

Judges 7 Notes

FIT, THOUGH FEW' By Alexander Maclaren Judges 7:1-6

GIDEON is the noblest of the judges. Courage, constancy, and caution are strongly marked in his character. The youngest son of an obscure family in a small tribe, he humbly shrinks from the task imposed on him, — not from cowardice or indolence, but from conscious weakness. Men who are

worthy to do such work as his are never forward to begin it, nor backward in it when they are sure that it is God's will. He began his war against Midian by warring against Baal, whose worship had brought the oppressor. If any thorough deliverance from the misery which departure from God has wrought is to be effected, we must destroy the idols before we attack the spoilers. Cast out sin, and you cast out sorrow. So he first earns his new name of Jerubbaal ('Let Baal plead'), and is known as Baal's antagonist, before he blows the trumpet of revolt. The name is an omen of victory. The hand that had smitten the idol, and had not been withered, would smite Midian. Therefore that new name is used in this chapter, which tells of the preparations for the fight and its triumphant issue. From his home among the hills, he had sent the fiery cross to the three northern tribes, who had been the mainstay of Deborah's victory, and who now rallied around Gideon to the number of thirty-two thousand. The narrative shows us the two armies confronting each other on the opposite slopes of the valley of Jezreel, where it begins to dip steeply towards the Jordan. Gideon and his men are on the south side of the valley, above the fountain of Harod, or 'Trembling,' apparently so called from the confessed terror which thinned his army. The word 'is afraid,' in verse 3, comes from the same root. On the other side of the glen, not far from the site of the Philistine camp on the day of Saul's last defeat, lay the far-stretching camp of the invaders, outnumbering Israel by four to one. For seven years these Midianite marauders had paralysed Israel, and year by year had swarmed up this valley from the eastern desert, and thence by the great plain had penetrated into every corner of the land, as far south as Gaza, devouring like locusts. It is the same easy route by which, to this day, the Bedouin find their way into Palestine, whenever the weak Turkish Government is a little weaker or more corrupt than usual. Apparently, the Midianites were on their homeward march, laden with spoil, and very contemptuous of the small force across the valley, who, on their part, had not shaken off their terror of the fierce nomads who had used them as they pleased for seven years.

I. Note, as the first lesson taught here, the divinely appointed disproportion between means and end, and its purpose.

Many an Israelite would look across to the long lines of black tents, and think, 'We are too few for our task'; but to God's eye they were too many, and the first necessity was to weed them out. The numbers must be so reduced that the victory shall be unmistakably God's, not theirs. The same sort of procedure, and for the same reason, runs through all God's dealings. It is illustrated in a hundred Scripture instances, and is stated most plainly by Paul in his triumphant eloquence. He revels in telling how foolish, weak, base things, that are no things in the world's estimate, have been chosen to cover with shame wise, strong, honoured things, which seem to be somewhat; and he gives the same reason as our lesson does, 'that no flesh should glory in His presence.' Eleven poor men on one side, and all the world on the other, made fearful odds. The more unevenly matched are the respective forces, the more plainly does the victory of the weaker demand for its explanation the intervention of God. The old sneer, that 'Providence is always on the side of the strongest battalions,' is an audacious misreading of history, and is the very opposite of the truth. It is the weak battalions which win in the long run, for the history of every good cause is the same. First, it kindles a fire in the hearts of two or three nobodies, who are burned in earlier times, and laughed at as fools, fanatics, impracticable dreamers, in later ages, but whose convictions grow till, one day, the world wakes up to find that everybody believes them, and then it 'builds the tombs of the prophets.'

Why should God desire that there shall be no mistake as to who wins the battle? The answer may very easily be so given as to make what is really a token of His love become an unlovely and repellent trait in His character. It is not eagerness for praise that moves Him, but longing that men may have the blessedness of recognising His hand fighting for them. It is for Israel's sake that He is so solicitous to deliver them from the delusion of their having won the victory. It is because He loves us, and would fain have us made restful, confident, and strong, in the assurance of His fighting for us, that He takes pains so to order the history of His Church in the world, that it is one long attestation of the omnipotence of weakness when His power flows through it. To say 'Mine own hand hath saved me,' is to lose unspeakable peace and blessing; to say 'Not I, but the grace of God in me,' is to be serene and of good cheer in the face of outnumbering foes, and sure of victory in all conflicts. Therefore God is careful to save us from self-gratulation and self-confidence.

One lesson we may learn from this thinning of the ranks; namely, that we need not be anxious to count heads, when we are sure that we are doing His work, nor even be afraid of being in a minority. Minorities are generally right when they are the apostles of new thoughts, though the minorities which cleave to some old fossil are ordinarily wrong. The prophet and his man were alone and

ringed around with enemies, when he said, 'They that be with us are more than they that be with them'; and yet he was right, for the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire. Let us be sure that we are on God's side, and then let us not mind how few are in the ranks with us, nor be afraid, though the far-extended front of the enemy threatens to curl around our flanks and enclose us. The three hundred heroes had God with them, and that was enough.

II. Note the self-applied test of courage which swept away so much chaff.

According to Deuteronomy 20:8, the standing enactment was that such a proclamation as that in verse 3 should precede every battle. Much difficulty has been raised about the mention of Mount Gilead here, as the only Mount Gilead otherwise mentioned in Scripture lay to the east of Jordan. But perhaps the simplest solution is the true one, that there was another hilly region so named on the western side. The map of the Palestine Exploration Fund attaches the name to the northern slopes of the western end of Gilboa, where Gideon was now encamped, and that is probably right. Be that as it may, the effect of the proclamation was startling. Two-thirds of the army melted away. No doubt, many who had flocked to Gideon's standard felt their valour oozing out at their finger ends, when they came close to the enemy, and saw their long array across the valley. It must have required some courage to confess being afraid, but the cowards were numerous enough to keep each other in countenance. Two out of three were panic-struck. I wonder if the proportion would be less in Christ's army to-day, if professing Christians were as frank as Gideon's men?

Why were the 'fearful' dismissed? Because fear is contagious; and, in undisciplined armies like Gideon's, panic, once started, spreads swiftly, and becomes frenzied confusion. The same thing is true in the work of the Church to-day. Who that has had much to do with guiding its operations has not groaned over the dead weight of the timid and sluggish souls, who always see difficulties and never the way to get over them? And who that has had to lead a company of Christian men has not often been ready to wish that he could sound out Gideon's proclamation, and bid the 'fearful and afraid' take away the chilling encumbrance of their presence, and leave him with thinned ranks of trusty men? Cowardice, dressed up as cautious prudence, weakens the efficiency of every regiment in Christ's army.

Another reason for getting rid of the fearful is that fear is the opposite of faith, and that therefore, where it is uppermost, the door by which God's power can enter to strengthen is closed. Not that faith must be free of all admixture of fear, but that it must subdue fear, if a man is to be God's

warrior, fighting in His strength. Many a tremor would rock the hearts of the ten thousand who remained, but they so controlled their terror that it did not overcome their faith. We do not need, for our efficiency in Christ's service, complete exemption from fear, but we do need to make the psalmist's resolve ours: 'I will trust, and not be afraid.' Terror shuts the door against the entrance of the grace which makes us conquerors, and so fulfils its own forebodings; faith opens the door, and so fulfils its own confidences.

III. Note the final test.

God required but few men, but He required that these should be fit. The first test had sifted out the brave and willing. The liquor was none the less, though so much froth had been blown off. As Thomas Fuller says, there were 'fewer persons, but not fewer men,' after the poltroons had disappeared. The second test, 'a purgatory of water,' as the same wise and witty author calls it, was still more stringent. The dwindled ranks were led down from their camp on the slopes to the fountain and brook which lay in the valley near the Midianites' camp. Gideon alone seems to have known that a test was to be applied there; but he did not know what it was to be till they reached the spring, and the soldiers did not know that they were determining their fate when they drank. The two ways of drinking clearly indicated a difference in the men. Those who glued their lips to the stream and swilled till they were full, were plainly more self-indulgent, less engrossed with their work, less patient of fatigue and thirst, than those who caught up enough in their curved palms to moisten their lips without stopping in their stride or breaking rank. The former test was self-applied, and consciously so. This is no less self-applied, though unconsciously. God shuts out no man from His army, but men shut themselves out; sometimes knowingly, by avowed disinclination for the warfare, sometimes unknowingly, by self-indulgent habits, which proclaim their unfitness.

