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Judges 7:1-15 "When God Sent People Home" **

Proposition: In Judges 7:1-15, God prepared His people to see His greatness by dealing with two problems in their lives.

I. God dealt with the problem of self-sufficiency (1-8).

A. He identified the problem (1-2).

B. Then He took steps to remove it (3-8).

1. God sent home the fearful (3).

· To be a good leader, you must first be a good follower.

· God is *the* Leader.

2. God sent home those who knelt to drink (4-8).

· God works in unexpected ways.

· God uses unlikely people.

II. God dealt with the problem of fear (9-15).

A. Gideon experienced God's patience (9-12).

1. God told him what to do (9).

2. God enabled him to do it (10-12).

B. Gideon experienced God's sovereignty (13-14).

1. We see it in the timing.

2. We see it in the dream.

C. Gideon experienced God's transforming power (15).

1. He worshiped God.

2. He returned ready to obey God.

Implications: Think about the following lessons...

1. Little is much when God is in it.

2. God doesn't need big numbers to do something big.

3. God hates self-sufficiency.

4. God wants us to trust Him.

Some things in life are hard to figure out, aren't they? Yes, the Bible clearly teaches that God is sovereign in all things. I believe that. Nothing just *happens*, that's true. But sometimes God's plan involves things that simply don't make sense to us.

For instance, in the prime of his life, the apostle James was beheaded. The teenager, Joseph, was sold by his brothers into slavery. Faithful John the Baptist was killed as the consequence of a devious plot. Was God in control when those things happened. Indeed, but from a human perspective those biblical incidents don't make sense to us.

Nor do some of the events we see around us today. Christian businessmen go bankrupt, too. Godly families lose loved ones to cancer just like ungodly families do. Bible-teaching churches feel the pain of splits, too.

Why? It's not that God doesn't know. He does. It's certainly not that God doesn't care. He does, more than we'll ever know. He who would give His only Son to die the death we deserve certainly cares.

But the fact of the matter is this. God's ways are higher than our ways. Sometimes God works in ways that just don't make sense to us. How should we respond when that happens? What should we do when God and God's ways simply don't make sense to us?

Gideon can help us. Gideon was a very ordinary person who saw God work in a very extraordinary way. In

fact, in Judges 7, Gideon saw God do something that from a human perspective made absolutely no sense at all. What's more, Gideon heard God say something that made no sense from a human vantage point.

God told Gideon he had *too many people* to win the battle. And here was God's solution. He sent home 99% of the troops!

That doesn't make sense, does it? If you want to defeat an enemy you recruit soldiers, not discharge them, don't you?

Some people find it hard to trust a God they can't figure out. Perhaps I'm describing you or someone you care for deeply. I'm convinced that what God did with Gideon in Judges 7 can help us.

Two weeks ago we met Gideon in Judges 6. There he was threshing wheat in a winepress (11). Things were bleak for his people, the Israelites. They'd disobeyed God, so God judged them by handing them over to experience the oppression of the Midianites (1).

But God had mercy on His chosen nation, and raised up a deliverer for them—a judge—just as the book of Judges records He did time and time again. In this case, the deliverer would be *Gideon*.

Here's what God told Gideon (6:14), "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" After a period of initial doubt, Gideon believed God and availed himself for service. The Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon (in verse 34), and Gideon recruited an army of 32,000 men to overthrow the Midianites. That's when God surprised Gideon, as we'll see today, by sending people home.

We're going to devote two weeks to the amazing episode recorded in Judges 7. Actually, in Judges 7 God performed two astounding works. First, He prepared His people for action (1-15a). And then, He took action (15b-25). Or to put it another way, in section one God dealt with *His people*, and then in section two He dealt with the *enemy*.

That's often how God works. First He does something *in* us before He does something *through* us.

Let's look now at God's first work in Judges 7, the work He accomplished in Gideon and his people before the actual battle took place. In Judges 7:1-15, God prepared His people to see His greatness by dealing with two problems in their lives.

I. God dealt with the problem of self-sufficiency (1-8).

Self-sufficiency is a big problem. As sinners we enter this world with a self-sufficient bent. In verses 1-8 we're going to see what God thinks of self-sufficiency and how He dealt with it. First...

