

A HERO WILL RISE

The Book of Judges

Text

Judges 7:1-8

Topic

God selects 300 men who lap-up water like dogs to be Gideon's soldiers

Title

"Let Lap the Dogs of War"

Introduction

300 is a number you might associate with the Battle of Thermopylae.

In 480BC the Persians attacked a combined force of Greeks at Thermopylae, a strategic small mountain pass that controlled access to most of the rest of Greece. A group of 7000 soldiers easily held off the several-hundred thousand man army of Persians for two days. But then a Greek traitor showed the Persians a secret passageway that allowed them to strike the Greek army from the rear.

Most of the defenders retreated. A group of 300 Spartans stayed on the battlefield, fighting to the death and covering their fellow Greeks' retreat. This heroic act allowed the rest of the Greek army to escape capture or certain death.

Commenting on this, one historian said:

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Judges 7:1-8

"Let Lap the Dogs of War"

Both ancient and modern writers have used the Battle of Thermopylae as an example of the power of a patriotic army defending its native soil. The performance of the defenders is also used as an example of the advantages of training, equipment, and good use of terrain as force multipliers, and has become a symbol of courage against overwhelming odds.

I wanted to get that out of the way, especially if you've seen the 2006 fantasy action film, *300* (which I have not).

I wanted to get that out of the way so it will not influence your thinking about the *original* '300' that we will read about in the Book of Judges.

Six hundred years *before* Thermopylae, the success of Gideon's 300-man army had nothing to do with the power of patriotism, or native soil; certainly it had nothing to do with training, equipment, and good use of terrain.

It had everything to do with God showing His strength through Israel's weakness:

- Gideon started out with thirty-two thousand men. God immediately had him pare down the force to ten thousand.
- God then pared down the ten thousand to 300, saying, "By the three hundred men... I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand" (7:7).

The great, over-riding lesson in this text is that it's not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord that we are to go forward serving Him.

I find something else, something devotional, for us to ponder.
See if this makes sense to you.

A large group of Israelites, the majority, either by their own choice or by God's, are *eliminated* from serving in the main battle. Later they get involved serving in the mopping-up after the main battle.

A smaller group, the minority, the 300, are *enlisted* in the main battle.

Ask yourself, "If God were eliminating and enlisting believers to serve Him today, *which group would I **want** to be in?*"

Which group **are** you in?

I hope all of us would want to be those enlisted, rather than those eliminated. To that end, I will organize my thoughts around two questions: #1 Are You In The Majority Who Are Eliminated?, or #2 Are You Among The Minority Who Are Enlisted?

#1 Are You In The Majority
Who Are Eliminated?

(v1-6)

On the reality show, *Survivor*, there are a number of times each season that teams are chosen using what Jeff Probst calls "a schoolyard pick."

Do you remember those? Are they fond memories? Or were you always the kid to be chosen last, to forever have your psyche scarred?

When we talk today about those eliminated and those enlisted, please don't think of it as if God were picking the best players - those most spiritual.

As I indicated, those initially eliminated still found themselves serving the Lord. And those enlisted were certainly not chosen because they were holier.

The application for us, in asking these questions, is, *Do I want to be among the enlisted?* Or am I OK - even happy - with being eliminated most of the time?

In other words, do you approach serving the Lord as if it were jury duty? I know it's my responsibility, and a privilege, to serve on a jury. But I do a happy dance if I'm eliminated.

As a Christian, I should not have that attitude when it comes to serving the Lord.

With that in mind, let's see how the story unfolds.

Jdg 7:1 Then Jerubbaal (that *is*, Gideon) and all the people who *were* with him rose early and encamped beside the well of Harod, so that the camp of the Midianites was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley.

Gideon had been given a nick-name, "Jerubbaal," after he destroyed the altar of Baal at Ophrah, and burned its idol. It means, "let Baal contend with him." It was at first a challenge to Baal to avenge himself against Gideon. When Baal didn't act, the name stuck as a kind of superhero alter-ego.

It tells us that the Israelites were superstitious, and not really on board with a true worship of Jehovah.

Their 'hero' wasn't the Angel of the Lord Who was leading Gideon. Their 'hero' was Jerubbaal - someone they thought Baal feared to fight.

God was faithful to His people when they were faithless. He delivered them while they remained idolaters. Our God is an awesome God.

We'll see that "all the" Israelites "who were with" Gideon numbered thirty-two thousand. Impressive, but they were outnumbered four-to-one, and had no weapons or armor.

Jdg 7:2 And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people who *are* with you *are* too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'

People... Money... Gear. We always think more of all of them will further the Gospel.

The apostles, and the disciples that they made in the first century, turned the world upside down for Jesus, with no resources **except those that were spiritual.**

Peter and John could say to the lame man, "Silver and gold, I **have none.**" But what they did have - Jesus - was beyond all the world's resources.

If God isn't giving us as a church, or you as a Christian, more material resources, it's because we don't need them - regardless the good that we think we would do with them.

I'm guessing Gideon wasn't too excited about the prospect of whittling down the size of his fighting force. Nevertheless this was not a negotiation. It was God revealing His divine strategy for the fight against the Midianites and their allies.

