

Introduction

Today is December 8, which means we have about a week or two before the Christmas shopping season begins. Thankfully many of us are able to do our shopping online. The convenience is simply incredible. This is especially true for buying books. While I would love to shop locally more, so much of what is sold in bookstores is, well, not the sort of book I would buy, including Christian bookstores. This is understandable given the keen insight that the great Roman statesman Cicero recently tweeted,

Times are bad. Children no longer obey their parents, and everyone is writing a book.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106BC–43BC)

It can seem the only real qualification for getting published is a large social media presence so we end up with self-help books disguised as Christian books. There was a book released this year written by a certain celebrity pastor called, “Do the New You: 6 Mindsets to Become Who You Were Created to Be”. I have not read the book but according to the Amazon listing the second practical mindset this particular book advocates is,

Christ is in me. I am enough.

Steven Furtick, “Do the New You: 6 Mindsets to Become Who You Were Created to Be”

Again, I haven’t read it and this is from the Amazon listing so I’m willing to look past the fact they misspelled the words “He is”. At least, the second point *should be*, “Christ is in me; he is enough.” I’m not trying to make fun of this particular author. Rather, I’m illustrating how often we approach the Bible with the perspective that “God plus me” equals anything I want to do. So often the message is little more than if God will offer me a bit of assistance, there is nothing *I* cannot accomplish.

Our text this week and next can be read in this way. If we read it in this way, however, we will miss a significant shadow of the King who is to come. We will miss the good news—the gospel—contained in it. That gospel is not seen in how great you and I can be, but in how great God is—not in *partnership* with us, but *in spite* of us. This isn’t a put-down. This isn’t self-deprecating. *This is good news*. We’re in Judges 6–7.

Jdgs 6:33 Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. ³⁴ But the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. ³⁵ And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him.

And he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them.

³⁶ Then Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, ³⁷ behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said.” ³⁸ And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. ³⁹ Then Gideon said to God, “Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew.” ⁴⁰ And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

⁷ Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod. And the camp of Midian was north of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley.

² The LORD said to Gideon, “The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’ ³ Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, ‘Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.’” Then 22,000 of the people returned, and 10,000 remained.

⁴ And the LORD said to Gideon, “The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there, and anyone of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall go with you,’ shall go with you, and anyone of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ shall not go.” ⁵ So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, “Every one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink.” ⁶ And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. ⁷ And the LORD said to Gideon, “With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home.” ⁸ So the people took provisions in their hands, and their trumpets. And he sent all the rest of Israel every man to his tent, but retained the 300 men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

Judges 6:33–7:8

The Spirit of the Lord

God has raised up Gideon to be a deliverer of Israel. As we’ve seen, Gideon was not ready. God had to assure him of his calling and had to assure him God himself would give the victory *through* Gideon. Then he instructed Gideon to tear down his father’s altar to Baal and his Asherah pole. This endangered Gideon’s life as the entire town was angry at the loss of their community worship site.

In this the Lord was rescuing Israel. The people thought their biggest problem was the Midianites but by having Gideon destroy their idolatry, God was rescuing them from their

biggest danger. This also served to further strengthen Gideon. Still, he's not ready. His faith is still weak. He is fearful. He is not ready to lead Israel into battle.

The Midianites aren't waiting for him to get ready. The remarkable thing is they know of Gideon. Gideon claims to be least in his father's house, essentially, a *nobody*. In chapter 7, however, the Midianites not only know his name, they know what he has done. This worship site God had him destroy appears to have been a substantial feature of the area. Surely the Midianites knew how various judges had, from time to time, rescued Israel from others and they would have assumed Gideon was next in line.

For this reason the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East join forces together and cross the Jordan. They are encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. If we were more familiar with the geography we would recognize this as the place where Sisera and his massive army were defeated—by rain and an overflowing River Kishon. This is the location where the Lord had rescued them and given them victory over a substantial army some years before.

Perhaps these three groups coming together think they can get the jump on Israel. Maybe if they bring the battle to Israel, they will be successful. After all, Israel does not have a standing army. They do not have battle-hardened soldiers. They have farmers and shepherders. We know they're not all that powerful because for seven years groups just like this one crossed the Jordan at harvest and stole their crops. They think that by engaging the battle earlier than Israel might have been expecting they can get the edge over them once again.

