

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

There are advertisements all around us. And those advertisements carry a common theme. It doesn't matter what the commercial is for. Car commercials, beer commercials, shampoo commercials, clothing or shoes commercials. Every one of them shows people that are strong, confident, poised, assertive, assured, daring, self-sufficient... even cocky, as long as it's not overdone. Every commercial says, "If you use our product, this is what you will be like!"

And why do they produce such commercials? Because that's what sells their product! Deep down we want to have these qualities, don't we? We want to be like the people on the commercials. We want to be strong, self-confident and in-control. We want to have a great image. We want other people to like us and look up to us and see us as strong.

And perhaps this is the reason we have trouble understanding the Bible. Perhaps you've noticed that the Bible is not overly concerned about your image. And as you look at the heroes of the Bible, what you find is that those heroes are in reality servants. And every one of them has a fatal flaw. Think about the great people of the Bible: Noah, Abraham, David, Mary, Peter, Paul and all the others. Though great heroes of faith, each had great weaknesses. And each one of them was great only because they trusted in God and relied on *his* strength.

In the text we consider today, God teaches us the same important lesson that every great man or woman of faith has learned. We are weak. The Lord is strong. Your strength comes from him. **The Lord is your strength.**

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. 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, 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. 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." 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." Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink. 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." 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.

I pray that all of you are doing additional Bible reading during the week. Could I suggest that this week you take some time to read through the book of Judges? Perhaps we sometimes short-change the Old Testament books and give all our attention to the New Testament. I hope you will forgive me if I use a little of this sermon time to generate an interest in the book of Judges for our reading this week. This will also serve as historical backdrop for the story before us today.

A quick race through Bible history so we get our bearings: God had promised Adam and Eve that he would send a Savior who would crush Satan's head. He would save them from their sin and rebellion. The promise was nearly lost to mankind on a number of occasions. Around 2100 BC, God saw fit to call a man named Abraham. Out of all the people on the planet, God chose Abraham to be the father of a chosen nation, from which the promised Savior would be born. Abraham had a son, Isaac. Isaac had a couple sons, but Jacob was the one through whom the Savior would be born. Jacob is the one who wrestled with God and who was renamed by God. Jacob was called Israel. Israel had 12 sons who got married and had lots of children too. These became the 12 tribes of Israel. A famine in the land of Canaan where Israel and his family had settled resulted in them immigrating to Egypt. There they and their descendants remained for about 400 years. They grew and prospered into a nation of a couple million over those 400 years.

God called Moses to be his servant to lead the people out of Egypt back to the Promised Land... Palestine... that bit of land that lies just east of the Mediterranean Sea. After 40 years in the wilderness, Joshua led the people into Canaan, the Promised Land. They proceeded to conquer the land and settle there. Read all about it in the book of Joshua. The 12 tribes received land according to tribe. They did not have a single king or a unified government ruling over them for the first 400 years or so. God was their king. It was a theocracy. That 400 years (for round figures we'll say 1400 BC until about 1000 BC) was known as the period of the Judges. No kings, just these local rulers called judges that helped keep law and order in the land, and deliver and protect the 12 tribes from outside threats.

But spiritually, all was not well among the tribes of Israel. To give you a preview of what the book of Judges is all about, listen to this summary from Judges 2:10-19: "After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up, who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD and served the Baals. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress. Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers, they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD's commands. Whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them, he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived; for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers, following other gods and serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways."

So you see a cycle in this book. The people are evil and rebellious. They worship false gods. God is holy and rightly angry. He disciplines them... usually by allowing foreign invaders to come in and make their lives miserable. The people come to their senses... they repent of their sin and idolatry and plead to God for help. God sends a deliverer... a savior (small 's')... a "judge" who would rescue them from their perilous situation. The people would praise God and worship him... for a short time. And then they would rebel and turn to false gods again... repeat.

In this book then, we see man's dark nature. God's holiness. God's incredible patience and mercy. And God's power to save. One author gave this subtitle to Judges: "Such a Great Salvation." So this week please read about God's great salvation in this book of Judges.

Before us today is specifically the story about one of those judges or saviors that God raised up named Gideon. After a period of oppression, God decided he would show his mercy to Israel by sending Gideon to be their savior and rescuer. Was Gideon a confident, strong man (the kind we see in commercials) who was sure he could handle such a task? Not at all. Look at Judges 6:15. After God told him what he would do, Gideon says, “But Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” Only when God gave Gideon some divine signs was Gideon able to even move forward to obey God’s command.