Jdg 7:3 Now therefore, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever *is* fearful and afraid, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead.' " And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.

If any of the men were afraid to go to battle, they were to be granted an immediate "honorable discharge." When the dust of their leaving settled, the odds were now at fourteen-to-one.

The Law of Moses prescribed reasons men could refuse military service. You find them in Deuteronomy 20:1-8.

Deu 20:1 "When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses and chariots *and* people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God *is* with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.

Deu 20:2 So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people.

Deu 20:3 And he shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel: Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies. Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them;

Deu 20:4 for the LORD your God *is* He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.'

Deu 20:5 "Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying: 'What man *is there* who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it.

Deu 20:6 Also what man *is there* who has planted a vineyard and has not eaten of it? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man eat of it.

Deu 20:7 And what man *is there* who is betrothed to a woman and has not married her? Let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man marry her.'

Deu 20:8 "The officers shall speak further to the people, and say, 'What man *is there who is* fearful and fainthearted? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart.'

Because Israel was being oppressed and occupied by enemy invaders, probably no one could honestly claim the first three reasons. They were about maintaining a normal, stable life - something the Israelites hadn't been able to do for the past seven years.

Fear, however, was very real. So that it wouldn't spread through the ranks, those who were afraid were dismissed.

They will be called into service after the initial attack, to chase after the defeated enemies. Don't think of these guys as losers, or as being rejected by God. He eliminated them, but it was based on an out that He provided them in the Law.

We have our ideas about what is more spiritual. If God gives someone freedom in an area, to make a choice, then who am I to decide which choice is the more spiritual? That is a matter for them to decide with the Lord.

Jdg 7:4 But the LORD said to Gideon, "The people *are* still *too* many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. Then it will be, *that* of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' the same shall go with you; and of whomever I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' the same shall not go."

There's a series of jokes about how many people it takes to change a lightbulb. Q: How many polite New Yorkers does it take to screw in a light bulb? A: Both of them.

Gideon must have begun wondering just how few men it would take for God to get the glory.

The Law provided four reasons for you to eliminate yourself. This next elimination was going to be by God. He designed an elimination test, but at first didn't tell anyone what He was looking for. Gideon was to observe, and then God would tell him to eliminate based on something he saw in their behavior.

Jdg 7:5 So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, "Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink."

How do you get ten thousand men to all drink from the river at the same time? This is totally a guess on my part (it's not in the text) but I think God made them thirsty. Suddenly they were all, to a man, parched, and wanting to get a drink of that fresh, running water.

I hope in Heaven we will be able to look back on our lives to see all the times that God gently manipulated circumstances to try to lead us, or to protect us. All the times that what seemed like a weird coincidence was really His providence.

There were two kinds of water-drinkers in Gideon's army: Lappers and kneelers. It would determine the final number of Gideon's men.

Jdg 7:6 And the number of those who lapped, *putting* their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water.

Finally Gideon had his army. Nine-thousand seven hundred men were kneelers. It wasn't thirty-two thousand; it wasn't twenty-two thousand; but nine-thousand seven hundred men might hold their own.

Except that God was going to dismiss the kneelers, not the lappers.

Jdg 7:7 Then the LORD said to Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the *other* people go, every man to his place."

The day had started so favorably. Gideon blew the ram's horn and thirty-two thousand men from several of the tribes rallied to his side. Gideon may have thought more would come.

It seemed supernatural. God must be at work, or else why would so many be drawn?

End of the day he was left with 300 lap dogs.

Let's pause to draw some application from the majority who were eliminated.

You can likewise be eliminated from serving God; or, at least, from certain ways of serving God.

We read the passage in Deuteronomy that listed four reasons an Israelite could eliminate himself. The first three had to do with house, home, and family concerns.

Those same concerns can eliminate you and I from certain ministries; or they can at least limit our commitment to them. Listen to what the apostle Paul said in First Corinthians 7:32-35.

1Co 7:32 But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord - how he may please the Lord.

1Co 7:33 But he who is married cares about the things of the world - how he may please *his* wife.

1Co 7:34 There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world - how she may please *her* husband.

1Co 7:35 And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction.

Tough times for believers were ahead. Paul encouraged them to make life-choices that were consistent with those tough times.

The responsibilities of family would weigh heavy on them - especially when persecution hit. Those who had spouses and families would be distracted from the Gospel.

In the movies, the hero's weakness is always his girlfriend or wife or children. In the recent film, *Batman vs. Superman, Dawn of Justice*, Lex Luther kidnaps Martha Kent, and almost kills Lois Lane. It's worse than Kryptonite.

In the *Spider-Man: Homecoming* trailer, the Vulture warns Spidey that he will kill everyone he loves.

It would be better for superheroes to remain loners.

Paul wasn't suggesting there was anything wrong with establishing a home and family. But you need to realize that house, home, and family choices will affect your *ability* and *availability* to serve the Lord.

You should therefore make those choices with that in mind.

The fourth reason an Israelite might eliminate himself was fear. Do you have fear of being used by God? I'll bet you do. I do.