They didn't read verse 34, however. The Spirit of the Lord *clothed* Gideon. He is the only judge said to have been *clothed* by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit "was upon" Othniel and he defeated Cushan-rishathaim. The Spirit of the Lord "was upon" Jephthah in chapter 11 and he was victorious. The Spirit "began to stir" Samson in chapter 13. The Spirit "rushed upon him" in chapters 14 and 15. Only Gideon is *clothed* with the Spirit.

The Spirit *covered* him up, *overwhelmed* him. The Spirit came around him so powerfully he couldn't resist. Gideon is filled with God's power to do the very thing God has called him to do. With the Spirit empowering him, Gideon signals his townsfolk to battle. Verse 34 says the Abiezrites—his entire clan—rally to his side. He, the least in his father's house, the one who destroyed a community treasure and caused the people to want to murder him for it, calls those same people to him and they come. *Gideon doesn't have to be great for the Lord to do great things.*

He then sends messengers throughout Manasseh and Asher and Zebulun and Naphtali. If you have one of the maps we provide in the lobby, you will see these are the four northernmost tribes. While the invaders would swoop all the way through the land down to Gaza, these tribes are the most affected.

What is remarkable is that while Gideon's self-assessment, his recognition that he's nobody special, is accurate, the Spirit of the Lord surrounds him and enables him to lead. Men from these tribes join him there near the Valley of Jezreel.

Gideon Seeks Assurance

Gideon knows what the Lord has called him to do. God has been clear. He is to raise an army and meet the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East in battle—in

faith—and drive them out from the land. This is simple and straightforward—but hardly easy. The battle belongs to the Lord, however. Listen carefully: Gideon’s responsibility here is not victory. He is not responsible for driving them out. He is responsible to obey the Lord in faith by engaging in battle. Then the Lord will drive them out.

The fact that Gideon calls the men of his clan to him and calls the men of Manasseh and Asher and Zebulun and Naphtali to him shows he knows he is to engage in battle. He knows he’s not calling them to a bocce ball tournament. The Lord has made it clear he will be victorious in the battle in which Gideon is to engage. Still, Gideon seeks assurance.

In verse 36 he tells the Lord that if God will, in fact, save Israel *through him*, notice carefully what Gideon says—“as you have said”—indicating God has made this direct promise, then he needs a sign. The sign is not seeking to learn what the Lord wants him to do. Gideon knows what he is being called to do. He has received the promises. Gideon has already received more assurances than any other judge in the entire book yet he seeks further assurance.

His plan to place a fleece on the threshing floor. Remember, a threshing floor is a flat area of stone on which one can pound wheat and other grains to break the kernels free from the stalks. The floor would be kept clean for its next use. A fleece is a hunk of sheep’s wool after it has been sheared. The sign he’s seeking is for the threshing floor to be dry in the morning and for the fleece to be wet with dew. This is a terrible sign. It’s like asking the Lord, “If you will make the sun come up tomorrow, I will know.” Well, yeah.

People living in desert areas around the world still today use this method. The fleece is made up of thousands of individual strands of hair, giving a fleece a tremendous amount of surface area. Dew collects on things overnight and by the time Gideon would check the fleece, the stone threshing floor may have already dried—the wind could do this quickly—but the fleece, having so much surface area, would still be wet. Gideon surely knew this. When he checked the fleece in the morning he saw that it was, in fact, wet with dew. The text says he could fill a bowl with water from squeezing the fleece. *Duh*. This is not remarkable.

Gideon realizes the absurdity of this sign in verse 39. He recognizes he’s bordering on impertinence by asking for another sign. Another sign will require another day, which means Gideon is delaying his obedience. He tells God they need to try it once more. This time, instead of the fleece being wet, the threshing floor should be wet and the fleece dry. This would be out of the ordinary. See again the Lord’s response:

Jdgs 6:40 And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.
Judges 6:40

God has been very clear: he is with Gideon and he has empowered Gideon to do exactly what he calls him to do. He will give the Midianites into his hand. Period. Gideon, *knowing this*, asks for more evidence. He’s already received more assurance than any other judge, yet God relents. God *relents*. God does what Gideon asks! It is very interesting that nowhere is Gideon chastised for seeking a sign. In fact, as we will see next week, the Lord offers Gideon even more assurance without being prompted to do so!