A. He identified the problem (1-2). Here's how it happened:

"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. 2 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..."

It all started *early* in the morning. In response to Gideon's call, 32,000 men reported for military duty and camped at the spring of Harad. Just northwards across the valley of Jezreel, the Midianite coalition army camped—just five miles away from the Israelite army.

Notice Gideon is referred to by his new name, Jerub-Baal, the name the townspeople gave him after he demolished the altar to Baal. He's now known as "the Baal fighter."

It's early in the morning, and the troops are ready for battle. Then came a surprise. God spoke to Gideon—the first of five times in this section that God spoke to Gideon—and said, "You've got too many men, Gideon."

What? Too many men? Verse 12 indicates that the Israelites are severely outnumbered by the enemy, but God says, "No, too many men."

That doesn't make sense. From a human perspective, how do you beat a big army? Get a bigger one!

The question is *why*. Why did God tell Gideon he had too many men? He gives the answer in verse 2 (as the KJV puts it), "Lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me."

Does it bother you when you do something and someone else takes credit for it? It's robbery, isn't it? It's not right.

The same goes for God. The fact is, God is offended when people take credit for what He did. Yet it happens all the time. People use God and then forget God.

The so-called self-made man thinks, "I really got myself out of that jam! I'm really something. There's nothing I can't do. I'm so smart!"

Who gets the glory for the accomplishments in your life, *God* or *you*? We would do well to remember Paul's questions in 1 Corinthians 4:7, "For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?"

Let that sink in, for it goes contrary to the humanistic ideas that bombard us day in and day out. The American mindset fosters the notion, "You have the innate ability to do anything you set your mind to. And then you can take the credit for it."

Know this. God hates self-sufficiency. In fact, 1 Peter 5:5 informs us, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." God doesn't use the proud person, but *opposes* him.

In Gideon's situation, the first thing God did was to identify the problem of self-sufficiency. Then, secondly...

B. Then He took steps to remove it (3-8). Drastic steps, two of them.

1. *God sent home the fearful* (3). "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."

It reminds me of an episode from the *Andy Griffith* show where an ex-con that Andy sent to prison returned to town. Barney rounded up some extra, potential deputies to help protect Andy—Gomer, Floyd, and Otis the town drunk. When Barney explained their mission, they became squeamish about the possible danger. Barney replied in dramatic fashion, "Listen! This is no job for cowards. If any of you are afraid, then you can just walk out that door right now." And every one of them headed for the door!

Can't you picture the scene here? Gideon speaks to his troops, "Listen, men. There's an army five miles from here that's too numerous to count. We'll be attacking them soon. If any of you are afraid, you may leave at this time, no questions asked."

And for every man that remained, *two* left! 22,000 men went home, only 10,000 stayed. When you think about it, the 22,000 did the sensible thing. Gideon's "army" was a rag-tag bunch of novices with no military training and experience, and facing them was huge army that had devastated them yearly for the previous seven years. And so 22,000 reasoned, "Why risk my neck? I'm going home."

They did the smart thing, right? Wrong. 22,000 men chose to miss out on seeing God work. 22,000 men didn't believe God could do what He said He'd do.

And by the way, remember that these 22,000 had originally volunteered for service. They weren't coerced, but came to the battlefield when Gideon called. But now their enthusiasm is gone. They've made a decision based on *fear*, rather than *faith*. And they're going to miss out. The person who lives by fear always does.

Put yourself in Gideon's shoes. What do you think he thought of God's order to send home the fearful, an order that would result in the loss of two-thirds of his troops? Do you think it made sense to him?

What's God doing with Gideon? He's teaching him two important lessons.

- To be a good leader, you must first be a good follower. God told Gideon to do something that made no sense to him—send home two-thirds of his troops. And what did Gideon do? He obeyed God. He did exactly as God commanded.

It's true, to be a good leader you must first be a good follower. Who must you follow? God. Why? Because of lesson two...

- God is *the* Leader. God is teaching Gideon a non-negotiable for victorious Christian living. There's only *one* Commander-in-Chief, only *one* who gives the orders. It's God. And if you want to be a good leader, the first thing you must do is resolve to be a good follower—of *Him*.

Men, I'd like to speak to you for a moment. Do you want to be a good leader at home? If so, you must start right here. Resolve to be a good follower. Give allegiance to God as *the* leader. What He says, goes. Resolve to obey Him, not just when His Word makes sense to you, and not just when others support you. Always. Make this resolve, "I will follow God. I will obey God's Word *always*."

So there's the first drastic step God took to deal with the problem of self-sufficiency in Israel. He sent home the fearful. But He wasn't done yet. Step #2...

2. *God sent home those who knelt to drink (4-8)*. Here's how it happened:

Verse 4, "But the LORD said to Gideon, 'There are still too many men.'" What? Still too many men? Do you get the impression that God's not into numbers like we so often are? He's not. He doesn't measure success by numbers. In this case, He whittled down the army. It was too big. That doesn't make sense to us, but it makes perfect sense to an omnipotent God.

He doesn't need anything. He is the *Almighty*. He's the One who once killed 185,000 Assyrian soldiers without using even one human soldier (Isa 37:36). Yes, at times He chooses to use human instruments, but it's not because He needs help.

So He told Gideon, "Still too many men." Then came this proposal (4), "Take them down to the water, and I will sift [KJV, "try"] 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."

Remember, now, these 10,000 men are *not afraid*. They're ready to fight. They *want* to fight. They're motivated, eager, willing, and loyal.

Yet God told Gideon, "No, still too many. Take them down to the water, and I'll sift them for you there." Again, Gideon obeyed God, as verse 5 states, "So Gideon took the men down to the water."

Then what happened? Verse 5 continues, "There the LORD told him." By the way, notice that when more

information was needed, God gave it, but not before. So often we ask God, "What do you want me to do?" God's method is this. Obey what you *know*, and then He'll *show*. Gideon obeyed, so God gave him further instruction.

He told him (5), "'Separate those who lap the water with their tongues like a dog from those who kneel down to drink.' 6 Three hundred men lapped with their hands to their mouths. All the rest got down on their knees to drink."

Again, visualize the scene. God told Gideon to separate the army into two groups. So he did. Group one contained those who lapped, and group two consisted of those who knelt. And he tallied up the "lappers"—300 men, which meant there were 9,700 who knelt.

What was Gideon thinking now? Was it, "Well, that wasn't too bad. I only lost 300 men. I'll take group two. We'll be okay."

If it was, Gideon was in for quite a surprise. "No Gideon, the 300 are not the ones you lose. They're the ones you *keep*."

Verse 7, "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." Again, Gideon must have thought, "But this doesn't make sense. I was already outnumbered when I had 32,000 men. The odds were even worse when I had 10,000. But 300 men? What can I do with 300 men?"

And that's the point, isn't it? Gideon is learning a vital lesson. This is God's battle, not Gideon's.

We forget that so often, don't we? We cry out, "God, the enemy is after me. Don't you see the battle I'm in?" And God is saying, "Yes, I see. But you're forgetting something. This is *My* battle. Remember, you're *mine*. I bought you. And I'll deal with your enemy in my way and in my time."

The commentators often discuss the question, "Why did God keep the men who lapped the water, and send home the men who knelt?" Some suggest that the water drinking test was designed to show which men were really ready for battle.

It's like God is recruiting a commando unit or "Swat Team." The ones who lap the water are prepared for action, but the ones who knelt down proved they really weren't prepared for action. The ones who cup their hands, bring the water to their mouths, and then lap it like a dog are demonstrating their alertness.

They're not afraid to be different. They're not sleeping on the job. They're not going to get caught off guard. They are the best of the best so God keeps them.

I suppose that's possible, but I don't think so. I think their actions show, if anything, that these are the flighty ones. The "lappers" are the unlikely ones, the surprising pick.

Remember, God already made it clear He's going to win this battle in such a way that no man or group of men can boast of their prowess.

What's happening here is this. God is choosing an unlikely group to follow an unlikely leader. Why? So He can show the sufficiency of *His power*. And as it turns out all these "commandos" do is blow a trumpet, smash a clay jar, and yell! They weren't going to win the battle because they were great fighters, but because they belonged to a *great God*!

