

Judges 7:1-8. Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. ² The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, ³ announce now to the people, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'" So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained. ⁴ But the LORD said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go." ⁵ So Gideon took the men down to the water. There the LORD told him, "Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink." ⁶ Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink. ⁷ The LORD said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place." ⁸ So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites to their tents but kept the three hundred, who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others.

Give God the glory for his gift of salvation and victory

- 1. God makes it clear that victory is through him alone***
- 2. By means of his grace God decides who receives heaven***
- 3. Don't be afraid that you will be excluded***

I want you to imagine a few scenarios as we begin today.

First, remember back to when you picked teams for kickball, or dodge ball, or whatever the game was, who were the first ones picked? It was the good athlete. It was ones who looked big and strong and capable. Maybe you didn't even know your classmates by name, at the time, but you could just tell who was going to be picked. Perhaps you can also remember the fear of not being picked.

Now think about planning an extravagant party. If you were throwing a great big dinner party, who would you invite? If you could invite anyone in the world and they would come who would you call? Most likely we would try to find some people that would make the neighbors impressed. You'd invite the powerful and the influential. You'd invite people who looked the part or had something to contribute, someone who proved themselves worthy in some way.

Finally, if you were putting together a small group of elite soldiers to defeat a much larger army and win a critical battle, who would you chose? On what basis would they qualify? Your requirements probably will include endurance and integrity, honesty and valor, bravery and overall strength and skill.

In all these scenarios you would most likely have an eye for detail. You would be careful to weigh all the visual evidence and make a logical decision based on your findings. I think

it is safe to say you probably would not make your choice in the manner that God had Gideon assemble his force in our lesson for today. Let's take a closer look at this lesson.

As Gideon gets up early in the morning to prepare for battle the first thing that the Lord tells Gideon is, ***"You have too many men."*** Gideon and the Israelites knew that they were badly outnumbered. The Midianites had a force of about 135,000 or roughly 100,000 more than the Israelites. And yet God would cut their numbers significantly with just one question, "Are you afraid?" The Lord told Gideon that if anyone trembled with fear he may turn back and leave Mount Gilead. When 20,000 left and 10,000 men remain the Lord still thought they had too many men for his plan and so he had another way of sifting his chosen few from these men. They would go down to the water to drink and there God would select those who would go with Gideon. It was not by a display of bravery or some other scientific or military test, but the Lord told Gideon to, ***"Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink."*** ⁶ ***Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.*** ⁷ ***The LORD said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place."***

Only 300 men were left! Instead of having an army a fourth of the size of the Midianite army, now Gideon's men were outnumbered 450 to 1. It would be clear that God alone would bring about this victory. In fact, God specifically tells us that this was all done ***in order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her.***

It was obviously not because of the strength or the numbers that Israel would win. It was not because of some ingenious military maneuvers or an epic display of bravery that would save the Israelites. **God made it clear that victory is through him alone.**

It is very much the same in the spiritual realm. In the eternal scheme of things God makes it clear that victory is through him alone. Perhaps if someone else was in charge of picking people for God's kingdom and for a place in heaven the requirements would look something more reasonable and logical. The requirements would likely include: integrity and honesty, valor and strength, endurance and self-control. However, in God's way of doing things we are told that these don't cause our salvation, but for a believer these will be the results of our salvation. No, God picks us, he chooses us for heaven, merely because of his undeserved love, not based on our outward merit. He alone is the reason that we are saved. **He makes it clear that the victory is through him alone.**

Scripture tells us that God does not pick people to be in his kingdom solely on the basis of outward achievement or earthly stature. He does not pick people to be in his kingdom in order to impress others, nor does he pick people to be in his kingdom in order to bring glory to those individuals. But with reckless grace he saves sinners. With kindness and love that many times defies human logic he brings the insignificant along with the prominent and the influential into his kingdom. He tells all people, regardless of stature or influence, that all who believe in his promised Savior have the victory of heaven. The most respected person, the most upright and honest, the most influential and the most powerful cannot save themselves anymore than the disrespected and the shamed. Neither the one praised by his neighbors as a saint nor those cursed by his family as a scoundrel can save himself. We are saved purely by God's grace. Christ alone, God alone, has the power to save

and his salvation is free to anyone who believes. As it is written, ***everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*** (Joel 2:32, Romans 10:13).

By his design, the way into heaven is not one we can achieve by ourselves. It is not a path paved by an impressive resume of good works. The way into heaven is not dependant on your ability to work your way up the celestial corporate ladder. Rather the only way to heaven, the narrow gate into this eternal celebration of victory, is through simple faith in Jesus Christ. That means salvation is open to all, but it is a narrow door.

In certain ways this is unexpected and confusing. This is not how the high and mighty of this world put together a guest list. This is not how a commander or general of today would hand select his unit. This is not even how kids would pick kickball teams. With God salvation is not based on ability or outward appearance or lineage or heritage. God's kingdom includes both the privileged and the underprivileged. It includes the extremely average and the utterly important, the remarkable and the unremarkable, the highly esteemed as well as the social pariah and everyone in between. Surely there will be those in heaven that we would not have expected to see and some missing that we surely would have expected. It will be indeed as Christ himself has told us, the last will be first and the first will be last.