In the book of Isaiah when Ahaz was king, Ahaz was facing the northern kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Syria. They were threatening Judah and the Lord sent Isaiah

to speak to Ahaz. In Isaiah 7:10 the Lord instructs Ahaz to *ask for a sign*. Anything he wanted! Ask whether the Lord will, in fact, protect the kingdom of Judah.

Is 7:12 But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.”
13 And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey when he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted.

Isaiah 7:12–16

Ahaz refused to ask the Lord for a sign so the Lord gave him a sign anyway. In that context, there is the initial fulfillment of this prophetic word. A young woman gave birth and before the infant had grown the Assyrian army invaded both Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel, ending their threats against Judah.

God is not angry with Gideon for seeking further assurance. God gives him the assurance he needs. Having this assurance, verified by the sign, Gideon gets up the next day to go to battle. The right response to what God says and does is always obedience.

Too Many

In verse 2 of chapter 7 the Lord speaks again to Gideon. He says something utterly remarkable to him.

Jdgs 7:2 The LORD said to Gideon, “The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”

Judges 7:2

God has repeatedly assured Gideon he will give him the victory. He has demonstrated this in multiple ways. But then God says, “Yeah, your army is too big for me to give you the victory.” He doesn’t say, “Yeah, *Midian’s army* is too big for me.” *Gideon’s* army is too big. This is the same warning God gave that first generation that would enter the land. Back in Deuteronomy 8 when they were still in the wilderness preparing to enter the land, God gave them this same warning.

In Deuteronomy 7 he made it very clear he had not rescued them from Egypt because they were so great. He had not led them to Mount Sinai to receive a covenant because they were so great. He had not chosen them out of all the nations on earth because they were so great. He was not planning to lead them into the land of Canaan and give them the victory over the Canaanites because they were so great. In fact, he did do those things and would do those things entirely because he loved them. He would do them because he made a promise to Abraham.

Then in chapter 8 God speaks to them about the coming time when he would give them the land and grant them prosperity. They would have plenty of food and plenty of natural resources to enrich them, sources like copper to be mined. Look at God’s warning, however:

Deut 8:11 “Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, ¹² lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, ¹³ and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴ then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵ who led you through the great and terrifying wilderness, with its fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty ground where there was no water, who brought you water out of the flinty rock, ¹⁶ who fed you in the wilderness with manna that your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end. ¹⁷ Beware lest you say in your heart, ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ ¹⁸ You shall remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your fathers, as it is this day.

Deuteronomy 8:11–16

Notice the danger: God will fulfill his promises and Israel will be blessed beyond description. When this happens, Israel may think it was their hand, their power that did this. If Israel experiences the fullness of God’s blessing and—here’s the key—if Israel forgets that it was the Lord who rescued them, and it was the Lord who blessed them, then in their arrogance they will rebel and turn away from him. The combination of blessing and forgetting the blessing’s source is deadly to one’s faith.

God tells Gideon his army is too big for God to act on their behalf because he knows what would happen. They will assume they were so great, that they themselves had stood up to Midian and won. It is for their good and for their blessing that God refuses to rescue them with such a large army.

Whittling

He doesn’t refuse to rescue them, however; they just need a smaller army. To reduce the army God instructs Gideon to send back any men who were fearful. Twenty-two thousand men returned to their tents, some distance away from where the battle will take place. The fear God means is not the normal sort of apprehension we all experience when facing a dangerous activity. This fear is the same dismissal of God’s rescue Gideon first had. This fear came from the same belief the Lord had forsaken them.

Israel is left with an army of 10,000. This smaller army is vastly outnumbered. In verse 12 of chapter 7 the text says Gideon saw the Midianites in the valley, “like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore”. What is 10,000 against so many?

It turns out that 10,000 against so many is still too many. God knows what will happen if he gives victory to 10,000. He instructs Gideon to take them to the water’s edge. Such an army is, no doubt, thirsty. God will tell him which men may remain. The text is somewhat obscure and there’s a lot of debate among scholars as to what is actually happening. It appears that those who “knelt” are the same group as those who lapped, though the ESV suggests otherwise.

Old Testament scholar Daniel Block argues that the Hebrew of this text indicates the second group—“Likewise, everyone who kneels down to drink”—is actually a clarification of those who lap like dogs. The idea is that everyone “who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog who laps” are those who kneel down to drink. They get down on all fours and use their hands to cup water and then drink with their faces in the water.

There are many attempts to suggest these men were more alert or were better prepared for the battle, but this would go against the thrust of the text. It isn't that these men were on the lookout for danger; their faces were near the water! The point isn't that God is searching for the best and the brightest. The point is that God doesn't *need* the best and the brightest. Rather than looking for elite soldiers, God is looking for *weak* “soldiers”. In a delightful mix of metaphors, Daniel Stulac summarized the point:

The reader should certainly not attempt to superimpose a military rationale on this second criterion for participation! The dog-lappers are not more alert than their peers and therefore constitute a band of Navy SEALs ready to do battle at Thermopylae.

Daniel J. D. Stulac, “Gift of the Grotesque”

The Battle of Thermopylae was made famous in the movie “300” in which 300 soldiers (though it was probably closer to 1,000) held off a much larger Persian army for three days. These 300 who lapped water on all fours were not shining examples of Spartan warriors, hardened and chiseled. Rather than bend to the water to scoop it up to their mouths, or better, rather than scoop up water in a cup to drink, they get down on all fours like dogs.

If you were there as one of the 9,700 who drank like humans, you would have looked a bit sideways at that handful of people who drank like this. Imagine standing in line at a group of drinking fountains seeing some drink from the fountain by putting their mouths over the spigot. *Who does that!?* These aren't 300 men like Leonidas protecting their home from invaders. These are 300 men who don't know how to drink properly.

God is whittling down Israel's army by a factor of 100. From 32,000 soldiers to just 300, and 300 whose only significant trait marking them out is drinking from the water *like dogs*. Gideon asked God for a sign that he will save Israel by his hand as God had said, and here God is giving Gideon an even greater sign.

To demonstrate just how true it is that the victory belongs to the Lord, the Lord chooses to go to battle with *these guys*. In gym class, these were the guys who were always picked last, whether for dodgeball or basketball or tug-of-war. When the 9,700 began to separate from the 300, none of them looked at the 300 who remained to fight and thought, “Oh, yeah. We're good. These guys? Yeah.” It would have been more like, “Oh. *We need a miracle.*”

No Superstars

Here's some good news: God doesn't need superstars. I've been saying this for the last few weeks and it's very clear in our text: Gideon and the 300 do not need to be great in order for the Lord to do great things. They don't have to be the best and the brightest. They don't have to be super warriors. They don't have to be superstars. They just have to trust

the Lord. If they will trust the Lord, they can be ordinary and be victorious—not because they are somehow enough, but because God is enough.

God is preparing to send Gideon into battle with 300 very ordinary men, again, men whose sole qualifying characteristic is they drink from a river like a dog. There are other times God sent a much larger army. In his wisdom he understands this time they need to see for themselves their inability to rescue themselves. Sometimes God may choose to use substantial force to rescue his people, as he did with Othniel. Sometimes he may choose to use mud to render iron chariots useless, as he did with Barak. Sometimes he may choose to use human cunning, as he did with Ehud. Sometimes he may choose to use 300 dog-lappers. In every case, however, the battle belongs to the Lord. The victory is because he fights for Israel. In none of these cases is the judge himself to be given credit for the outcome.

The reality is that all of Israel are the 300. The 300 are a subset of the whole, but the 300 truly represent the whole. This was God's point in Deuteronomy 7! He didn't choose them because they were so great. He didn't choose them because they were so powerful. He didn't choose them because they were so numerous. If that had been the reason, he would have chosen the Egyptians to be his people! Before the exodus they were the greatest and most powerful and most advanced nation on earth! God didn't choose them; he chose Israel.

Think of the men the Lord Jesus chose as his disciples—the twelve men who would walk with him as his closest disciples, the very men through whom he would change the world. Think of these men. In Mark 9 Jesus tells them he was going to be killed rather soon. He will be physically assaulted and beaten and then nailed to a cross. Remember their response? “Hey, when you're king, *which one of us will be your right-hand man?*”

After telling them—repeatedly—that he was going to be arrested and beaten, that he would suffer and be crucified, he tells them in John 13 that this was the night. One of them—*one of the twelve*—would betray him, setting into motion his arrest and suffering and death. He tells them they will soon look for him but they won't find him. Peter asks him where he is going. To the grave, dummy! Jesus simply says that where he is going, they cannot follow.

Peter, being Peter, says he will follow Jesus *anywhere*—even to the grave. Jesus tells him he will not; before morning he will have denied Jesus three times. He then tells them all he is going to prepare a place for them. Thomas, with all his insight, says, “We don't know where that is, and we don't know the way.”

Jesus tells them in John 14 that he is the way to the Father. He said to know him is to know his Father. To see him is to see his Father in action. Philip, one of the first to recognize Jesus, said, “Just show us the Father; that would be enough.” This was after three years with Jesus. For three years he had taught them and walked with them and still they had no clue. They had no idea who Jesus really is. They were just a group of men, on all fours, lapping water from the river of life—like a dog.

Most of them were very ordinary men. Matthew was a tax collector, which means he had some formal education. It also means he betrayed his own people. Peter would run his mouth for hours before his brain realized he was talking. James and John were hot-headed and wanted to call down God's wrath on those they didn't like. They were clueless, these men whom Jesus called to change the world. But then something happened: the day of Pentecost.

As with Gideon, the Holy Spirit came upon these country bumpkins, men with funny

accents that others would make fun of. They were all from the north—near Nazareth and as they say, *can anything good come from Nazareth?* In their case, however, the Spirit would not depart after the task was accomplished. With his followers, the Spirit of God is a permanent indwelling, for the presence and activity of God’s Spirit is the very sign of the new covenant.

Sometime after Pentecost Peter and John were boldly preaching Christ in the temple. The rulers had them arrested because this was creating a disturbance. We read these words:

Acts 4:13 Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.

Acts 4:13

The rulers recognized these disciples were “uneducated, common men”—*dog-lappers*. There was nothing special about them. They didn’t have large vocabularies. They weren’t reading the latest scientific literature. They didn’t have graduate and post-graduate degrees. However, they had this one characteristic that set them apart: they had been with Jesus.

More Like Jesus

Because they had been with Jesus, they became *like* Jesus. In this whittling down of Gideon’s army we see a shadow of Jesus, a hint of his divine rescue. He came and was much like Gideon—or rather, Gideon gave us a glimpse into what Jesus would be like. Jesus’ own brothers thought he was crazy. He was “least” in his earthly father’s house. He was from Nazareth, which made him a nobody.

Paul tells us that even though he is God in every way, and therefore worthy and deserving of all honor and glory and praise, Jesus didn’t grasp at what was his by right. He didn’t insist on his glory being recognized. Instead, he made himself a servant. He didn’t even own a home! Being a servant he was falsely accused and beaten and falsely convicted. He was killed as a common criminal—an enemy of the state—outside of Jerusalem. He was buried in a borrowed tomb.

We know how it ended. On the third day he walked out of the tomb in victory. He had defeated sin and death. Through his own suffering and death—through his own *weakness*—God had delivered his people from the greatest enemy they faced.

God’s power is displayed through weakness. This is why Gideon didn’t have to be great in order for God to do great things. In fact, not only did Gideon not have to be great, it was necessary for him to not be great.

I have good news, New City! We’re not great. We’re not a huge church. We don’t have a massive budget. We don’t have a lot of highly influential people. If New City were a book, we wouldn’t be a best-seller. We’re not full of people reaching their maximum potential. We aren’t flashy, and we’re not trying to be. We don’t draw a lot of attention to ourselves.

The truth is, we’re a bit odd. We are the 300. Who publicly confesses sin—regularly? We routinely acknowledge their desperate need for Jesus in the midst of the struggle, be it with depression or temptation or pain? Who kind of church sees discipleship not as a set of programs but in relationships? We are the 300, and there’s no place I’d rather be.

From the perspective of best-selling authors we don't have a lot to offer. We do, however, have the Lord in our midst. Because of who he is and what he has done, you and I do not have to strive to be influencers or strive to have a perfect persona, whether online or in person. We can be the 300 because through faith in Jesus, God can be great and God can do great things. This is the mindset we must adopt:

Christ is in us. He is enough.

We just need to become more like him.