Fear keeps us from sharing Jesus; from serving Jesus. Rather than eliminate ourselves because of fear, we ought to eliminate our fear.

Our fear can come from a sense that we aren't ready; that we aren't knowledgeable enough; that we aren't holy enough. Well, neither were Gideon's men, yet God was going to use them. It wouldn't be by their readiness, or knowledge, or holiness. Not by their might nor power, but by His Spirit.

You have the Spirit indwelling you. You can ask, anytime, and God has promised to give you the Spirit in greater measure.

We need to believe God and let His promise of the Spirit overcome our fear of serving Him.

In our story, God eliminated some of the men Himself. How might He do something like that today?

One way is by the gifts that He chooses to give to you. God the Holy Spirit is described as granting spiritual gifts to believers. He does it, we're told, as He wills - not as we will.

Your gifts will suggest when and how you serve the Lord; so, in that sense, God eliminates you from certain things in favor of the good works He has set before you to accomplish in His power.

The men eliminated by God from Gideon's army would be called into service, supporting the three hundred by mopping-up after the initial battle:

Jdg 7:23 And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites.

You may eliminate yourself, or be eliminated, from certain things, but you remain a servant wherever you are. You can go from eliminated to enlisted at any moment.

None of those who were eliminated from Gideon's army were in sin. But I should mention that sin is a way that we eliminate ourselves, and are eliminated by God, from serving Him. We pull ourselves out of the battle when we yield to sin.

I can think of at least two possible reactions to all this talk about being eliminated:

1. One reaction would be a sense of relief that I'm too busy, too involved, in my everyday life to be on the front lines of ministry.
2. Another reaction would be a desire to alter my lifestyle as much as possible in order to get out more on the front lines of ministry.

Pick door number two.

#2 Are You Among The Minority Who Are Enlisted?

(v7-8)

TIME Magazine named the Navy Seals the top elite fighting force in the world.

It was in an article in which they listed their Top Ten elite fighting forces, both current and in the history of modern warfare.

Israeli Special Forces made the list at number nine.

There is a tendency to see Gideon's 300 as a sort of Israeli Special Forces. Were they? Let's read again how they were enlisted.

Jdg 7:7 Then the LORD said to Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the *other* people go, every man to his place."

It's only natural to want to come to some conclusion as to why lappers were preferred over kneelers. It's been suggested that by lapping the water, cupping their hands and bringing it to their mouth, they could remain alert to what was happening around them.

Commentators insist that God therefore designed the test in order to select only those men who maintained a greater overall sense of military preparedness or vigilance.

While that might make sense, it absolutely does not fit the context. In fact, it contradicts what God intended.

God was whittling down Gideon's forces in order that He, and not they, would get the glory for the victory over the Midianite alliance. If you say that these 300 men were the most prepared, and possessed the greatest vigilance, then you make them a heroic, elite fighting force.

You make them the 300, like those Spartans at Thermopylae. In that scenario, God doesn't get the glory; the Dog Soldiers do.

God's test was arbitrary. Whether you lapped water or knelt with your face in the river, it revealed *nothing* about your military prowess. God's foreknowledge was that there were more lappers - only 300 who would drink that way.

These were not "a few good men." They weren't going around saying, "the only easy day was yesterday"; or, "always ready, always there"; or "death from above."

They weren't those who completed rigorous physical and mental training in order to qualify. There was absolutely nothing special about these men that set them apart from their fellow Israelites.

They weren't, as Agent J says in *Men in Black*, "the best of the best of the best, Sir!"

They were simply 300 random guys out of thirty-two thousand.

Jdg 7:8 So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all *the rest of Israel*, every man to his tent, and retained those three hundred men. Now the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

The 300 outfitted themselves so that each had a trumpet. It'll be important when we get to the battle.

The rest of the men did not go home. They went back to camp, where they would be ready to serve when called upon.

I want to have us hear once again the beginning of Deuteronomy 20.

Deu 20:1 "When you go out to battle against your enemies, and see horses and chariots *and* people more numerous than you, do not be afraid of them; for the LORD your God *is* with you, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.

Deu 20:2 So it shall be, when you are on the verge of battle, that the priest shall approach and speak to the people.

Deu 20:3 And he shall say to them, 'Hear, O Israel: Today you are on the verge of battle with your enemies. Do not let your heart faint, do not be afraid, and do not tremble or be terrified because of them;

Deu 20:4 for the LORD your God *is* He who goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.'

Four-to-one... Fourteen-to-one... Four-hundred-fifty to one. Those were the odds Gideon faced.

*You and I always face greater odds. We can't even calculate them numerically, because our foes are supernatural. They are "principalities... powers... the rulers of the darkness of this age, [the] spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places*."*

We are always "on the verge of battle with" our enemies.

But we need never faint or lose heart. Our Great High Priest is with us. To the extent we stand in His strength, He is the one Who fights, not us.

I don't like trite, over-used sayings, but I am compelled to say that "One with God is a majority."

As you reflect on this text, determine whether or not, in your heart, you want to be among those enlisted by God to serve Him.

Then ask Him for a refreshing of the Holy Spirit upon you.