



# Central Peninsula Church

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## When Small is Good

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One of my children is in her junior year of high school. Besides taking a demanding schedule of classes and preparing for the SAT's, she is at that point where she is trying to decide where to apply to college. It's not an easy decision. What makes it even more difficult is that she must get three or four letters a week from colleges all over the country that we've never even heard of. Schools like Randolph-Macon, Colby, Lock Haven, Babson and Allegheny. These schools are the "little guys" among the giants like Penn State and UCLA. As we read over their letters, these tiny colleges are sending a consistent message: small is good. They boast about things like a close-knit community, personalized instruction, opportunities for financial aid, intercollegiate athletics where you don't have to be the next Michael Jordan to play, and a top ten rating in the US New and World Report College Guide.

Of course, it's not always easy to convince a 17-year-old that small is good. To them close-knit community means there are limited social opportunities; personalized instruction means you can't hide in the woodwork; more financial aid means it's unaffordable to begin with; and small college athletics means they play lacrosse instead of football. To a 17-year-old, that doesn't always sound so good. But you can't blame them for that. They've grown up in a society where we boast not about small things but big things: big houses, big churches, big salaries, big stars, big companies. Let's face it, for the most part, we're more impressed with big things than we are with small things.

But when we come to the story of Gideon in Judges 6-8, we see that there is something about that which is small that is good; there is something about being outnumbered that gives us an advantage rather than a disadvantage; there is something about being the most likely to be overlooked that is better than being the most likely to succeed.

### I. God places us in situations where the odds are overwhelming.

The story begins like we would expect. Look at v. 1. **"Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD; and the LORD gave them into the hands of Midian seven years."** Another cycle begins. Israel does evil in the sight of the Lord and the Lord gives them over to a new enemy - the Midianites. Later, we learn that they were also joined by the Amalekites and the sons of the east. These desert nomads were long time enemies of Israel. But this wasn't a military occupation, it was more like terrorist attacks where they constantly raided Israel's food supply. Whenever Israel had crops to be harvested, they would ride in on their swift camels and help themselves to both crops and livestock. For seven straight years they did this. Verse 2 says it was so bad that Israel had to run for the hills and live in caves. And it wasn't just one area; the writer says they did this "as far as Gaza" which is

in the deep south of Israel. And look how many of them there were. **"For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, they would come in like locusts for number, both they and their camels were innumerable; and they came into the land to devastate it"** (v. 5). They were "like locusts," not just in their destruction but in their sheer numbers. Altogether, they couldn't be counted!

As a result, once again Israel is miserable. Look at v. 6. **"So Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried to the LORD."** They were brought "very low." The NIV says they were "impoverished." Here they are in the land of milk and honey living like scavengers. They can't even enjoy the fruit of their labor. That's what compromise does, you know. Oh, it doesn't start that way. Sin usually begins with a bang. It yields some rather tasty dividends. But before long it vomits tragic consequences in our lives. If you've ignored God's warnings for long, you've been there. You've camped in that place called Reap What Was Sown. It was fun getting there, but you've had enough. You've been brought very low. Don't forget that it's the Lord who does that. It says that the Lord gave them into the hands of Midian. He's so much more committed to your holiness than he is to your happiness, that he afflicts you. David wrote, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word." His love is so fierce that he'll go to almost any lengths to get your attention.

And he got Israel's. Israel began to cry out to the Lord. At this point in the familiar cycle of Judges, we would expect God to raise up a new judge; a new deliverer for his people. But instead we see in vv. 7-10 that God sends a prophet instead. He doesn't have a name or a pedigree. He just comes with a word from God. Through this anonymous prophet God says,

**"Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'It was I who brought you up from Egypt and brought you out from the house of slavery. I delivered you from the hands of the Egyptians and from the hands of all your oppressors, and dispossessed them before you and gave you their land, and I said to you, "I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But you have not obeyed Me'"**" (vv. 8b-10).

