

Title: The failure of success, pt.1  
Text: Judges 7.1-23  
Theme: How success can be a failure  
Series: Judges  
Prop Stmt: A victory that does not produce dependence upon and obedience to God will be a colossal failure.

Read Text:

This account is one of the most famous stories in the OT. However, consider this. There is more written about Gideon and Samson than all of the other judges combined. That means that there is a lot more about Gideon than just this event, which means that there is a lot more that we need to understand and take to heart. So, this account is the not the end of the story, it is leading us somewhere. Therefore, I have entitled this sermon, “the failure of success, pt.1 because while we are looking at chapter 7, the story goes on in chapters 8 and 9. And by the time we get done with the rest of Gideon’s story and that of his family, we aren’t really sure what to think. Remember, that the story of Gideon, the deliverer of Israel is part of the story of the deliverers of Israel in the time after Joshua before the monarchy. These 400 years are marked by idolatry, chaos, anarchy, immorality and violence. Humanly speaking, there is no way that Israel is going to survive. These people are determined to destroy themselves. The book of Judges is explaining why the nation of Israel came to the conclusion that they had to have a king who would save them from their enemies.

The first judge or deliverer is Othniel and he is a good guy and has many wonderful qualities to him. The last two guys are Jephthah and Samson, and these heroes are tragic. How many of us have had to turn the news off lest our children hear things about the president? This is Israel! So, in between Othniel and Jephthah and Samson is Gideon. He is not as bad as the last two guys, but he is clearly not an Othniel. Therefore, in order for me to honestly preach this text, I have to preach it with a sense of hesitation, meaning, I don’t want you to get the sense that this event means that Gideon is awesome, because he isn’t. Gideon had his moments, but the truth is, God is awesome and if Gideon had given of himself to that wholeheartedly he could have left a much greater mark on Israel than what he did. So, I preach this, with gratitude for what God did through Gideon, yet with a sense of grief because Gideon wasted such a great opportunity.

I. **God prepares you to confront an “impossible situation.”** (1-14)

A. **This was a problem of their own making** (3.6, 12; 4.1; 6.1)

This is the proper starting point that seems so difficult for us to grasp.

B. **This was a problem that they could not solve on their own.**

For seven years now, Midian had been taking everything that Israel had been trying to produce. That means that Israel was probably close to poverty level. She probably had

barely enough to survive, much less, man an army and equip it with weapons and resources to fight. Midian wisely did not destroy Israel and take her land. Midian had accomplished something better. She had managed to enslave Israel and lived off the fruit of her work. This made Midian rich and powerful and attractive. The end of chapter 6 says that now the Amalekites and the people of the East joined Midian in this annual incursion into the land of Israel. So, over the Jordan and into the country and now camping in the Valley of Jezreel without any concern for their safety or any concern of being challenged, this ravenous host of men has descended in order to raid the countryside and take whatever and whoever they wanted. This is terrifying for Israel.

In chapter 7.12, the author again describes them as the Midianites, the Amalekites and the people of East. They are described as locusts in abundance, sand along the seashore and even their camels are so numerous it is impossible to count them. Seriously, how on earth can anyone expect to defeat such a force, especially if you are in a weakened condition like Israel? So, obviously they are in trouble and they have a problem they cannot solve. However...

### C. This problem was not the real problem. (2-8)

How could Israel raise an army that would even begin to match Midian? She can't, but she does manage to gather about 32,000 from Ashur, Zebulun, Naphtali and Manasseh, which Gideon was part of. Note this, because this becomes an issue. The problem of too many Midianites however, was the not the problem that God saw. God told Gideon that he had too many men. Gideon probably thought that he had misunderstood God, right? Wouldn't it make sense for God to say, "hey, Midian has too many men." We would all understand that. But God said that Gideon has too many men. Are you kidding me? That's like having to pay the rent tomorrow and you only having \$25 and someone telling you that you have too much money. Only in this case, it is God telling Gideon that he has to downsize his army. Wow, talk about upsizing your anxiety, but that is the point. Gideon, you have too many men.

What happens next is very counter-intuitive. God tells Gideon that everyone who is afraid is free to go home. Interestingly enough, the spring named Harod, means "trembling." So, those who were trembling were free to leave and 2/3's of them did just that. When people leave a company, a church, a neighborhood, or anything where there is a sense of relationship and dependency, it is hard. But, when someone chooses to quit an army in the face of serious danger, the discouragement, even anger is usually very deep. This feels like a betrayal. And of course, the remaining are wondering why Gideon would have ever issued such an order. Why didn't he rally the troops rather than give into their weakness? What happens next is worse, much worse.