The great lesson taught here is that self-restraint in the use of the world's goods is essential to all true Christian warfare. There are two ways of looking at and partaking of these. We may either 'drink for strength' or 'for drunkenness.' Life is to some men first a place for strenuous endeavour, and only secondly a place of refreshment. Such think of duty first and of water afterwards. To them, all the innocent joys and pleasures of the natural life are as brooks by the way, of which Christ's soldier should drink, mainly that he may be re-invigorated for conflict. There are others whose conception of life is a scene of enjoyment, for which work is unfortunately a necessary but disagreeable preliminary. One does not often see such a character in its pure perfection of sensualism; but plenty of approximations to it are visible, and ugly sights they are. The roots of it are in us all; and it cannot be too strongly insisted on that, unless it be subdued, we cannot enlist in Christ's army, and shall never be counted worthy to be His instruments. Such self-restraint is especially needful to be earnestly inculcated on young men and women, to whom life is opening as if it were a garden of delight, whose passions are strong, whose sense is

keen, whose experience is slender, and to whom all earth's joys appeal more strongly than they do to those who have drunk of the cup, and know how bitter is its sediment. It is especially needful to be pealed into the ears of a generation like ours, in which senseless luxury, the result of wealth which has increased faster than the power of rightly using it, has attained such enormous proportions, and is threatening, in commercial communities especially, to drown all noble aspirations, and Spartan simplicity, and Christian self-devotion, in its muddy flood. Surely never was Gideon's test more wanted for the army of the Lord of hosts than it is to-day.

Such self-restraint gives double sweetness to enjoyments, which, when partaken of more freely, pall on the jaded palate. 'The full soul loatheth a honeycomb; but to the hungry soul every bitter thing is sweet.' The senses are kept fine-edged, and the rare holidays are sweeter because they are rare. The most refined prudence of the mere sensualist would prescribe the same regimen as the Christian moralist does. But from how different a motive! Christ calls for self-restraint that we may be fit organs for His power, and bids us endure hardness that we may be good soldiers of His. If we know anything of the true sweetness of His fellowship and service, it will not be hard to drink sparingly of earthly fountains, when we have the river of His pleasures to drink from; nor will it be painful sacrifice to cast away imitation jewels, in order to clasp in our hands the true riches of His love and imparted life

A BATTLE WITHOUT A SWORD

By Alexander Maclaren

Judges 7:13-23

To reduce thirty-two thousand to three hundred was a strange way of preparing for a fight; and, no doubt, the handful left felt some sinking of their courage when they looked on their own small number and then on the widespread Midianite host. Gideon, too, would need heartening. So the first thing to be noted is the encouragement given him. God strengthens faith when it needs strengthening, and He has many ways of doing so. Note that Gideon's visit to the Midianite camp was on 'the same night' on which his little band was left alone after the ordeal by water. How punctually to meet our need, when it begins to be felt, does God's help come! It was by God's command that he undertook the daring adventure of stealing down to the camp. We can fancy how silently he and Phurah crept down the hillside, and, with hushed breath and wary steps, lest they should stumble on and wake some sleeper, or even rouse some tethered camel, picked their way among the tents. But they had God's command and promise, and these make men brave, and turn what would else be foolhardy into prudence. He put his ear to the black camel's-hair wall of one tent, and heard what his faith could not but recognise as God's message to him.

The soldier's dream was just such as such a man would dream in such circumstances. A round loaf of barley (the commonest kind of bread) was dreamed of as rolling down from a height and upsetting 'the tent.' The use of the definite article seems to point to some particular tent, perhaps simply the one in which the dreamer lay, or perhaps the general's; but the noun may be used as a collective, and what is meant may be that the loaf went through the camp, overturning all the tents in its way. The interpretation needed no Daniel, but the immediate explanation given, shows not only the transparency of the symbol, but the dread in the Midianite ranks of Gideon's prowess. A nameless awe, which goes far to produce the defeat it dreads, was beginning to creep over them. It finds utterance both in the dream and in its translation. The tiny loaf worked effects disproportioned to its size. A rock thundering down the hillside might have mass and momentum enough to level a line of tents, but one poor loaf to do it! Some mightier than human hand must have set it going on its career. So the soldier interprets that God had delivered the army into Gideon's hand.

This dream suggests two or three considerations. In several instances we find God speaking to those outside Israel by dreams; for example, to Pharaoh and his two officers, Nebuchadnezzar, Pilate's wife. It is the lowest form of divine communication, and, like other lower forms, is not to be looked for when the higher teaching of the Spirit of Christ is open to us all.

Again, while both dream and interpretation might be accounted for on simply natural grounds, a deeper insight into the so-called 'natural' brings us to see it as all penetrated by the operations of the ever-present God. And the coincidences which brought Gideon to just that tent among the thousands along the valley at just the moment when the two startled sleepers were talking, might well strike Gideon, as they did, as being God's own fulfilment of the promise that 'what they say' would strengthen his hands for the attack (v. 11).

Further, Gideon had already had the sign of the fleece and the dew; but God does not disdain to let him have an additional encouragement, and to let him draw confirmation of his own token from the talk of two Midianites. Faith may be buttressed by men's words, albeit its only foundation is God's.

Gideon has a place in the muster-roll of heroes of faith in Hebrews 11., and his whole conduct in this incident proves his right to stand there. 'He worshipped,' for his soul went out in trust to God, whose voice he heard through the two Midianites, and bowed in thankfulness and submissive obedience. There could be no outward worship there, with an army of sleepers close by, but the silent

uplifting of confidence and desire reaches God and strengthens the man. So he went back with new assurance of victory, and roused his sleeping band.

Mark his words as another token of his faith. The Midianite interpreter had said, 'God has delivered'; Gideon says, 'The Lord has delivered.' The former name is the more general, and is natural on the lips of a heathen; the latter is the covenant name, and to use it implies reliance on the Jehovah revealed by His acts to Israel. The Midianite had said that the host was delivered into Gideon's hand; he says that it is delivered into the hands of the three hundred, suppressing himself and honouring them. God's soldiers must be willing to 'esteem others better than themselves,' and to fight for God's glory, not their own. The Midianite had said, 'This is... the sword of Gideon'; he bid his men cry 'the sword of the Lord, and of Gideon.' It was God's cause for which they were contending, not his; and yet it was his, inasmuch as he was God's instrument. 'Excellent mixture,' says Thomas Fuller, 'both joined together; admirable method, God put in the first place. Where divine blessing leads up the van, and man's valour brings up the battle, must not victory needs follow in the rear?'

Gideon does not seem to have been divinely directed to the stratagem by which the Midianites were thrown into panic. He had been promised victory, but that does not lead him to idle waiting for fulfilment of the promise. 'To wait for God's performance in doing nothing is to abuse that divine providence, which will so work that it will not allow us to idle' (Bishop Hall).

True faith will wisely adopt means to reach promised ends, and, having used brain and hand as if all depended on ourselves, will look to Him, as if nothing depended on us, but all on Him.

There was strong faith as well as daring and skilful generalship in leading down the three hundred, with no weapons but trumpets and pitchers, to close quarters with an armed enemy so superior in numbers. And did it not need some faith, too, not only in Gideon but in God, on the part of his band, to plunge down the hill on such an errand, each man with both his hands full, and so unable to strike a blow? The other three hundred at Thermopylae have been wept over and sung; were not these three hundred as true heroes? Let us not count heads when we are called on to take God's side. His soldiers are always in the minority, but, if He is reckoned in, the minority becomes the majority. 'They that be with us are more than they that be with them.'

One can fancy the sleepers starting up dazed by the sudden bray of the trumpets and the wild shout of that war-cry yelled from every side. As they stumbled out of their tents, without leaders, without knowledge of the numbers of their foe, and saw all around the flaring torches, and heard the trumpet-blasts, which seemed to speak of an immense attacking force, no wonder that panic shook them, and they fled. Huge mobs of undisciplined men, as Eastern armies are, and these eminently were, are especially liable to such infectious alarms; and the larger the force, the faster does panic spread, the more unmanageable does the army become, and the more fatal are the results. Each man reflects, and so increases, his neighbour's fear. Great armies, once struck with amazement, are like wounded whales. 'Give them but line enough, and the fishes will be the fishermen to catch themselves.'

So the host broke up in wild disorder, and hurried in fragments towards the Jordan fords, trampling each other down as they raced through the darkness, and each man, as he ran, dreading to feel the enemy's sword in his back next moment. 'The wicked flee when no man pursueth: but the righteous is bold as a lion.' Thus without stroke of weapon was the victory won. The battle was the Lord's.

And the story is not antiquated in substance, however the form of the contests which God's soldiers have to-day to fight has changed. Still it is true that we shall only wage war aright when we feel that it is His cause for which we contend, and His sword which wins the victory. If Gideon had put himself first in his warcry, or had put his own name only in it, the issue would have been different.

May we not also venture to apply the peculiar accoutrements of the victorious three hundred to ourselves? Christ's men have no weapons to wield but the sounding out from them, as from a trumpet, of the word of the Lord, and the light of a Christian life shining through earthen vessels. If we boldly lift up our voices in the ancient war-cry, and let that word peal forth from us, and flash the light of holy lives on a dark world, we may break the sleeper's slumbers to a glad waking, and win the noblest of victories by leading them to enlist in the army of our Captain, and to become partakers of His conquests by letting Him conquer, and thereby save them.