

## "The Strange Strategy of God"

I came across a book this week that was also turned into a documentary movie titled, *Touching the Void*. It was written by Joe Simpson, a mountain climber with a fantastic survival story. He and his climbing partner were climbing a difficult mountain in the Peruvian Andes when they were caught in a Blizzard. He plunged over an ice ledge, breaking his leg. His safety rope was severed, and he fell and into a deep crevasse – a deep crack in the glacier. After several desperate attempts to climb out of the crevasse, he had to face that fact that his weakness and brokenness made it impossible. Against all his instincts, he made the excruciating choice to lower himself deeper into the crevasse in the hope there might be other exits farther down. All the time he said he was wondering, *Am I lowering myself to freedom or deeper into the belly of the earth? Does a ray of sunlight await me in the pit, showing a way out, or is there only darkness and slow death?* With every inch he lowered himself, it felt like he was dropping farther away from the obvious way out. Of course, he made it, or he couldn't have written the book. But he said even though it was his only hope it was so strange to go deeper in order to get out.

Sometimes the strategy that saves us is a strange one. It goes against what seems logical, feels natural and has become habitual. Jesus said as much didn't he? He said things like *whoever saves his life will lose it*. I wonder if there are ways God works in our lives that are so strange that when they are happening, we think, *"this is too hard, this can't be right."* Faith is a huge issue in the Bible because it requires us to trust God with things that seem so strange at times. This comes through clearly in the story of Gideon. We just read the heart of the story from **Judges 7** we will come back to that in a moment, but we're going to go back to an earlier part of the story to begin this morning.

The story of Gideon begins with the downward cycle of Judges repeating itself again. **Judges 6:1-2** say, *The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. <sup>2</sup> And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds.* It was a time of deep misery. The verses that follow tell how these enemies came up in such overwhelming numbers they

were like locusts. They laid waste to everything. People were hiding in caves.

**Verse 6** says, *And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to the LORD.*

*So how does God respond to misery and a cry for help? Most people respond to misery with sympathy. We offer help. But in this story, the first part of the strange strategy of God is this:*

### **I. IN OUR DEEPEST MISERY GOD CONFRONTS US WITH OUR RESPONSIBILITY.**

Look at **verses 7-8**, *When the people of Israel cried out to the LORD on account of the Midianites, <sup>8</sup> the LORD sent a prophet to the people of Israel.* He doesn't send a deliverer. He sends a prophet. Why?

#### **A. Sometimes we want to escape our troubles, but God wants us to gain insight into our part in our troubles.**

What does the prophet do? First, He reminds them of God's grace, **verse 8-9**, *And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery. <sup>9</sup> And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land.* Second, He repeats God's command. **Verse 10** *And I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' Finally, he calls them out for their failure to trust and obey. *But you have not obeyed my voice."**

Imagine your car breaks down and you are stranded roadside in this horrid summer heat. You call AAA, and instead of a mechanic, they send a life-coach. He pulls up and launches into a lecture, *"You know you are supposed to check your battery regularly, change your oil, and inspect your air filters and tire pressure, but you have not obeyed my voice."* We tend to want people to give us a break when we are in pain or under stress. There are even voices in our culture that encourage us to play up the role of victimization in general and place the blame for bad behavior on some parental, societal, or economic injustice we have suffered. God takes everything into consideration but he never let's us off the hook. God's strategy may seem strange. His response seems, to some of us, an "inappropriate" response to people in urgent need.

**B. Sometimes the first movement toward a way out of your difficulty is honestly owning up to your own responsibilities.**

We often suffer because of the sins of others or the brokenness of a fallen world. But sometimes we have brought some of the pain we suffer on ourselves. When that is the case, God calls us to face the truth. So whenever you are suffering, by all means, cry out for help, but as you do take an honest look at yourself. Learn to pray humbly and honestly Lord search me and show me if there is any twisted way in me. (Psalm 139:23-24). **Proverbs 28:30** applies, *Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy.* Listen to and receive the conviction of God. Practice honest reflection and repentance.