Why does God send a prophet before he sends a deliverer? Because he wants them to deal with the real issue. When we're in pain, what is that we want? We want relief. We cry out because we want God to step in and fix the problem. Sometimes our cry is not a cry of genuine repentance, but just a cry for relief. We're like the man who goes to the doctor because he has terrible heartburn. He wants relief, but he doesn't want to change his diet. We're like the couple who goes to a financial counselor to get out of debt. They want relief, but they don't want to change their spending habits. Here God says, "The real issue here is that you've forgotten who I am and what

I've done. The real issue is that I warned you about these foreign gods, but you've not listened to me." When we're under God's discipline; when we're reaping what we've sown; when we've been brought very low because of our sin, we need to deal with the root issue.

Until we do that, we're not ready for relief. And we'll continue like Israel to be overwhelmed by our enemies. They'll be "like locusts for number...innumerable." We don't know how much time passed before Israel really got the message. But starting in v. 11 God says, "Enough!"

## II. God calls the least likely people to defeat the enemy.

**"Then the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites. The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, 'The LORD is with you, O valiant warrior'" (vv. 11-12).**

We're introduced here to Gideon, who will become the fourth major judge in this book. The angel of the Lord, who we know is the Lord himself, comes and sits under an oak tree in the town of Ophrah, which is in the north of Israel. This oak belonged to a man named Joash, who was an Abiezrite, a family within the tribe of Manassah. His son, Gideon, is a vivid picture of the sorry state of Israel. He's beating out wheat in a wine press. This is like trying to fly a kite or sail a boat indoors. Wheat was always beaten outside on a threshing floor; you threw it up in the air and the wind carried away the chaff and the grain fell to the ground. But he's forced inside, in fear of the marauding Midianites. The angel of the Lord seems to have quite a sense of humor! "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior." "Who me?" Gideon must have looked around to see who else was in the room!

But Gideon isn't laughing. Look how he responds.

**"Then Gideon said to him, 'O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian'" (v. 13).**

At this point Gideon has no idea who he's speaking with. So he engages in a little theological debate: "If the Lord is with us like you say, why am I threshing wheat in a wine press? If he's a God of miracles, why doesn't he do one now? He's not with us; he's abandoned us." At least he's honest! By the way, we need more of this. I just don't think God is all that impressed with our pious words. We need more honesty. I mean, he's not singing "God is good, all the time!" That's okay. He's being real with God and I think God prefers that to shallow spirituality.

That's not to say we'll always get airtight answers. The Lord refuses to enter into a theological debate with Gideon. He sticks to the matter at hand.

**"The LORD looked at him and said, 'Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?' He said to Him, 'O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel?"**

**Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house.' But the LORD said to him, Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man'" (vv. 14-16).**

We're starting to get a picture here of who this Gideon is. Not only is he full of fear, he's full of doubt. And not only does he doubt God, but he doubts himself. He says, "You need to check your map. You've come to the wrong place. I'm the least of the least. I'm the least person in the least family. No one would listen to me. They'll laugh me out of Israel!" And you know the Lord doesn't disagree. He doesn't try to boost his self-confidence. None of that matters. What matters is, "I've sent you. I'll be with you." And because of that, don't miss what he says, "You will defeat Midian as *one man*." Underline those words, "as one man." Remember v. 5? Remember the words, "like locusts for number, both they and their camels were innumerable." The Lord says, "I'm going to put one man up against all of them!"

But Gideon is still not convinced. So in v. 17 he asks for a sign of confirmation.

**"So Gideon said to Him, 'If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who speak with me. Please do not depart from here, until I come back to You, and bring out my offering and lay it before You.' And He said, 'I will remain until you return'" (vv. 17-18).**

Before we're too hard on Gideon, realize that he's in pretty good company here. Remember Moses? God said, "I'm sending you to deliver your people." Moses said, "Who am I?" God said, "I'll be with you." Moses said, "Prove it. Show me a sign." The Lord did just that. He gave Moses the proof he needed, and he does the same thing with Gideon. In vv. 19-24 Gideon runs off and prepares a big meal for the angel. The angel tells him to lay it all out on the rock. Gideon follows directions and right before his eyes fire springs up from the rock and swallows up the meal. And then - poof - the angel disappears. Gideon realizes this really was the Lord, and he's afraid because he knows you can't see God and live. But the Lord just whispers in his ear, "Peace. Don't be afraid. I didn't show up here to kill you." And then with all the zeal of a new convert, in v. 24 Gideon builds an altar and worships the Lord right there. His closet of fear becomes an altar of worship.