God tells Gideon that he still has too many men. Now, I cannot prove this, but I think that it is possible that just as Gideon was testing God with the fleece thing at the end of chapter 6, that God now pushes back. Twice Gideon tested God and now twice God tests Gideon. Coincidence? I don't think so. I'm guessing that God is forcing Gideon to learn the lesson that he has so far been so reluctant to embrace and that is, God is serious about

his Word. He will do what he says he will do. Back in chapter 6 (v.14) God commanded Gideon to take on the Midianites, and God won't let him off the hook. But now, God is taking extra steps to take the credit for the victory that is to follow and he informs Gideon that this time he will reduce the number of troops by a simple test. The men are taken to a brook where they are given the opportunity to drink. Those who kneeled down and drank the water like a dog would were told to go home while those who put the water into their hand and drank it that way were told to stay. What was the point of that? Was it because the first group was lazy and vulnerable to being attacked because they bent down and put their face in the water while the second one remained alert? I've heard it explained that way, but I'm not sure that we can assume that. The whole point of this story is that you cannot save yourself anyway. Since the text never says that there was something wrong with the 9,700, I think that this was just God's way of thinning the herd. And again, the result had to have Gideon wondering what on earth God was doing. 9700 vs. 300 are you kidding me? But, don't forget that God is actually talking with Gideon and the command is clear. If Gideon had the heart of David, he would have been excited because he would have known that God was about to pull off an upset that was so much greater than a #16 team beating a #1. Why do we talk about a shepherd boy with a sling taking down a giant with a sword? Why do we talk about the walls of Jericho falling down flat when the priests blasted trumpets and the people shouted? That's the point! If Israel, in her condition defeated the Midianites in their condition then an upset this big would have people talking about it for years, which is exactly what we are doing over 3,000 years later. But this hasn't happened yet and Gideon's faith in God is pretty shaky, so God not only tells Gideon to attack the Midianites, but he informs him that the battle is already won. "I have given it into your hand."

This is not the power of positive thinking mishmash or the "believe and you will achieve" nonsense. This is not believing in yourself or believing in what you want God to do, this is divine revelation. (explain the difference between this and the word of faith message) "I have given it into your hand." It is as good as done.

Let me give you a NT example of this. One of the greatest promises in all of Scripture is found in Romans 8.28. But, that promise is based on the theology of verses 29 and 30. (explain) Now God has done so much more for us than Gideon, by sending Christ, and by giving us all of this doctrine to explain what God is doing and what is going to happen. And yet, many you have wondered this week about what on earth was God doing and could you actually trust him? How can we doubt God? We do, don't we? So, we can cut Gideon a bit of slack as does God who along with the direct command to attack the camp of the Midianites also let's Gideon know that if he is afraid that he should take his servant sneak down by the edge of the camp because God has something for him to experience.

#### **D. Revelation and Assurance (9-15a)**

This is fascinating. God gives an unsuspecting Midianite soldier a dream. This soldier is either doing guard duty or is on the outskirts of the camp and decides to tell another soldier about his dream. God tells Gideon to go down to the camp so that he can hear the Word of God from a Midianite. In other words, if you won't believe me, then perhaps

you will believe this Midianite. It's kind of pathetic when you think about it, but it worked. The soldier told his dream to the other guy and they both concluded that this cake of barley bread that came rolling into the camp and smashed a tent had to be an omen that indicated that Gideon was going to be successful and they were all going to die. How did these guys even know Gideon's name? And what is more, how do you get that interpretation from that dream? It seems more plausible to me that the meaning of the dream was how bad the army food was. In fact, the bread was so hard you could use it as a bowling ball to wipe out a tent or that it was so bad that an entire tent full of guys were all messed up because they ate some it. But, obviously because of God's direction, the guy who heard the dream was absolutely convinced that this was a sign that this Gideon guy had their number. And that was exactly what Gideon needed to hear and God was gracious to give it to him.

I think verse 15 is Gideon's finest moment. I wish the rest of the story was like this. Gideon is mentioned in Hebrews 11 as an example of faith and this is it. At this point Gideon is all in. He doesn't know exactly what is going to happen, but he knows what he is supposed to do, and for the moment, that is all that matters.

## II. **God calls you to act upon your faith.** (15b-20)

Gideon's faith in God's Word is reflected in Gideon's obedience to God's command. And now, instead of responding reluctantly and fearfully, Gideon is on a mission. He is ready to go. His change in demeanor is noticeable and notice what he says. Gideon is now repeating what God had already said. Gideon is now telling his men what he had to learn. The battle is as a good as done. You cannot lose. God has done this. In God's mind the battle is already over, we get to go and watch.

Now, the text does not state anything about how the 300 respond. The text is rather detailed about Gideon's instructions. Notice vs. 16-18 (read). Gideon is now telling these men the same sort of thing that God told him. God told Gideon back in chapter 6 that he was going to use Gideon to defeat the Midianites and Gideon was in complete disbelief. This will never work – are you kidding me? Well, now, here is Gideon giving 300 men trumpets, empty jars and torches to go inside the jars. Then comes the battle plan. "Do what I do." The guys are divided up into 3 companies of 100 each. Gideon says that when he blows his trumpet and his company all blow there's, then everyone should do the same and then they should shout – "For the LORD and for Gideon."