The first part of the strange strategy of God is this: *In our deepest misery, God confronts us with our responsibility. The second is that...*

**II. EVEN WHEN WE FEEL POWERLESS GOD CALLS US TO COMMITMENT.**

The book of Judges doesn't tell us how the people responded to the prophet. It immediately shifts the scene to the call of Gideon. **Judges 6:11-12**, says, *Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. <sup>12</sup> And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor."* The angel calling Gideon a "mighty man of valor," is either sarcastic or prophetic. That's not how he feels. Gideon is in the winepress to hide the wheat from the Midianites. He's beating out wheat in a bad place because he is fearful. He doesn't feel up to fighting or even facing the Midianites.

**A. Our feelings of inadequacy can often feed into self-protective strategies.**

*If we don't feel up to a thing, we think we think we can opt out of it.*

**1. You can put off obedience with skepticism or cynicism. Verse 13** *And Gideon said to him, "Please, my Lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian."* I hear cynicism and self-pity.

**2. You can plead your weakness and inadequacy as if God doesn't understand. Verse 14-15** *And the LORD turned to him and said, "Go*

*in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?"* <sup>15</sup> And he said to him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." There is no reason to believe this wasn't true. It was undoubtedly what Gideon felt. It's easy to let yourself off the hook when you feel too powerless to be effective and too fearful to be courageous.

*The surprising thing is that ...*

**3. Sometimes God meets us in our weakness with great patience.**  
**Verse 16-17** *And the LORD said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man."* <sup>17</sup> And he said to him, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. We don't have to read the whole story, but God graciously gives him a sign. He causes spontaneous combustion – fire consumes some food that Gideon has brought. Is this enough to provide Gideon with the faith and courage he lacks? It doesn't look like it. His response is terror. Now, he's not just afraid of the Midianites. He's afraid of the angel of the LORD. The lesson here is not that you get to demand miraculous signs from God when you want to. Gideon repeatedly asks for signs, but in the end, his story ends badly. He is not a good example in this. Faith never becomes his way of life.

*No matter what God does, Gideon continually slips back into self-protective weakness. He feels powerless. He is powerless but...*

### **B. God persists in calling the powerless to obedience.**

It turns out his own father is an idolator who has an altar to Baal and an Asherah, a sort of totem, on his property. God tells Gideon to tear it down with his father's bulls and build an altar to God. It is scary and dangerous. Look at **verse 27**, *So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.* In the morning the people of the city want to kill him, but his father says, *If Baal is real let Baal deal with Gideon himself.* That initial act of commitment is a turning point in Gideon's story.

There is a lesson in that for us. When we feel weak, weary, or fearful, sometimes what we want is for someone to let us off the hook and release us from our responsibilities. That's what makes God's strategy so strange. When we are feeling powerless, God calls us to obey him.

I've seen it happen where someone is in a hard, scary place and like the climber in the crevasse they so want to climb out it. But they can't do that, and God is saying that his strange strategy, which seems so unnatural, is that they have to go deeper into it. Often, just as in the story of Gideon, there is some idol, some false god that competes for worship with the true God that has to come down. Maybe it is pride or family or some dream of success, but it has to be torn down, and there is a first step, an initial act of commitment that marks a new beginning. Here's the thing that makes it strange – you don't get to wait to feel strong enough before you take that initial step of commitment. Sometimes faith only grows stronger when, with the imperfect faith you do have, you commit to what God wants.

*Do you see God's strange strategy?*

- 1. In our deepest misery he confronts us with responsibility.*
- 2. When we feel powerless, he calls us to commitment.*
- 3. Here's the third part of it...*

### **III. WHEN WE DON'T HAVE ENOUGH GOD SAYS IT'S TOO MUCH.**

This truth is the heart of the story. If you don't know the whole story, what happens is that the time comes for Gideon to deliver God's people from the Midianites. It all comes to a head in the same valley Alex talked about last week. The valley of Jezreel. Later in **Judges 7:12**, the Midianites are described as spread out in the valley *like locust in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance*. Even later, in **Judges 8:10**, there is a number given, and it is 135,000. Gideon has an army of 32,000. So he is outnumbered by over four to one.

At this point we come to **Judges 7:2-3** *The LORD said to Gideon, "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.'* That is a key issue. <sup>3</sup> *Now, therefore, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, 'Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.'" Then 22,000 of the people returned, and 10,000 remained.* Now he is outnumbered thirteen to one! But what happens? **Verse 4**, *And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there, and any one of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' shall go with you, and any one of whom I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' shall not go."* So what happens is God takes them down to the water, and he tells Gideon to separate those who kneel down to drink from those who lap up the water like dogs.

**Verse 7** And the LORD said to Gideon, “With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home.” There are several theories about what is going on here. Some suggest those who bend down scoop up some water and lap it are the vigilant ones always with an eye out for the enemy while the kneelers were careless, thinking only about their thirst. But there is no basis for this idea in the text. The only thing the Bible actually says is the LORD wanted fewer men. The whole point is that the LORD wants it to be clear that the victory comes from him. And of course, that is what happens dramatically. Gideon divides the three hundred into three groups of a hundred each and gives them all trumpets and earthenware jars with torches hidden in the jars. They surround the camp of the enemy, and at the signal from Gideon, they sound the trumpets. They smash the jars with the torches. All at once the lights are revealed and the trumpets are heard. The Midianites panic, fight each other and flee for their lives. The victory is won.

*The lesson taught is that...*

**A. When we don't have enough, it is still too much *if* what we have tempts us to rely on our strength or boast in ourselves.**

Gideon started out outnumbered 4 to one he ends up outnumbered by 450 to one. But God said, although it is not enough, it is still too much! Here's the principle. We do not have enough resources, people, virtue, ability, energy, or anything to defeat our enemies or win God's victories. And yet the danger is if we have even a little bit we might be tempted to think it is enough and not rely as desperately on God as we need to or not give God the honor and praise for the victory that he deserves. And so the strange strategy of God is this: With God when we don't have enough it is still too much *if* there is the danger that we will rely on our own strength or claim the victory for ourselves.

**B. It is only and always dependence on God that saves us!**

We can't save ourselves, we can't fix or change ourselves. We cannot, with our meager resources, do what God wants done. We have to learn to rely on him. Human flourishing in life and fruitful progress for God only takes place in a relationship of dependence on God. The book of Judges shows us a period in Israel's history when one leader after another is shown this principle, but none of them hold on to so that it becomes a part them. The whole book of Judges just builds a longing for a leader who will get it.

Finally, later he will come, at least in part in the person of David. The little boy who faces down a giant and knows that his skill with a sling is not the source of his strength. He tells Goliath, *"I come against you in the name of the LORD."* He writes **Psalm 20:7**, *Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.* Ultimately it is Jesus who embodies this life of trust in God.

In the New Testament Paul talks about his thorn in the flesh a form of sickness, pain, and weakness, but he says *God's power is made perfect in my weakness. When I am weak, then I am strong.* (**2 Corinthians 12:9-10**) The Bible doesn't just say God works *in spite* of our weakness, it says he works *because* of it. God is a God of light, which means truth and reality, and he will not support the lie that we are strong enough to save ourselves. He is our savior.

**Ephesians 2:8-9** *For by grace, you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast.* Do you hear the echo of the LORD's word to Gideon? *"I do not want you to boast and say, "my own hand has saved me."* God's grace comes into your life through his own strange strategy of salvation. In Christ, God came into the world and became weak for us. He fought the battle for our salvation in total dependence on and submission to God. After he paid for our sins on the cross, he rose powerfully from the grave. He had humbled himself, and God exalted him. God saves people, not because they have done enough or have become enough but solely and purely by his grace through faith – trust in Jesus. That's the strange strategy of God.

## Conclusion

Remember the mountain climber he saw what looked like the way up and out but he couldn't make it. He had to do the strange thing of going down deeper. It was the only thing he could do but, to his delight and salvation, when he got to the bottom he saw light. The sun was shining in an opening and there was a way out and up. Sometimes life is like that. You have to realize that what feels natural, seems logical might not be right. You have to let go of all that to trust the strange strategy of God. Imagine, what if even in times of pain you faced your own responsibilities. What if when you felt your weakness you were still willing to make God inspired commitments? What if no matter what your strengths or resources your trust, your heart's trust was in

God alone? That's the life to which God with great love and grace calls you.

**Amen.**

*Prayer of Response.*

*Almighty God our gracious redeemer we thank you that your strategies, even when strange to us, bring salvation to the weak and powerless. Help us to see our responsibilities even when we are in difficulty. Help us to take a step of commitment even when we deeply feel our weakness. Help us to remember to rely only and always on your strength and saving grace and to give you alone the honor for every victory we experience. In Jesus name, Amen*