have been through a twelve-step program report that when they get to the place where they have to admit that life is unmanageable and every decision brings nothing but greater grief, there appears a grace to help in such times of trouble. It does not come because people deserved it or acted in ways that cause it to happen . . . when we come to the end of our ropes, we discover that we are not at the end of gracious opportunities."³

The ministry I am involved with now is headed by Jim Riley. Jim was an original member of the Miami Dolphins' No Name Defense. He played on the 1972 team that had the perfect, undefeated season. But all through his playing days, and until the age of 40, he was an alcoholic and drug addict. His family did an intervention with him, and he credits God for his sobriety, which has lasted for 20 years now. He was definitely at the end of his rope, when God showed up.

I serve on the board of Ethiopian Christian Missions. We exist to support the work of my dear brother Benyamen Yusuf, the son of a Muslim priest who, at the age of 14, came to know Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior.

At the age of 21, Beny took a job working for a church in Addis Ababa as an evangelist. Six months later, he began an odyssey that took him to America where he studied at two different schools, one in Minneapolis and the other in Florida. Eventually a mission agency called "Every Home Crusades" hired Beny to return to Ethiopia and do evangelism amongst his people.

Just three months after returning to his homeland, he was arrested and put in prison. The communist authorities had tapped his phone. He made regular calls about his work to the sponsoring mission board in America, and the charges leveled against him were that he was a spy for the CIA. For a period of seven weeks, Beny underwent physical torture. He was beaten regularly and hung upside down for hours. Over and over again, he was told that all he had to do was to sign a paper saying that he renounced his faith in Jesus Christ, and he would be set free.

Beny refused.

One of the jailers was particularly cruel to Beny. Each night, as he checked his cell, he would extinguish his cigar on Beny's bare chest. Numerous scars remain to this day as a result. But this jailer was to play a role in Beny's escape.

Beny had been praying about getting out of jail, and as he was doing so, one day he noticed some rats that were eating bread crumbs in the corner of his cell. The thought occurred to him, "If God provides for even these rats, surely he can provide for me and help me to escape." He asked God to give him the words to say. That night, that very night, the mean jailer once again burned Beny's skin with his cigar. As he turned to leave the cell, Beny heard himself saying, "Have a good night."

The jailer turned around and said "What did you just say?" "Have a good night ", Beny repeated.

"How can you say that to me after what I have done to you?" the jailer asked. It was then that Beny was able to talk about his faith in

Christ, telling the jailer about God's faithfulness in his life time after time.

The jailer helped Beny escape from prison. Whose strength?

God's strength.

In the last 14 years Dr. Benyamen Yusuf, D. Missiology from the Fuller School of World Mission, has been responsible for planting 96 churches, with a total membership of over 13,000, for providing a facility that cares for 85 elderly, formerly homeless women, and for helping to provide for the needs of almost 3,000 children.

We don't have to be physically tortured, and our prison does not need to be in Ethiopia. We just need to remember . . .that God lives at the end of our ropes.

Finally, I believe with all of my heart, that it is when we do not run from God because of our fears, but face them, instead of being annihilated or thrown out, you and I are welcomed, embraced, and received. About a hundred years ago, my maternal grandmother was a 16 year old living on a farm in what was then Austro-Serbia. My grandmother's father was an alcoholic who used to regularly beat her, her mother, and her grandmother. She was told one day to take one of the family's cows to town, sell it, and bring the money home. She sold the cow, but then, afraid for her life, she took that little bit of money and ran away.

When she got to the coast, she boarded a ship for America. She arrived, according to Mapquest, 226 miles from here, at Ellis Island. All of the passengers waited in lines to be processed. When she got to the front of her line, upon learning that she had no documents, no money, no sponsors, and was a single woman, the immigration official placed an X with white chalk on her shoulder. She was told to go and stand with a group that was going to be deported immediately.

My grandmother's name was Barbara Slobovic. Across from her, in another line, was a man named Theodore Daizy. He saw what had happened. When the official wasn't looking, he reached out and brought Barbara into his line. . . and he brushed away that white X off my grandmother's shoulder. When they got to the head of the line, Theodore Daizy simply said, "She's with me."

And they went and got married. My friends, you and I were born into this world with an X . . . without status, without a real home, and without hope. But there is one who comes to us, who in Jesus Christ reaches out and wipes away that X of guilt and fear and says to us, "You're with me. . . and I'm with you. Come, follow me."

And when God calls us, God calls us to action.

Everyone of us.

Every ONE of us.

Perhaps there is someone here today who needs to send Gareth an e-mail, saying, "Dear Gideon, I've been gone, but now I'm back. With God's strength, sign me up."

One final word . . . for you warriors who have been fighting the good fight for many years, be reminded by this story, you don't deserve any credit, so be careful not to take any. The battles are the LORD's . . . it is the LORD, and ONLY the LORD, who deserves the praise for victories won.

Let us pray: Forgive us God, when we are prone to desertion, when we don't show up when we should, when we leave the armor of God in storage, content to let others fight for us. For you do not give us the option of hiding behind our fears, or of letting them keep us disengaged.

Encourage us all, LORD.

Meet us at the end of our ropes, in the midst of those things that bring us the most fear.

Overwhelm us with your power. And by your strength, so continue to gently transform and redeem us that all the world may know, without question, that YOU are in this place. Amen.

Sources: 1. Plan B – Further Thoughts on Faith, p.9. 2. Old Testament Survey, Hubbard, LaSor, and Bush, pp. 224-225. 3. God the Ingenious Alchemist, pp. 17-18.