

Protection, Encouragement, Victory

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[0 : 00] Verse 19.

When they had just set the watch, and they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars.

They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, A sword for the Lord and for Gideon. Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran.

They cried out and fled. When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army. And the army fled as far as Beth Shittah toward Zerarah, as far as the border of Abel-Mehalah by Tabith.

And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian. Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, Come down against the Midianites and capture the waters against them as far as Beth-bera and also the Jordan.

[1 : 31] So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they captured the waters as far as Beth-bera and also the Jordan. And they captured the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeb they killed at the winepress of Zeb.

Then they pursued Midian, and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeb to Gideon across the Jordan. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's Word.

Our Father in Heaven, we praise and thank you that you didn't let Gideon sit alone by himself in his fear, and you don't do the same for us.

You come to us with your Word, and you speak clearly to us. You remind us of your power and your mercy so that we can follow you in faith.

We ask that you would do the very same thing this morning, that you would use your Word in a powerful way, that you would pour out your Spirit in a special way here this morning in this room on these people, on us, that we would see and believe and follow you.

[2 : 40] We ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Last week, we saw Gideon's fear as the battle that is inevitable draws closer and closer, and we also see God providing his assurance to Gideon in the midst of that fear.

You'll remember that Gideon asks for two different miracles. He says, God, I want you to have this fleece. I want the fleece to be full of water and the ground to be dry. And then I want the ground to be full of water and the fleece to be dry.

And God does that. God meets a Gideon in the midst of his fear. Remember, we said God delights to meet his people who are faltering and fearful and grow their faith. Now, however, the time for battle has finally come.

There are no more delays for Gideon. And God here does the unexpected. He has assured Gideon on the one hand. Now he raises the need for Gideon's faith on the other.

He does something shocking that will require more trust, perhaps, than Gideon imagined. He takes Gideon's troops, and he reduces them from 32,000 down to 300.

[3 : 56] If you're doing the math, you know that is an exponential reduction. What Gideon was up against was difficult in any situation.

It is now laughable in this situation. I hope you didn't miss what we were told in verse 12.

Remember, his enemies, they are like locusts in abundance.

And what are their camels like? Like the sand that is on the seashore. And so we're meant to see how ridiculous this matchup is. You have these overwhelming numbers, and 32,000 men probably was a stretch to begin with.

God takes them down and reduces them to 300. He does this in two ways. First, in verse 3, we see that they are to send away the fearful and the trembling.

This is actually something that appears in Deuteronomy chapter 20 as a general practice for Israel during their wartime. God gives them their laws for war, and he says a few things.

[4 : 57] He says, look, if a man's been married less than one year, don't send him out into combat. And also, if you have people who are fearful and trembling, don't send them out either. Allow them to go back home.

And in Deuteronomy, he gives them the logic, which is this. Fear is contagious. So the last thing you want is men who are running away from the battle, causing those who are brave to lose their heart and their strength.

And so that makes sense at some level, and it's consistent with what we've seen earlier in the Bible, in the book of Deuteronomy. What we see next, though, is very, very strange.

We have this division in verses 4 through 8 based on drinking style. Now, there are those who laugh like a dog, and then there are those who kneel.

And we find out, verses 6 through 7, it is only those who laugh like a dog who pass a selection for Gideon. It's only those who laugh like a dog who are actually chosen.

[5 : 55] Now, there's a lot of discussion around, you know, why is it that the ones who laugh like a dog got chosen? Some people will tell you, well, that's because something about the way they lapped revealed that these were the most elite of all the soldiers that Gideon had.

And those who kneeled, well, they clearly were not as competent in combat. And so really what Gideon is doing here is he's choosing those who are the best and the strongest.

Problem is this, twofold. First, passage doesn't say that. It doesn't tell us what the difference between lapping and kneeling is. And the second one is even stronger.

This actually cuts against the point of the passage. The point of the passage is not God chose the most elite troops possible.

He chose the best of the best, the cream of the crop. No, the point of the passage is God puts himself, his people in this situation that is ridiculous. He puts them in this situation where clearly, unless he intervenes in a powerful way, they have no chance.

[7 : 06] Okay, so the point is not God chose the best 300. The point is God will accomplish the impossible. God will do with 300 what only God can do.

The purpose is for God to emphasize his power, to emphasize the need that Israel has to rely on him, not to somehow applaud these 300 for their water-lapping ability.