We started today by talking about image. We tend to want others to perceive us as self-assured, confident, independent and strong. But note whom God hand-picked to deliver his people from powerful enemies. A man who had no image. A nobody in Israel / tribe / and even family! God chose the weakest one to accomplish great things.

But God wasn’t done. God was bound and determined to make sure that everyone in Israel knew that this deliverance from Israel’s enemies was HIS work, not the work of a strong Israelite force. The army at Gideon’s disposal was a group of 32,000 fighting men. But God spoke to Gideon and said, **“You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands.”** Can you imagine if you were Gideon. You’ve never led troops into battle. The future of your whole nation is on the line. And God says, “You have too many men...” Too *many*? What?! That’s like saying, “You know that car you want to buy? I’m sorry, but you have too much money to buy it!” Not possible! Surely, you can have “not enough,” but “too much” isn’t a problem!

But for God, it was. You see, God insisted on weakness, so that he could clearly demonstrate to Israel that it was his strength that was saving them. So God pares down the army a bit. First he tells Gideon, **“Announce to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mont Gilead.’”** It was blanket permission to abandon the army and forget the fight. Are you afraid to go into battle? That’s fine. Go home! And 22,000 men up and left, just like that. 10,000 men were left. Do you think Gideon was sweating yet?

But God wasn’t done. **“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.’”** 10,000 still too many! When the men went down to the water, God told Gideon to have them drink. As they drank, he watched. Some would drink with their face right down in the water. Others scooped it up in their hands. In fact the ratio was 300 to 9,700. God said, “Take the 300, they will be your army.” Now, there was nothing inherently better about those men. We’re reading too much into the text if we insist that the 300 were somehow much more skilled or fit for battle because of the way they drank water. This was just a seemingly random way to quickly pare down the army to the size God wanted. From 32,000, down to just 300. Now God had Gideon’s “army” (if you can call it that) just the size he wanted.

Let’s pause here and remember once again why God reduced the size of this army. **“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.”** God was going to prove to Israel that he was strong to save them. He did not want there to be any danger of them taking credit for what He had done. So he cut back the army size 99% in order to prove his point.

I’m going to let you read the rest of the story on your own, but, spoiler alert: God does give Israel the victory. An army of just 300 men completely crushes the entire army of the Midianites. God proved his strength and his ability to save his people. The point hit home. Gideon remained a ruler in Israel for 40 years, and during that time, the people not only enjoyed peace, they also remained true followers of the one living God.

What does God want us to take from all of this? Think for a moment of a success you've experienced in your life. It can be anything. Landing the big contract for your company. Graduating with honors. Hitting the grand-slam homerun. Getting promoted or a pay raise in your job. Raising kids that turned out to be good, godly people. We all have those moments of success when we did something right. Now let me ask you this. Where was your heart when that happened? What were you thinking about? Were you soaking it in, letting your ego grow? Were you happy to take the credit? Did you give a thought to God and how it was ultimately his strength that gave you your success?

God wants us to honestly look at ourselves today, and not just muster up a little false modesty about ourselves and our abilities. God wants us to honestly admit that weakness is our real condition. Understand me right. I'm not trying to convince you to *feel* weak, puny or even sickly. I want you to acknowledge that you *are* weak.

When we think we are strong, God often has a way of bringing us to our knees. Have you ever noticed that? Just when you're starting to feel that your life is under your control. That you are able and capable and you can do it all, God throws you a curve ball to remind you who you really are. He does it because he loves us.

He even did that to the apostle Paul. Wow, talk about a guy who could easily get a big head? Extremely smart, very talented, beyond successful! He is certainly by far the most influential man in the spread of Christianity around the world. God gave him direct revelations and moved him to record 2/3 of the divinely inspired books in our New Testament! The temptation to put trust in self and in his own strength must have been immense. And so God helped him out. God sent him a "thorn in the flesh"... some kind of physical disability. It was a real, evident weakness that impacted Paul's work significantly. So he prayed God would remove it... three times he prayed intensely. And God said: "**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**" Because of this *blessing* from God, Paul concluded, "**When I am weak, then I am strong.**" God often reminds us that weakness is our real condition.

When we realize our weakness we turn to God and his strength. And we are mightily impressed. When we look to God's strength, we see just how strong he is. He defeated our worst enemies: Satan, Sin and Death. He did it with an army of ONE ... his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The power for eternal life and godly living does not lie within you! It lies within your God. He is powerful to save... and that's just what he's done!

Brothers and sisters, rely fully in God and in his salvation. Trust Jesus fully. And always remember: The LORD (not you, not your money, not your family, etc.) **the LORD** is your strength. Amen.

And the peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will guard and keep your hearts and your minds through faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.