It's no surprise that Gideon had a hard time sleeping that night. As he lay awake in bed wondering what the next step would be, God spoke to him again. He spoke very specifically about an issue in his life he had to deal with before the Lord could use him. Right there at his father's house were other altars. There was an altar to the Canaanite god, Baal, and there was a wooden image of the goddess, Asherah. Gideon hadn't given it a second thought. That's how he was raised. That's all he ever knew. That's what happens to us. We get so used to a worldly way of thinking and living, that we don't even see it anymore. But in v. 25 God says, "Deal with it. Go tear it down." That's always the way God operates. Before we can make a difference out there, we have to take care of matters here at home. We have to clear out the idols in our own life before we can deal with the lives of others. We have to stand up and be counted for Christ at home before we go out and change the world. And that's scary. For some of us, it's harder at home. It's hardest with those who know us the best. It wasn't easy for Gideon either. Look at v. 27. **"Then Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had spoken to him; and because he was too afraid of his father's household**

**and the men of the city to do it by day, he did it by night.**" Don't you love this guy? He's a secret agent for God! He's scared to death, not only of the men of the city, but of his own family. That's okay. He's still learning how to walk. Better to obey in fear than not to obey at all. As one writer put it, "Obedience was essential and heroism optional." I think of a high school student who takes her Bible to school. She intends to read it at lunch time, but meanwhile she hides it beneath her other books. I think of a wife sneaks off to a Bible Study while her husband is at work. She's afraid of what he'd do if he found out. That's okay. God understands. They're both learning to walk by faith.

Sooner or later, though, someone will open the closet door and word will get out. It did with Gideon. And when it did all his fears were realized, at least initially. One of those ten servants must have ratted him out. The men of the city came to his house and said, **"Then the men of the city said to Joash, 'Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has torn down the altar of Baal, and indeed, he has cut down the Asherah which was beside it'"** (v. 30). And then you'll never believe what happens. Guess who comes to his defense? His father. His father says, "Listen, if Baal is that much of a big shot, let him defend himself." What an encouragement this must have been to Gideon! His own father is now standing with him. His obedience is paying off.

And it seems that his willingness to obey had a ripple effect on his fellow Israelites. Sometime later, when the Midianites were preparing for another raid, he was able to rally several tribes.

**"So the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; and he blew a trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called together to follow him. He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, and they also were called together to follow him; and he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they came up to meet them"** (vv. 34-35).

I think it must have surprised Gideon that his people actually responded. Again he is encouraged. You would think he is ready for battle, but look what happens next.

**"Then Gideon said to God, 'If You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken, behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken.' And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he drained the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water. Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not let Your anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground.' God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground"** (vv. 36-40).

So now, for the second time, Gideon asks for a sign of confirmation. Once again, he gets it, not just once, but twice. Unfortunately, Christians have been laying out fleeces ever since. "God, if you want me to buy that new car, I ask that I would see it on sale tomorrow in the paper." Or, "God, if you want me to take that job, I ask that they would call me and make an offer in 24 hours." I don't recommend this approach. Why? Well, the Bible never tells us to do it. And, what WE commonly call laying out a fleece, is NOT what we see Gideon doing. First of all, Gideon's fleece was NOT a circumstantial sign, but a miraculous display of

supernatural power. You can't compare a car going on sale with what the Lord did with Gideon's fleece!

Second, Gideon was NOT employing the fleece to ascertain what God's will was, but rather to confirm what God had already told him his will was. There is no question here what God's will was. He just wants God to confirm what he had already spoken. This leads to the third thing: Gideon's demand was an expression of doubt, not an example of how to receive guidance from God. God's will was clear. But God was also gracious and patient to build up his faith step by step.

That's the whole point behind Gideon's call. "One man," God had told him. "You shall defeat Midian as one man." What kind of man? An important man? A godly man? A courageous man? A big man? None of the above. He uses a fearful man; an unimportant man (the least of the least); an idolatrous man; a small man. A doubting man who needed an extra assurance every step of the way. But ultimately he was an obedient man whose faith would ever so slowly translate into action. Things haven't changed. That's still who he calls. That's still who he uses. No one is too small for God to use them, but they can be too big. It's true of individuals, but it's also true of God's people as a whole.

