



Judges - Chapter Seven

II Judges 3:7-16:31 - The Downward Spiral of Israel's Apostasy (continues)

II.e Judges 6:1-8:35 - Gideon (continues)

Summary of Chapter Seven

The Lord considered the 32,000 troops that had gathered to fight Midian as being too many for he knew they would then believe they had gained the victory in their own strength rather than giving glory to God. So he reduced the numbers by two tests. The first was to allow all those who were afraid to fight to return home. The second was to separate the remainder by the way they drank water, leaving only 300 men out of the original 32,000.

The Lord then allowed Gideon to enter the Midianite camp where he overheard one of them telling a dream that showed Gideon would overcome them in battle. This was to encourage Gideon.

The tactic used to rout the Midianites was to come upon their camp at night, suddenly reveal their lights and make a lot of noise. God used this to throw the Midianites into disarray and they started to fight each other. They then ran away pursued by men from other tribes that Gideon had summoned.

II.e.iii Judges 7:1-8:21 - Gideon Surprises and Routs the Midianites

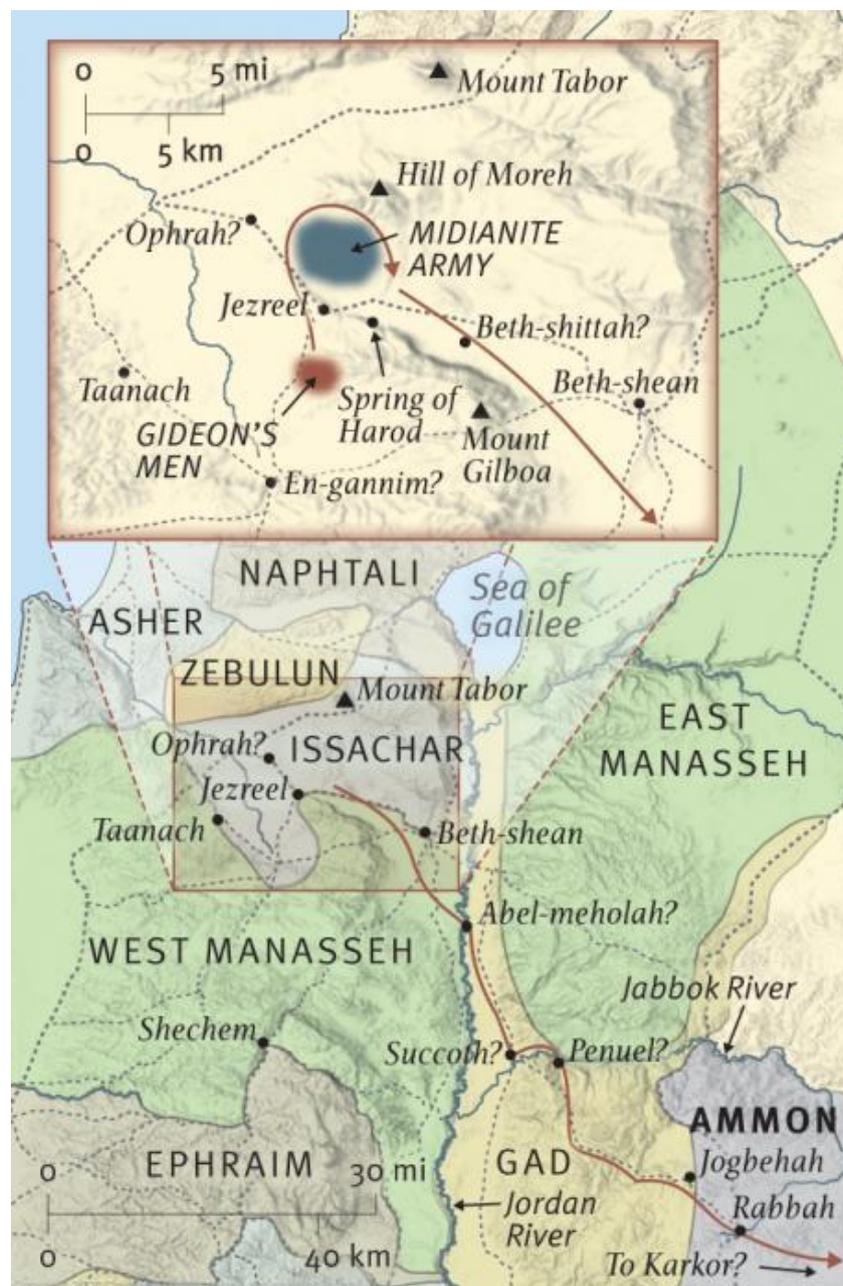
The Israelite army was drastically reduced from 32,000 to just 300 but it was still sufficient for God's purposes to defeat the enemy. After routing the Midianites, Gideon was confronted by the army of Ephraim, who were unhappy they had not been called out to fight, but Gideon was able to pacify them.

As the 300 men of Gideon pursued the remnant of the Midianites intent of capturing the leaders, they came first to Succoth and then Penuel, requesting

bread. Both towns refused to help and so they were punished by Gideon on his return after capturing the leaders, who were subsequently put to death.

II.e.iii.1 Judges 7:1-8:3 - Gideon's First Battle

God clearly delivered Israel in Gideon's first military encounter. The account of Gideon's force reduction from 32,000 to 300 men (vv.1-8) emphasises that God rightly wanted the glory for himself. God's assurances of help for Israel were reinforced when Gideon overheard the Midianites speaking of God's triumph (vv.9-15). The battle did not significantly involve the Israelites because God provided the victory in a special way (vv.16-25). The battle's aftermath shows the resolution of the Ephraimites' misunderstanding of Gideon's intentions (8:1-3).



Gideon Defeats the Midianites

Gideon's small army of 300 men camped by the spring of Harod while the vast Midianite army spread out in the Jezreel Valley by the hill of Moreh. When Gideon's men encircled and surprised the Midianites during the night, the Midianites fled. Gideon's men chased them to Abel-meholah and beyond, passing through Succoth and Penuel on their way to Karkor, where they captured the leaders of the Midianite army.

¹ Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the troops that were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod; and the camp of Midian was north of them, below the hill of Moreh, in the valley.

Judges 7:1

Jerubbaal means 'let Baal contend' and was the name given to Gideon by the people after he had destroyed Baal's altar and sacred pole in the previous chapter.

As the map shows the spring of Harod was east of Jezreel. It is likely the location from which at least two of David's thirty chief warriors came from: <<*Shammah of Harod; Elikah of Harod*>> (2 Samuel 23:25).

² The Lord said to Gideon, 'The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, "My own hand has delivered me."'

Judges 7:2

The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand.

This was a great test of Gideon's faith. His army of 32,000 men was already overmatched by 135,000 Midianites. Yet God thought his army was too big, and he commanded Gideon to invite all who were afraid to go home. He was left with only 10,000 fighting men. Gideon was probably surprised at the number of men who were afraid to fight, and hoped that only a few hundred would leave. However, the narrator states that they assembled in a place where they could see the 135,000 Midianite troops (v.8). The sight of a huge opposing army made many Israelite soldiers understandably afraid.

Israel would only take the credit away from me. God made it clear from the very beginning that the glory for this victory was to be all his. This makes all the more absurd the Israelites' request after the battle that Gideon rule over them because he had supposedly delivered them from the Midianites: <<*Then the Israelites said to Gideon, 'Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian'*>> (Judges 8:22).

This explains why the army of 32,000 was too large. Israel could still take credit for a victory if they had 32,000 troops. They could believe they were

underdogs who triumphed through their own great bravery or strategy. God wanted the odds to be so poor that the victory would clearly be his alone.

If Christians really believe the principle: <<*Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts*>> (Zechariah 4:6b), then their apparent inferior numbers and strength do not matter. If they really believe the principle: <<*Some take pride in chariots, and some in horses, but our pride is in the name of the Lord our God*>> (Psalm 20:7), then size does not matter.

³ Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, “Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.” Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained.

Judges 7:3

Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home. The Mosaic Law allowed military exemptions for several classes of people, including those who were fearful since they might cause others also to fear; refer to Deuteronomy 20:5-8.

⁴ Then the Lord said to Gideon, ‘The troops are still too many; take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you there. When I say, “This one shall go with you”, he shall go with you; and when I say, “This one shall not go with you”, he shall not go.’ ⁵ So he brought the troops down to the water; and the Lord said to Gideon, ‘All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths, you shall put to the other side.’

Judges 7:4-5

The troops are still too many. God had already reduced Gideon’s army from 32,000 to 10,000. Here he reduced it from 10,000 to just 300 fighting men. He did this because 10,000 were still too many for God’s purpose.

It is rarely thought that bigness can be a hindrance to the work of God. Yet it is harder to truly rely on God when there is an abundance wonderful resources at hand. Although it certainly can be done, it is hard to be big and to rely only on the Lord. However, when churches grow big, it is still possible to do a lot with human resources and still give the credit to God.

Paul was in danger of being too strong for his own good. Therefore, God brought a weakness into his life so that Paul would keep relying on the Lord’s strength, and be stronger than ever: <<*Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I appealed to the Lord*>>

about this, that it would leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong>> (2 Corinthians 12:7b-10).

Take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you there. The following may seem strange but it was in the hands of the Lord to sift or test them by whatever means he deemed appropriate.

All those who lap the water with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side. The second test for reducing Gideon's forces involved a strange ritual: taking into account how men drank water from a brook. Neither way of drinking is singled out as the 'right' way, so this may be simply a means of trimming down the number of men rather than a critique of either form of drinking. It was much the same as tossing a coin. However, note also the comment made on vv.6-8.

As a dog laps. The ancient Hebrew word for laps is *yalok*, used to imitate the sound a dog makes when lapping water.

⁶ The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water. ⁷ Then the Lord said to Gideon, 'With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go to their homes.' ⁸ So he took the jars of the troops from their hands, and their trumpets; and he sent all the rest of Israel back to their own tents, but retained the three hundred. The camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

Judges 7:6-8

The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water. As commented above, it was not necessarily the way they drank but the fact that a certain number drank in one way that got them selected for battle. However, there are those who comment that the men who lapped could also keep their eyes on what was going on around them and were therefore more alert to danger, making them potentially better soldiers.

With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. God assured Gideon that victory was certain, even through only 300 men. Now the Israeli army was less than 1% of its original size and the proportion was 400 Midianite soldiers to each Israelite soldier. Gideon could only trust in God because there was nothing else to trust.

⁹ That same night the Lord said to him, ‘Get up, attack the camp; for I have given it into your hand. ¹⁰ But if you fear to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah; ¹¹ and you shall hear what they say, and afterwards your hands shall be strengthened to attack the camp.’ Then he went down with his servant Purah to the outposts of the armed men that were in the camp.

Judges 7:9-11

But if you fear to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah. God graciously granted to Gideon, who had been reluctant and afraid previously in Chapter 6, a preview of the coming victory by allowing him to enter the Midianite **camp** and overhear a Midianite’s dream about Israel’s triumph. God wanted Gideon to find encouragement in this visit to the enemy’s camp. This shows that when God asks his people to do hard things for him, he does not fold his arms and sit back and expect them to do it on their own. He is there to guide them, to keep them safe, and to encourage them all along the way.

Rahab the prostitute in Jericho had likewise told the spies how the people feared what God had done for the Israelites and this was reported back to Joshua to give courage to the army for the upcoming battles: <<*They said to Joshua, ‘Truly the Lord has given all the land into our hands; moreover, all the inhabitants of the land melt in fear before us’*>> (Joshua 2:24).

Afterwards your hands shall be strengthened to attack the camp. This is the tender mercy of God. He dealt with the doubts and fears of Gideon, and wanted to reassure him.

¹² The Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the east lay along the valley as thick as locusts; and their camels were without number, countless as the sand on the seashore. ¹³ When Gideon arrived, there was a man telling a dream to his comrade; and he said, ‘I had a dream, and in it a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian, and came to the tent, and struck it so that it fell; it turned upside down, and the tent collapsed.’ ¹⁴ And his comrade answered, ‘This is no other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, a man of Israel; into his hand God has given Midian and all the army.’

Judges 7:12-14

As thick as locusts; and their camels were without number. This is repetition of what was said in the introductory verses of Gideon: <<*For they and their livestock would come up, and they would even bring their tents, as thick as*

locusts; neither they nor their camels could be counted; so they wasted the land as they came in>> (Judges 6:5).

Countless as the sand on the seashore. This is similar to the description of the northern Canaanite tribes that came out against Joshua in their conquest of the Promised Land: <<*They came out, with all their troops, a great army, in number like the sand on the seashore, with very many horses and chariots*>> (Joshua 11:4).

A cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian. The word tumbled literally means ‘turned itself over.’ The loaf in the dream, symbolising the sword of Gideon, ‘overturned’ the Midianite camp. The dream provided the confirmation that Gideon needed, in light of his earlier fear (v.10). Only the very poor ate barley bread. The vision meant that the camp of the Midianites would be knocked over by an ordinary person.

This is no other than the sword of Gideon. God allowed Gideon to see a great confirmation of his future work. This was obviously no coincidence and no display of luck. God used this situation to build the faith of Gideon, and it worked so well that all Gideon could do was worship God.

It was not simply by chance that the man dreamed the dream that night; no accident that he told his friend about it at just that moment; no accident that Gideon came to the exact place where he overheard the man telling the dream. It was all planned and preordained by God.

It must have built the faith of Gideon to know that his enemies were afraid of him. When people are weak in faith they often make their enemies stronger than they really are. It could be said that the devil himself is afraid of the normal Christian, or at least afraid of what they could become because of God’s Holy Spirit within them.

Into his hand God has given Midian and all the army. The Midianites had suppressed Israel for seven years and had nothing to fear from them. Yet this shows that this man, at least, also knew of the Israelite God and his might. This is what put fear into the man through this dream.

¹⁵ When Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshipped; and he returned to the camp of Israel, and said, ‘Get up; for the Lord has given the army of Midian into your hand.’ ¹⁶ After he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and put trumpets into the hands of all of them, and empty jars, with torches inside the jars, ¹⁷ he said to them, ‘Look at me, and do the same; when I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do.’ ¹⁸ When I blow the

trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets around the whole camp, and shout, “For the Lord and for Gideon!”

Judges 7:15-18

He worshipped. This indicates prostrating oneself to the ground in humble obeisance. This is the way that Jesus worshipped his Father in the garden of Gethsemane: <<*And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, ‘Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want’*>> (Mark 14:35-36).

Get up; for the Lord has given the army of Midian into your hand. Gideon’s encouragement was contagious. Having received encouragement, he could not help but spread that encouragement to others and his encouragement built their faith.

He divided the three hundred men into three companies. There is no specific mention that God gave Gideon this plan through supernatural revelation. Yet, because Gideon was a Spirit-filled man (Judges 6:34), the supernatural can operate very naturally in his life.

Look at me, and do the same. This plan probably came very naturally to Gideon, but upon reflection one can clearly see how the Holy Spirit prompted him. This is an example of good leadership and one that Paul supported: <<*I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me*>> (1 Corinthians 4:16).

For the Lord and for Gideon is literally ‘the sword of the Lord and of Gideon.’ Refer also to v.20 and the comment made there.

¹⁹ So Gideon and the hundred 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 smashed the jars that were in their hands.

Judges 7:19

The middle watch. Jewish tradition speaks of three night time watches of 18:00-22:00, 22:00-02:00 and 02:00-06:00; the ‘morning watch’ is mentioned: <<*At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic*>> (Exodus 14:24), and: <<*The next day Saul put the people in three companies. At the morning watch they came into the camp and cut down the Ammonites until the heat of the day; and those who survived were scattered, so that no two of them were left together*>> (1 Samuel 11:11). The later division into four watches: <<*And in the fourth watch of the night he came to them, walking on the sea*>> (Matthew

14:25 ESV) seems to have been influenced by Roman practice. Their watches were generally 18:00-21:00, 21:00-midnight, midnight-03:00 and 03:00-06:00.

They blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. The Midianite soldiers awoke to an explosion of noise, light, and movement coming down on them from all directions. No wonder they thought they were being attacked by an army even bigger than they were.

²⁰ So the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars, holding in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow; and they cried, ‘A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!’

Judges 7:20

A sword for the Lord and for Gideon! The full war cry is now uttered in the event of battle as previewed in v.14 and v.18. Ironically, no Israelite swords were used at all, only torches, trumpets, and jars – scarcely classic military weapons. This cry was not the result of pride on Gideon’s part. Instead, it showed wisdom in the attack because clearly the Midianites were already afraid of the sword of Gideon (v.14), and shouting helped to send them into panic. Perhaps not all the Midianites knew who the Lord was, but they knew there was a man from the Lord named Gideon. It was appropriate for Gideon to take this leadership role. After all, it was what God had called him to do.

The sword of the Lord is a mighty weapon: <<See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand. For I lift up my hand to heaven, and swear: As I live for ever, when I whet my flashing sword, and my hand takes hold on judgement; I will take vengeance on my adversaries, and will repay those who hate me>> (Deuteronomy 32:39-41), and: <<From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty>> (Revelation 19:15).

²¹ Every man stood in his place all around the camp, and all the men in camp ran; they cried out and fled.

Judges 7:21

Every man stood in his place. Given the overwhelming odds against them and their lack of men and weapons to fight with, it would be difficult to criticise anyone who lost courage and had fled before the battle. Yet all these men stood their ground and trusted in God. The church will be greatly strengthened when every person stands in their place.

They cried out and fled. Such fear gripped the Midianites and their allies that they ran away in total panic. This is similar to what would later happen to the Aramæan army when King Ben-hadad was besieging Samaria in the days of Elisha: <<*So they fled away in the twilight and abandoned their tents, their horses, and their donkeys, leaving the camp just as it was, and fled for their lives*>> (2 Kings 7:7).

²² When they blew the three hundred trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah towards Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. ²³ And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after the Midianites.

Judges 7:22-23

The Lord set every man's sword against his fellow and against all the army. The first phase of the battle was not between Israel and Midian, but as the Midianites fought against each other. This is a good example of how: <<*in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*>> (Romans 8:37). Christians get the spoils of victory although it was Jesus who won the battle for them. The victory was clearly God's: he turned the Midianites' own swords against them, and they fled south and east to the Jordan River and across it.

The early Christian writer Origen often emphasised elaborate spiritual meanings to Biblical accounts. In this story he made the 300 men types of preachers of the Gospel. Their trumpets were a picture of preaching Christ crucified. Their torch lights represented the holy conduct of the preachers.

And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after the Midianites. Charles Spurgeon wrote, "If some have the courage to strike the enemy, there are others who will come out of their hiding-places to hunt the beaten foe. When you really want help, often you cannot get it; but when you can afford to do without assistance, you will sometimes be embarrassed by it."

²⁴ Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, 'Come down against the Midianites and seize the waters against them, as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan.' So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they seized the waters as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan. ²⁵ They captured the two captains of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the wine press of Zeeb, as they pursued the

Midianites. They brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon beyond the Jordan.

Judges 7:24-25

Come down against the Midianites. This was not unbelief on Gideon's part. Although God started the work with a small number of soldiers, once the work began, Gideon wanted many to get involved in the work. This would not detract from the knowledge that it was God alone who had given them the victory; although their later reaction may dispute this.

They pursued the Midianites. God blessed the effort of people of Ephraim, and they made good success against the enemy and their leaders.

They brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon beyond the Jordan. The deaths of these two military leaders, along with the kings of Midian Zebah and Zalmunna (Judges 8:21), became part of the Israelite folklore and were even included in a psalm of praise to God: <<***Do to them as you did to Midian, as to Sisera and Jabin at the Wadi Kishon, who were destroyed at En-dor, who became dung for the ground. Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna, who said, 'Let us take the pastures of God for our own possession'***>> (Psalm 83:9-12).