And you can imagine one guy looking at his buddy and saying, "Then what do we do?" Gideon doesn't say. What is going to happen then? We don't know. You sure this is going to work? Whoever heard of attacking the enemy with trumpets, jars and torches? Wouldn't you feel a bit unprepared and defenseless? The irony is that they all shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon" and they did not appear to have any swords. Humanly speaking I think that these 300 were a whole lot crazier than Gideon. God had talked with Gideon. God had made himself very clear to Gideon. Gideon's challenge was to believe God directly. These men were called to believe the message of God through Gideon. It does sound similar to the instructions that Joshua gave to the nation regarding

the defeat of Jericho, and again the point is clear. Do not look for some secret military strategy in this that would logically explain how this is going to work, because there isn't any. This is not going to work based on human skill and ingenuity. This is going to work because God said so, and he is going to make it work and no one will be able to take credit for it, because no one would have been stupid enough to come up with a plan like this, nor crazy enough to attempt it, unless God had given explicit instructions and they believed him.

So, they do it. The middle watch of the night was probably midnight and after getting into position around the camp, they blew the trumpets, then smashed the pitchers and held up their torches and then shouted. That was all they were told to do and they did it. What happened next was anybody guess. It was anybody's guess but God's.

### III. God does what you cannot do. (21-23)

I read v.21 with a sense of zeal and with grief. Here's what I mean. The book of Judges is a hard read because the nation of Israel does not look distinct from the world around them. They are supposed to be the people of God. They are supposed to be different than their world. They are not supposed to worship like, live like, eat like, marry like, nor treat others as the world does. These are the people of God. These are the people that God has called to put his glory on display to the world. These are the people who are supposed to set the pace for the world and are supposed to live in such a way that the world sees what following God looks like and be drawn to it. Instead, Israel looks more and more like the world and in some cases is even worse. It is tragic and it doesn't have to be that way. So, I read v.21 and I think – There it is! This is it! Look at this! The 300 who dare to believe God are standing their ground. They are outnumbered, they are defenseless and yet they are victorious. They cried and stood. The Midianites in contrast cried out and ran. And in fact, they were the ones who had swords, but they started killing each other with them. The 300 did not have swords but did not need them. The enemy had the swords but used them on each other. God does what you cannot do. "*The LORD set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army.*"

Honestly, this is a perfect illustration of the gospel. You cannot save yourself from sin. You cannot defend yourself. You have to trust in what God has done. You have to trust in Christ because Christ has done what you cannot do. He alone paid the penalty for your sin. You cannot do that. You cannot contribute one penny for your salvation. Christ paid it all. All you can do is believe it. Believe it and stand on it. Watch how God has destroyed sin and destroys death through Christ.

Whatever is left of the Midianites take off for home. They are running south and east and then we read v.23. "*And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian.*"

Right here, the story changes. If this was a movie and you were writing the musical score to accompany the movie, this would be the point when the cellos would take over from the trumpets, when a minor key would replace a major one, when a bright fast-paced

triumphant sound would now start to transition toward an ambivalent, even ominous one. What is wrong, you ask with calling on these other soldiers to finish the job? What is wrong? It makes sense on paper, but God told Gideon at the beginning of chapter 7 that he had too many men. That number was reduced down to 300 where God clearly demonstrated that he did not need a large army to accomplish his plan and having proven that, this was not the time to forget what God had done!

It is better to be a coward and trust in God than be confident and trust in yourself. And what happens right here to Gideon is very telling. I liked Gideon so much more when he is doubting himself but he finally believes God, instead of believing in himself and ignoring God. So often, success is the soil for the seeds of failure. Gideon goes from being a coward to being confident. The same thing happened later on to Saul. He went from a humble, backward boy to a king, who after some military success got a taste of victory that went to his head that destroyed him. This is exactly what happens to Gideon. The rest of his story that we will pursue next week takes us through it and once again, Israel manages to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. We read this account and the stories of the OT and grieve. It does not have to be this way.

Success is the soil for the seeds of failure unless the seed is planted with humility and single-heartedness.

## Conclusion

The book of Judges is explaining why the nation of Israel came to the conclusion that they had to have a king who would save them from their enemies. But, the author of this book is pointing out that the real problem is not the lack of a king, but their failure to follow God. This is the lesson that the rest of the OT reveals. In the end, the nation of Israel did not need a king to save them from the enemies, they needed a Savior who would save them from themselves. But, this is the lesson they did not learn. 1000 years later, Jesus comes as the Savior, and they kill him because they wanted a king. But, his death provides the ultimate salvation for every Jew and every Gentile who would trust in him.

- 1) What impossible situation do you need God to rescue you from? (surface or heart)
- 2) How has God rescued you in the past?
- 3) Have you forgotten it? Has it gone to your head instead of your heart? How do you tend to respond to success?
- 4) Be encouraged. God knows the challenge of faith. He knows that you have not seen Christ with your own eyes, heard his voice with your own ears, nor touched the marks in his hands or side with your own fingers, which is why he told Thomas, “You’ve seen and believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” The 300 believed and stood their ground and in that moment made a statement of what the people of God can be.