By nature a part of us doesn't understand this underserved love, this grace of God. That sinful judgmental part of us sputters, *"This is not how it should work, especially for something as important as the kingdom of God and the gift of heaven."* *"Why is it open to just anyone who would believe in Jesus?"* *"Shouldn't you have to earn it or deserve it somehow?"* On one hand our sinful nature is bothered by how easy it is to get into heaven and on the other hand something makes our sinful minds a bit squeamish, *"Why does it have to be so exclusive? Why only through faith in Christ?"* We have been heavily influenced and persuaded by the world around us to be overly accepting, to compromise truth for tolerance, to let everyone just have their own way even if it is to their own detriment - and in this case, destruction. Because of this sinful mindset, this distorted perception, some might question that God's way of salvation is much too exclusive. Some might be critical of the Almighty's antics and call for a better way; and isn't that what many in this world do?

Many people in our world today believe that there are many roads to heaven. Major religious leaders, even Christian leaders, from around the world chime to say that we are all one and the same, that we all came from the same God and basically believe in the same God. The preach salvation as all-inclusive. *"It doesn't matter whether you're a Buddhist or Hindu, whether you practice Islam or Judaism, are a member of the Mormon church or a Jehovah's Witness,"* they'll say. *"All that matters is that you live a good life, try to treat others well, and do the best that you can."*

However, while most world religions may espouse noble goals for earthly living, these goals fall short of what God demands for entrance into heaven: perfection (Matthew 5:48). God still demands perfection, so it does matter what you believe. It does matter in whom you put your trust and what you believe; because there is only one way to salvation and eternal victory. The bad news is that we are not perfect, but the good news is Jesus came to be perfect in our place; and through faith he has given us his perfection (2 Corinthians 5:21). Through faith in him we have eternal life. Jesus is only way, the narrow door, and that door is open to us who believe.

Now, one more thing might bother us; because it is through such a narrow door that one must enter into God's kingdom a person might speculate that only a few people are going to be saved just as that individual in the gospel for today did. **"Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"** (Luke 13:23) It is not just curiosity that compels this question, but also fear, isn't it? *"Am I going to be left out because of something that I have done wrong or something I have failed to do?"* A sudden surge of panic comes over us as we consider our sins, our inadequacies, *"How could I ever make it into this exclusive club?"* We ask ourselves. A rush of fear takes hold as we look at the power and the mighty force of sin, death, and the devil. *"How could I ever defeat such a force?"*

Fortunately, our faithful God is there to drive away such fear. Because he alone is the one who brings us the victory. If you look again to this account of Gideon and his 300 men, fear was everywhere among the Israelites. In the original Hebrew this is brought out in the very words that are used. Gideon and his army camped at the Spring of Harod. The name of this spring mimics the Hebrew word for fear. The hill near their camp is referred to in the first verse as the Hill of Moreh (Teacher's Hill), but is called Mt. Gilead (Fear Mountain) in verse 3. When Gideon at God's direction asked those who trembled with fear to depart, there were 20,000 who fled. Fear was quite real in the camp of Israel.

Fear can be a real and powerful tool of the devil that he attempts to use in our lives as well. When a young man stumbles into a life of sin the devil can assault his conscience with fear. *Why would God love you? Why would God take you back? Why would God save you? Shouldn't he punish you instead?* When a woman commits a sin she may be trapped and smothered by the fear that she has disqualified herself for the victory of heaven. *How could God welcome you now? How could you be included in his family?* Our enemy, Satan, snarls as he ambushes us with fear.

Dear friends, we don't have to be afraid. As much as the devil wants to convince us otherwise, as much as he tries to talk us out of our victory in Jesus, as much as he wants us to plunge in despair and overwhelm us with fear when we are caught in a sin, he cannot. For we have forgiveness, we have salvation; we have pardon and peace in Christ Jesus. Even if we mess up, even if we fall into a temptation that causes shame and disgrace the victory we have in Christ is not forfeited. Jesus forgives all our sins. He keeps heaven open to us. He gives us the victory. Christ Jesus and his Holy Spirit lead us to repentance and then guide us in joyful and confident living for though we know our heart's condition we know victory that we have in Jesus. For God makes it clear that Christ alone brings the victory. His perfect love, his perfect sacrifice, drives out fear. Our salvation is sure and certain because our salvation is not based on our performance, but on his perfect sacrifice. This gives us the peace and comfort that God intended. It takes away a fear of punishment and guilt and gives us the joy of salvation.

Let us give God the glory for the great things he has done for he has done marvelous things. God alone gives us the victory. By his grace we are saved. Christ has saved us and through the miracle of faith he includes us in his kingdom of victory. Daily the good Lord takes away our guilt, and our fear of punishment, and he gives us the confident joy of eternal salvation and victory. Praise the Lord for the marvelous things he has done! Give God the glory for his great gifts of salvation and victory which are yours through faith in Christ Jesus! Amen.