

JUDGES—WEEK 7

THE SOUND OF VICTORY



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

Having overheard the Midianite discussing his dream, Gideon is encouraged. So, he attacks their camp and routs them. Many kings are captured and/or killed.

But Gideon spends as much time dealing with problems within Israel than he does fighting the Midianites. He has to placate the Ephraimites, plus deal with Gaddites whose lack of support borders on treason.

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Joshua, Week 7 — The Sound of Victory
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1 Judges 7:15–18

And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, “Arise, for the LORD has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand.” Then he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man’s hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers. And he said to them, “Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do: When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, ‘The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!’ ”

Gideon just can’t believe his luck. Of course, overhearing the Midianite’s dream is really anything but luck and Gideon’s faith meter hits the pin. So, he does the only thing anyone could do—worship.

Then he acts. That action is essential. Had Gideon just “gone back to the couch” after worshipping, the worship would have lacked something. He would have acknowledged and celebrated God’s goodness but then let it all go to waste. Would that even qualify as worship?

Most celebrations aren’t worship. Having a good time is fine, but let’s not kid ourselves. Worship has to be more. Gideon’s actions sanctify his worship.

But was what Gideon witnessed here a miracle? That’s an interesting debate. Some feel that a miracle must be “contra natura.” That is, it must be physically impossible, violating the laws of nature or physics.

Others think that events like this one, those that are merely off-the-charts improbable, qualify as miracles. God often uses natural processes to work His will. When events are both outrageously improbable and connected to specific prophesy or prayer, they can qualify as miracles. I like to call these improbable events “minor miracles” to distinguish them from “contra natura” miracles.

But super improbable events must be super rare; otherwise they’re not all that improbable. There are benefits from being sensitive to these “minor miracles,” but don’t overdo it.

Both extremes have problems. Contra natura miracles were a sign of the apostolic age. We don’t get many of them nowadays. Thus, limiting miracles to just that kind pretty much sentences you to never seeing a miracle. That’s missing out.

But the other extreme is worse. Seeing extraordinary meaning in ordinary things is the birthplace of superstition. That can lead to a lot of justified ridicule. Avoid that like the plague.

There’s one final “contra natura” argument that’s compelling if handled properly—that this is all a matter of semantics. One doesn’t have to label super improbable events as miracles to appreciate that they’re from God. He works His will in amazing and glorious ways, usually through natural processes. That’s just not what the word “miracle” means.

Okay, fine. So, what should those things be called? Give me a short label.

2 Judges 7:19–23

So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers—they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing—and they cried, “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!” And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled. When the three hundred blew the trumpets, the LORD set every man’s sword against his companion throughout the whole camp; and the army fled to Beth Acacia, toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah, by Tabbath.

And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites.

One might assume that this victory was achieved despite the tiny Israelite army, but that’s not it. It was achieved *because* of the army’s small size. Consider this.

A recent car bombing in Moscow made the news because it killed the daughter of a high Russian official. The Russian government immediately condemned the bombing as an action by the Ukrainians. They had to spin it that way; the alternative is too painful to contemplate.

It could just be that the Russian people have grown tired of Putin’s imperialism. Maybe one of the mothers whose son came home in a box decided it was time for a little payback. Or maybe one of the oligarchs who had his yacht seized thinks that new leadership would be more lucrative.

Or it could have been anyone. Russia isn’t littered with security cameras the way the US is. The government may not have any good leads on who did it. That’s much worse than a hit from the Ukrainians. If the Russian people have started killing each other, their end is nigh.

That’s what happened to the Midianites. There were way too many of them for the Israelite army to kill. They had to be tricked into killing themselves.

If an army of thousands of Israelites had attacked, the Midianites would have been able to see their enemy and would have fought them. Instead, all they could see was each other and, since they knew they were being attacked, they fought the ones they could see. In the dark, they couldn’t tell who was who.

The LORD used “friendly fire” to defeat the Midianites.

The rules of warfare aren’t really rules; they’re just traditions or “best practices.” Like most human rules, God seems to make a point of not following them. That’s by design.

The point is humility. The LORD winnowing down Gideon’s army to only 300 men was to make it so they couldn’t take credit for the victory. But that was just part of the larger agenda of humbling them.

Remember, the Midianite oppression was to humble Israel. God’s deliverance mustn’t puff them back up.

3 Judges 7:24–8:3

Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the mountains of Ephraim, saying, “Come down against the Midianites, and seize from them the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan.” Then all the men of Ephraim gathered together and seized the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan. And they captured two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side of the Jordan.

Now the men of Ephraim said to him, “Why have you done this to us by not calling us when you went to fight with the Midianites?” And they reprimanded him sharply.

So he said to them, “What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. And what was I able to do in comparison with you?” Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that.

Do the men of Ephraim not know that the LORD deliberately shrunk the Israelite army down to only 300 men? Their complaint is silly; Gideon was just following God’s commands.

But notice that Gideon doesn’t make that argument. Instead, he gives the kind of silly response their silly complaint deserves. That speaks volumes about what’s actually going on here.