In fact, we know that. We're told clearly in verse 2 what the purpose of all of this is. The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, my own hand has saved me.

So the point is this. Success is very dangerous. Success is very dangerous.

And the reason that success is very dangerous is because when we experience it, we are going to be tempted to praise ourselves rather than to praise God.

[8 : 22] In fact, some people will say success is actually a better test of someone's character than failure. When someone has finally access to power and influence and wealth and esteem, that's when we find out who they really are.

That's when they're able to do what they want to do. It's success, not failure, that is difficult to handle.

And it's difficult to handle for that simple reason. It tempts us to think that we are great rather than recognizing that God is great. It's the church that pats itself on the back for success and growth. It's the man who congratulates himself when his children succeed and make wise choices. He says, look at me. I'm such a great father. It's the woman who congratulates herself for her academic achievement rather than recognizing God is the one who opens doors, who gives gifts and abilities. And so God reduces this army to a laughable number for a simple reason. God wants to protect his people against the danger of success.

[9 : 49] God wants to make sure that when victory comes, it is crystal clear that all honor and praise belong to him.

God leaves no opportunity for Israel or Gideon to pat themselves on the back. No, he says, look, I'm going to give you victory, but I am going to give you victory.

Of course, we face that same temptation today. We face the temptation to look at the blessings that we've received in life and to say, look, wow, look at me.

Look how great I am rather than recognizing how great and gracious God is. How do we protect against that danger?

Well, there's a few ways. One of them we're doing this morning, which is we praise God for his provision in our lives. Worship reorients us to reality.

[10:54] It reminds us of what's true. We are singing praises to God, recognizing he is the one who's been at work doing great things. The other antidote to the temptations of success we've also already done this morning, which is that we pray to God.

Pastor Tim Keller says that prayer is what God uses to protect us against the dangers of success. This quote's on the back of your worship guide. He goes so far as to say God actually withholds certain things from us unless or until we pray for them, because if we receive them without prayer, they become spiritually dangerous to us.

Success without prayer tempts us to think, yes, I planned correctly. I am intelligent enough. I made it happen. Success with prayer allows us to say, wow, God answered.

Wow, God showed up and did the miraculous. Wow, God honored his promise. And so the question for us is this.

This is on page nine of your worship guide. Can you handle success, or will it be the worst thing that ever happened to you?

[12:19] When success comes, will you praise God or praise yourself? God is not simply looking to protect his people from pride, though.

He's also looking to protect them from despair. We see this protection from pride in verses two through eight, and then verse nine, the tables are suddenly flipped.

It's not pride that they need protection from. It is being overwhelmed by what they're up against.

Verse nine, God tells Gideon, arise, go down against the camp.

It's time, Gideon. The battle has come, right? We've been waiting for this since the call of Gideon.

You'll remember when Gideon was called, it's the last chapter, verse 16. God says, you shall strike the Midianites as one man.

Now it's game time. And God knows what we've already learned about Gideon. Gideon is a man full of fear.

[13:23] So he tells him to go, verse nine, very next breath, verse 10. But if you are afraid to go down, and we know Gideon's afraid, go down to the camp with Purah, your servant.

We know Gideon's afraid because that's what it means to be Gideon. And we see God meeting him at that very same place of need. In verses 11 through 14, he goes to the Midianite camp, and he hears this dream.

And what is the dream? Well, verse 13 lays it out for us. There is this cake of barley bread that knocks over a tent. And that actually makes a lot of sense.

Have you ever seen a cake of barley bread knock over a tent? No. Why? Well, maybe you don't have cakes of barley bread, but the more important reason is it's ridiculous, right?

A cake of barley bread doesn't have enough power to knock over a tent. In the same way that 300 men can't defeat enemies that are like locusts in abundance.

[14:30] Right? The dream confirms God is going to do the impossible. Barley bread knocks over the tent. The 300 are going to conquer those who are numbered as locusts.

And so what does Gideon do? He hears this. It is confirmation once again. God is going to do what he said he's going to do. Verse 15, Gideon finds new courage just in time for the battle.

And so the point here is this. God knows that we are weak and easily scared.

God knows what Psalm 103 tells us. We are only dust. God knows that we are weak and feeble and faltering.

God knows that we are weak and we are weak and we are weak and we are weak and we are weak. God does not despise his people for their fear. God delights to meet his people who are fearful and faltering and grow their faith.

[15:46] God did it with Gideon last week, the miracle of the fleeces. God does it again this week with the miracle of the dream. God always empowers and enables what he commands.

God does it with God. And so we see once again the solution to fear. If you have fear and trembling as you think about obeying God and following him, the solution is not to give yourself a rah-rah pep

talk.

The solution is not to look at inspirational figures from history and think, well, I can be like them too. The solution is not to work harder to be better.

As we're filled with fear and trembling, thinking about following after God, the solution is to be reminded once again God is the one who is in control.

God is the one who rules and reigns over the nations. God has no one and nothing that are more powerful than him.

[17:02] God can use barley cakes to knock over tents. He can use 300 men to destroy enemies who are like locusts in abundance.

So we're reminded once again God's word is true, and so we trust his promises. We trust God's promises.

We follow him in obedience. We've seen here that God protects his people from the dangers of success.

We've also seen that God encourages them in the midst of their fear, and these are actually two sides of the same coin. You might think pride and fear should be far apart from each other, but they have the same root, which is self-reliance.

If you rely on yourself and you have success, you're going to praise yourself, right? If you rely on yourself and you face overwhelming odds, you're going to be filled with fear.

[18:07] And so it actually makes sense that these two things follow right after each other. God is responding to the same issue, which is the temptation of his people to rely on themselves.

A reliance that is going to lead them to either pat themselves on the back to congratulate themselves, or a reliance that's going to leave them on the ground curled up in a ball.

So the answer to both of those is the same. God is in control. God is the one who protects, provides for his people.

And so the solution to both pride and despair is this. God is God, and we are not. God is the one in charge.

We are not. God has the victory. We do not. God is the one in charge.

[19:29] Deceive the enemy forces to make them think that he had more soldiers with him than he actually did. Gideon's doing the same thing here. He's going to fool his enemies here into thinking that each of these 300 men actually represents a whole unit.

And so they're going to believe that they are surrounded by this superior force, that they are outgunned and outmanned, when the reality is they have almost no one up against them.

They have a bunch of guys armed with trumpets and jars. In fact, it's been noted by multiple commentators that what is not on their equipment list is any type of weapon.

They are armed with the exact opposite of what they need to win, and yet they do. Why? Well, how do they win?

This passage clearly tells us it is God who wins the battle. That is not some nice preacher phrase, okay? That is right here in the passage.

[20:30] Look at what happens. Verse 20, they break the jars and blow the trumpets, and then they charge in and start stabbing people, right? No.

Verse 21, what do they do that gives them such great victory? They stand there. Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran.

Who defeats the Midianites? The Midianites defeat the Midianites. Remember, Gideon has got them in the middle of the changing of the guard. So you have some of them are returning back to their tents to go to sleep.

Some of them are walking out of their tents to go on to guard. They see each other. They hear this confusion of the trumpets, and they see the torches. And what do they do? They start stabbing each other. We could say that is Gideon's brilliance, but what are we told?

Verse 22, God wins the battle.

[21:35] God defeats the Midianites. All Gideon and his 300 men do is stand there and watch.

And so what option are they left with when they go back? Praise God and God alone. And of course, that's what we've seen all along, right?

What did God say in verse 7? Verse 15, We might say it another way with the words of Psalm 20, verse 7.

Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the Lord our God. Praise to God, not to men.

And of course, this is the same concept, the same idea that's at the heart of the gospel. It's what we see with our Lord Jesus. That when Christ comes, when he lives the perfect life that we should have lived, when he dies the death that we should have died, he doesn't say, hey, I'll fight most of the battle, and you can contribute a little bit.

[23 : 01] No, he says, all you're going to do is stand and watch. Why? Well, Ephesians chapter 2 gives us one reason. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing.

It is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. God is protecting us against the danger of success.

What is our salvation if not accomplished by God and God alone? What is it if not a battle that he fights for us?

And so that's why we sing, this is on page 12 of your worship guide, for now the weak can say they are strong in the strength that God has given.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we praise you and thank you that you never command, but you don't also enable and empower.

[24 : 02] We thank you that you protect us from the dangers of success, the danger to praise ourselves rather than you. We thank you that you meet us in the midst of our fear and trembling.

And we thank you that the battle belongs to the Lord, that our salvation is won by you and you alone. We thank you that we don't have to worry about whether we've earned or deserved these things.

We know that we haven't. And so we simply ask them in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. I invite you to stand for our closing hymn.