### **III. God reduces our strength so that we're not boastful in victory.**

Chapter 7 begins with Israel's troops in place for battle. 32,000 Israelites are camped at the spring of Harod, which fittingly means the spring of trembling. The Midianites are just four miles north in the valley of Jezreel. But before Israel is ready for battle, God has one more matter to take up with Gideon.

**"The LORD said to Gideon, 'The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, "My own power has delivered me." Now therefore come, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, "Whoever is afraid and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead." So 22,000 people returned, but 10,000 remained"** (vv. 2-3).

God says, "I don't like these odds. We know there are more of them than we can count, but there are too many of us. Get rid of the ones who are afraid." Gideon is left with 10,000. In v. 4 God says, "I still don't like these odds." He had Gideon put the 10,000 through a kind of strange screening process, and 9,700 are sent home. So Gideon's army is trimmed down to 300 men. That's 300 men against an army of a million locusts! Why would God want odds like that? Why stack the deck against your own people? The answer to that question is very clear. God wants to make it unmistakably clear who is responsible for the victory. **"The people are too many for me...for Israel would become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me.'"**

You can't be too small for God to use you, but you can be too big. So God is always reducing us to the point that we have nothing in ourselves in which to trust. If we have other resources or any confidence apart from God, then we'll rely on these things. God does with us what he did with Gideon: He eliminates everything that we might trust in and

derive strength from. He puts us in situations that we can't handle, where we find ourselves overwhelmed. He removes all the supports and scaffolding in our lives. We think that life is falling apart, but God is carefully and patiently building our faith step by step.

I recall so well how the Lord taught me this when I first came to CPC. I was 30 years old and I had been at CPC for less than a year. I wasn't hired to preach; I was hired to lead the CG ministry. But then Jeff Farrar became ill, and the elders decided to give him a needed Sabbatical that ended up lasting for five months. I found out within a few weeks that seminary hadn't prepared me for this. I was in over my head. Every Sunday morning I felt my inadequacy being exposed to 400 people. But God was reducing me. I came out of seminary too big for God to use me. I needed to be reduced.

Now this reduction threw our friend Gideon into another crisis of faith. And it's interesting, because this time he doesn't ask for a sign, but God gives him one anyway. God tells Gideon to sneak down to the Midianite camp. Look at vv. 9-11.

**“Now the same night it came about that the LORD said to him, ‘Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hands. But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp, and you will hear what they say; and afterward your hands will be strengthened that you may go down against the camp.’ So he went with Purah his servant down to the outposts of the army that was in the camp.”**

He and his servant sneak down. Notice we're reminded again in v. 12 how numerous they were. This time it says they were **“lying in the valley as numerous as locusts, and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore.”** That's a lot of people and a lot of camels for an army of 300. But then Gideon overhears a Midianite relating a dream to his friend. In the dream a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian and struck a tent so that it fell and even turned upside down.” His friend said, **“His friend replied, ‘This is nothing less than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given Midian and all the camp into his hand’”** (v. 14). Did you hear what he said, “Gideon, the son of Joash, *a man of Israel.*” After hearing that Gideon was ready. Verse 15 says after he heard that, **“he bowed in worship.”** He returned to the camp of Israel and said, ‘Arise, for the Lord has given the camp of Midian into your hands.’” We'll see how the Lord did that next week, but for now just imagine one man leading a miniature army of 300 against what just as well could be a million. But those are the odds where God can do a work.

## CONCLUSION

You see, you can't be too small for God to use you, but you can be too big. It doesn't matter what the odds are. A little boy was playing right field for his Little League baseball team. He was standing there looking around while the opposing team was up to bat, and a man walked by and asked him what the score was. “We're losing 18-0,” said the boy. “Well,” the man said. “I must say you sure don't look concerned.” The boy looked puzzled, “Concerned?” he said. “Why should I be concerned? We haven't even come to bat yet.” The Christian life is like that. God loves it when the odds are stacked against us. That's why he puts us in situations where we're brought very low. That's why he chooses insignificant people like Gideon. That's why he reduces us.

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