The Ephraimites’ complaint is more about old rivalries than about anything substantive. We can deduce that, not from what they said, but from the way Gideon’s response shamelessly butters them up.

The line, “*Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?*” is especially slick. Gideon is an Abiezite (a tribe of Manasseh, Ephraim’s sibling). Gideon is saying that their “gleaning” of capturing *the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb* is better than the initial rout.

But he’s also implying that their tribe is better than his tribe.

And it works.

If people were logical, apologetics and evangelism would work quite differently from how they actually work. Buttering people up really does work.

This gets into psychology that’s too intricate for a devotional, but some general principles apply.

Folks don’t listen to people they don’t like. If you want someone to listen to the gospel, you have to make friends with them. Everything you say exists in context. Are you trustworthy? Do you really care?

Like with everything else in Christianity, “Be yourself,” is good advice here too. Being excited about this part of your life doesn’t look all that different from any other kind of excitement.

It’s infectious.

4 Judges 8:4–9

When Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over, exhausted but still in pursuit. Then he said to the men of Succoth, “Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian.”

And the leaders of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?”

So Gideon said, “For this cause, when the LORD has delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers!” Then he went up from there to Penuel and spoke to them in the same way. And the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. So he also spoke to the men of Penuel, saying, “When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!”

What the Israeli army needs is carbohydrates. They’re in the middle of a long slog, and carb-loading with bread will give them the recharge they need to continue. So, Gideon doesn’t ask much of *the men of Succoth* (part of the tribe of Gad)—just some bread. They should give that much hospitality to complete strangers merely traveling through.

Gideon and his men deserve much more; they’re on a mission that affects Succoth’s future. The Midianites had been raiding them just as much as everyone else. Gideon could just as well have demanded the bread plus some soldiers to help with the fight.

But he doesn’t. He even uses the Hebrew word for “please” (נָא, na). Their refusal is astonishing. It’s tantamount to siding with the enemy. That really trips Gideon’s wire, and he threatens to punish them when he returns victorious. Then the same thing happens with *the men of Penuel* (also of the tribe of Gad), and Gideon threatens them too.

What has Gideon so upset isn’t just their refusal to give him bread; it’s the excuse they give. They could have said that they were fresh out. They were used to hiding it from the Midianite raiders; they don’t have great storehouses of it anyway.

But they give an insulting reason for denying them bread. They’re not willing to contribute bread to an endeavor they think won’t succeed. Despite the amazing rout that has already occurred, they have no confidence in Gideon and his army.

So he basically says, “When I get back, I’m going to teach you a lesson.”

This is an example of a spiritual tell. The men from Succoth and Penuel don’t come right out and say they don’t give a rip about Gideon, but it’s obvious that they don’t.

This is what James was writing about in his epistle.

If you *say* you have faith, but apparently don’t really give a rip, that’s a tell.

5 Judges 8:10–17 (ESV)

Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about 15,000 men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East, for there had fallen 120,000 men who drew the sword. And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Nobah and Jogbehah and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic.

Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. And he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men. And he came to the men of Succoth and said, “Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, ‘Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?’” And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson. And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

Gideon’s mission is to capture Zebah and Zalmunna. He doesn’t need to destroy their army. That’s important because Gideon only has 300 men and the Midianite army protecting Zebah and Zalmunna has 15,000 men.

But when Gideon attacks, Zebah and Zalmunna flee. Big mistake. Once again, panic in the Midianite camp is the key to Gideon’s victory. He captures Zebah and Zalmunna and this throws all their army into a panic. Even then, the text doesn’t say their army is destroyed. However, had they kept their wits about them, they could have organized a counter-attack rescue mission with a fifty-to-one overwhelming force.

So, Gideon achieves the very thing the men of Succoth and Penuel thought impossible. He returns triumphant and rubs their noses in it.

The punishment Gideon inflicts on Succoth and Penuel seems extreme until we consider what he’s punishing—something akin to treason. There’s a deep lesson in this.

Treason is typically the betrayal of a nation. A treasonous act either helps the enemy or hurts your own country. This might be giving information or arms to the enemy or harming something on your own side.

But they didn’t do that; they only refused to help their own soldiers. Why is that akin to treason?

Because Gideon’s battle was also spiritual. The rules are different in the spiritual realm. Significant events aren’t limited to just physical things. Worship or any display of loyalty counts, even though it doesn’t involve harm or the physical transfer of anything. You can’t physically harm God anyway.

The Midianite raids that Gideon is putting an end to were the LORD’s punishment for disloyal acts of worship. Those acts transferred no physical assets and didn’t harm anything. Yet the LORD’s response transferred and harmed plenty.

Gideon likewise inflicted great physical punishment in response to a mostly spiritual disloyalty.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Have you ever dropped to worship on the spot? Ever felt like doing it?
2. What is your favorite example in scripture of God going against human rules or traditions?
3. Have you ever seen someone's anger suddenly erased?
4. What are the clues that someone's faith is phony?
5. What is spiritual treason for a Christian?

Items for prayer: