

Against the Odds

Judges 7:1-27

Introduction:

We love the underdog. We cheer when the little guy wins. When someone, with nothing more than grit and determination, stares in the face of overwhelming odds and overcomes them we are applaud.

People love it when someone can beat the Patriots or the Yankees unless those happen to be your favorite teams. We love it when Cinderella gets to go to the big dance. The sports world went wild in March when the 16th seeded UMBC Retrievers downed the Number 1 Virginia Cavaliers. The whole nation got behind the Loyola Ramblers' run into the Final Four and their 98 year old chaplain Sister Jean became the best-selling bobblehead during Loyola's incredible run.

But when it comes to facing overwhelming odds, my sci-fi nerd brain prefers everyone's favorite Vulcan from Star Trek— Spock.

(Show Clip — from *Errand of Mercy*)

Now there's some pretty bad odds. Why are we drawn to people who go against the odds? Why do we identify with the little guy? Because we've all been there. We've all been in those situations where we felt the deck was stacked against us. We've all faced what we believed to be overwhelming odds. Oh, they might not be Klingons armed with phasers, but they are fearsome odds nonetheless. In fact, sometimes we'd rather face Klingons armed with phasers.

Have you ever felt like you were going against the odds trying to raise your kids in the discipline and instruction of the Lord in a world that is constantly bombarding them with everything but? Do you feel like you're facing overwhelming odds trying to live a life of holiness and purity under a constant barrage of immoral temptation? Have you ever felt like the odds were against you in trying to make your marriage work? Young people, do you ever feel like you're facing staggering odds trying to get through 4 years of high school and 4 years of college with a vibrant, growing personal faith intact?

Sometimes, in just trying to get good grades, or get the bills paid we feel like the deck is stack against us. Shoot, it can be tough just getting to church on time, to say nothing of using our gifts in a vital ministry, reaching the lost, and growing God's kingdom.

But when it comes to facing impossible odds, nobody has anything on Gideon. Gideon

marched into battle with only 300 troops. His enemy numbered 135,000. Wonder what Spock would have to say about those odds? But even more fascinating than the overwhelming odds Gideon faced, was the story of just how he got those odds. We find this story in Judges 7.

Judg 7:1-8

So Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and his army got up early and went as far as the spring of Harod. The armies of Midian were camped north of them in the valley near the hill of Moreh. 2 The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many warriors with you. If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites will boast to me that they saved themselves by their own strength. 3 Therefore, tell the people, 'Whoever is timid or afraid may leave and go home.' "Twenty-two thousand of them went home, leaving only ten thousand who were willing to fight.

4 But the LORD told Gideon, "There are still too many! Bring them down to the spring, and I will sort out who will go with you and who will not." 5 When Gideon took his warriors down to the water, the LORD told him, "Divide the men into two groups. In one group put all those who cup water in their hands and lap it up with their tongues like dogs. In the other group put all those who kneel down and drink with their mouths in the stream." 6 Only three hundred of the men drank from their hands. All the others got down on their knees and drank with their mouths in the stream. 7 The LORD told Gideon, "With these three hundred men I will rescue you and give you victory over the Midianites. Send all the others home." 8 So Gideon collected the provisions and rams' horns of the other warriors and sent them home. But he kept the three hundred men with him.

Let's run some numbers here. Gideon started with an army numbering 32,000 men. Now that's a whole lot more than 300, but it still was nothing compared to Midian's 135,000. Gideon was outnumbered 4 to 1. Nearly any military commander in his right mind would look at this and say, "It's not enough."

But God looked at these numbers and said, "It's too much." I wonder what went through Gideon's mind when he heard God say that, "Excuse me, what did you say?" That probably didn't sound too good to Gideon considering how reluctant and afraid he was at the beginning. Gideon didn't want to lead his people into battle, and he took a whole lot of convincing, and now God says, "Let's get rid of 2/3 of your army. Send those who are timid and afraid home." And so God winnowed the number of Gideon's army down. He goes from 32,000 to 10,000. 13 to 1 odds.

The Right Heart

It isn't talking about the normal fear any man has before battle. He is describing those whose hearts are paralyzed with fear. God wanted men with the right heart. Courage is not the absence of fear. It is the trust to go forward in spite of your fear. But these men were paralyzed by their fear. The thought of their home undefended and their families unprotected was just too

much.

I don't want to say these men were cowards. They had answered Gideon's call. They showed up with their weapons. They may have even gone into battle. The problem though, was their hearts wouldn't be in it, because their hearts weren't right. They were paralyzed with fear.

God was not being arbitrary or random in selecting which men stayed and which men went home. God wanted only the best. The truth is these 22,000 men that went home could have been a liability to Gideon's army. In Deuteronomy 20 God gives Israel regulations in conducting warfare, and in vs. 8 it says, "*Is anyone terrified? If you are, go home before you frighten anyone else.*" Many battles in history have been lost when the front lines of one of the armies breaks. When enough soldiers turn tail and run, panic infects everyone.

If Gideon had marched into battle when 2 of every 3 of his men didn't have a heart for it, what would have happened to the morale of his army? Such fearful timidity spreads like a cancer, jumping from one person to the next. It can spread quickly through an army, through a life, through a marriage, through a church. All it takes is just a handful of people who say, "We can't do it. It won't work. We've never done it before."

It's one thing to show up and play the role. Lots of people don't mind playing the part of being a Christian. We go to church. We say the prayers. We sing the songs. But we're not really fighting the battle. We're not really having an impact for the kingdom. We hang out in camp and look like a soldier, but we're no threat to the enemy. We just slow our side down.

Many times this is because we are fearful and timid. We're afraid to get deeply into God's word. We're afraid to get serious about holiness and purity in our lives. We're afraid of the commitment it would take to be involved in dynamic, life-changing ministry. We're afraid of having a possible-only-with-God vision what that might mean for our own comfort zone. We're afraid of what we might have to give up, if Christ were truly Lord of our hearts and Lord of our church. And so we just sit here.

And when such fear festers in our lives, or in the church, it paralyzes. It keeps us from serving. It keeps us from giving. It keeps us from reaching the lost. It keeps us from growing. If somebody has a new idea, we shoot it down. If somebody does something, we criticize. If we don't like the way someone does something, we complain. If God wants to do some new thing in our lives we cower. We don't have any new ideas ourselves. We're not doing anything ourselves, and we let our fear keep anybody else from dreaming and doing too.

God didn't want this kind of fear festering in Gideon's army. And so he sent them home. Better to march into battle with 10,000 dreamers and doers, 10,000 with the right heart, than with 32,000 trembling with fear. If you want to beat the odds, you have to have the right heart

The Right Mind

So, with 10,000 guys with the right heart Gideon was ready to march into battle, right? Not quite. Gideon is now outnumbered more than 13 to 1, and God says, "Not yet, Gideon. You still have too many men." Then God had Gideon's men submit to a most unusual test. He was to divide the men who scooped the water in their hands from those kneel down and drink directly from their stream. In the first group there were 300, and in the other group, 9,700. I can almost hear Gideon's thoughts at the end of the test, "Oh, great, I bet he's going to pick the group with only 300." **God sends the 9,700 away. Gideon is now facing 450 to 1 odds.**

Again, God's selection process is neither random nor arbitrary. The first test found the guys with the right heart. This test singles out the guys with the right mind. In a combat situation facing a hostile enemy, you want men who are always on guard, alert, and prepared to do battle. Well, the men who abandoned themselves to the luxury of the water by kneeling all the way down were neither alert, nor were they ready to do battle. They also made an easy target. However, the men who took a hand, the Hebrew specifies only one hand, could remain observant, they could keep a hand on their sword, and were ready to spring to action in an instant. They kept in mind the priorities.

This is another problem that often afflicts the church. Sometimes the church is held back not by her lack of heart, but by her shallow mind. The church is busy and active, but her efforts are misdirected. Doing something becomes more important than doing the right thing. Doing more becomes more important than doing well. Busy schedules and crammed calendars don't mean the church is engaging the enemy or advancing the gospel. Sometimes, we're just spinning our wheels and burning people out.

God is not only looking for people to serve Him with all of their heart. He is looking for people to serve Him with all of their mind. It takes more than a courageous heart. It takes an agile mind. In Romans 10:2, Paul criticizes the Israelites for having great zeal without knowledge. In Romans 12:2 he calls us to be transformed by the renewing our minds. He urges the Christians in Corinth to take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Cor. 10:5) It takes the right heart and the right mind.

That's what God found in the 300 men. So Gideon went from 32,000 men to 10,000, from 10,000 to 300. He went from being outnumbered 4 to 1 to being outnumbered 450 to 1. God stripped Gideon of 99% of his resources, leaving him with only 1%. Gideon marched into battle with a force that was 1/5th of 1% of that of Midian's. So how do you like those odds?

Conclusion

Gideon and his 300 men go on to defeat the Midianites with a combination of stealth, cunning strategy, and psychology, but it's none of those things really that win the battle. It's the protection and provision of God. The ultimate lesson we learn from this passage isn't about battlefield psychology, or combat tactics, as brilliant as those may have been. It's about faith in God. More important than being courageous or having a good head about you in the thick of the struggle, is that you have an unyielding trust in God.

"You have too many warriors," God said. How often do we think that we don't have enough for God? I don't have enough talent. I don't have enough gifts. I don't have enough knowledge. I don't have enough influence. Brothers and sisters, our problem, isn't that we don't have enough. It's that we have too much. Could it be we have too many human resources on which to rely? We certainly have too much pride, too much ego, too much self-reliance, too much concern about our self-image, and too much selfishness.

And yet we so often fail to step out in faith because we fear what we don't have, or we fear what the enemy does have. But it's not what we don't have that limits us, nor is it what our enemy has. It's what we do have, but won't let God use.

God makes it very clear to Gideon that He doesn't want there to be any confusion about accomplished the great victory for Israel. He didn't want them to think it was due to their powerful force, or Gideon's great leadership. Israel would know with absolute certainty that it was divine intervention that gave them victory.

God did all this to a guy, who didn't want to do it in the first place. In chapter 6 Gideon is a man who fears the quantity of the enemy. In chapter 7 God strips him of confidence in quantity of his allies. This shapes him into having the quality of reliance upon God.

God wants us to have a quality that relies on Him, instead of quantity that encourages us to rely on ourselves. Look at what he does with Gideon. He cuts out 99% of the people that Gideon had to rely on. When you lose 99% of your earthly confidence, the only thing you have left to rely on is God. What do you think God can do with your 1%