You have to wonder what Gideon was thinking at this point. You'll recall that he was timid and unsure of himself back at the winepress, "Use me, God? I've never led an army before." Then God's Spirit filled him, he

blew a trumpet, and an army of 32,000 men responded to his call. "Hey, this isn't so bad! Maybe God can use me!"

And then this. By the time the two tests ended, God sent 31,700 of the men back home.

But watch what Gideon did. Verse 8, "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."

Gideon obeyed God. Why? Because it made sense? No. It's because He's God.

Listen. If you're a person who lives by your feelings, your hunches, by what *seems* right to you, rather than by a determination to obey God's Word no matter what, you will live a frustrated life.

By the way, just because we obey God doesn't mean He'll make our problems go away. Notice the final words of verse 8, "Now the camp of Midian lay below him in the valley." The enemy is still there!

We learn a couple of important things about God from this episode which I'd like to highlight at this point. The two are related...

- God works in unexpected ways. Like sending troops home before the battle. "God, this isn't the time to be down-sizing!" Actually, it's the perfect time—for until God eliminates any reason for self-sufficiency, He won't display His power.

- God uses unlikely people. Like Gideon and the 300 "lappers." God's ways don't always make sense, do they?

They didn't one Friday two thousand years ago, either. Remember the Cross? When Jesus died it didn't make sense, not at the time. The crowd mocked, the leaders jeered, the women wept, the followers fled. It just didn't make sense.

Why would God allow His Son to die? Was it a blown plan, a waste of a life? No. It was a *sacrifice*, an intentional, predetermined, substitutionary sacrifice. In eternity past, God decided that His Son would die to redeem a people for His glory.

What happened on the Cross may be foolishness to the world, but it's salvation to all who believe. Are you a believer? Have you placed your faith in the One God sent to die in your place?

In Judges 7, God prepared His people to see His greatness by dealing with two problems in their lives. The first is self-sufficiency. Here's the second...

II. God dealt with the problem of fear (9-15).

By this point in the story, God has the army He wants—300 men strong (or *weak*, since He'll provide all the strength needed). But there's something else needing attention, another problem. It's fear, Gideon's fear.

Watch what God does to deal with Gideon's fear. God allows him to experience three of His attributes. First...

A. Gideon experienced God's patience (9-12). Beginning in verse 9, God spoke again to Gideon. This time, rather than telling Gideon what to do, God gave him an option. Let's listen (9):

"During that night the LORD said to Gideon, 'Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands.'"

There's option #1. Gideon, get up and go against the enemy. But then God gave Gideon a second option, as follows (10-12): "If you are afraid to attack [now there's an understatement!], go down to the camp with your servant Purah 11 and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp." So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp. 12 The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore."

What's God doing with Gideon? He's demonstrating His patience. How? First...

1. *God told him what to do (9)*. But then—and this is so beautiful...

2. *God enabled him to do it (10-12)*. How? He told Gideon to take his servant, go to the Midianite camp, and listen. Once there he'd hear an encouraging message.

God is so good. As the psalmist put it, "He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust (Ps 103:14)." God knows how to encourage and bring along His people. He does it all the time with me. How about you? We can be thankful for His patience.

B. Gideon experienced God's sovereignty (13-14). We see it in two ways here:

1. *We see it in the timing*. Namely, the timing of Gideon's arrival. Verse 13 states, "Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream."

Stop there. Talk about perfect timing! This was no coincidence. Just as Gideon arrives, he hears two Midianite sentries talking. And guess who they're talking about? Him!

2. *We see it in the dream*. Verse 13 again, "'I had a dream,' he was saying. 'A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed.' 14 His friend responded, 'This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands.'"

That's quite a dream! The man saw a round loaf of barley. Barley was the staple crop of the poor farmer in Israel (being worth only half the value of wheat). It was a fitting symbol for Gideon, since he was leading the poverty-stricken Israelites.

The barley cake rolled into a tent. The tent obviously represented the Midianites, who were nomadic and lived in tents.

Then Gideon heard the second man's interpretation of the first man's dream, "This is Gideon! God has given our army over to him!"

My first thought is, "How did this man draw *that* conclusion from this simple dream?" The answer is *God*. God took the fear out of Gideon and put it into the Midianites. Oh, how marvelous to watch the sovereignty of God at work!

Beloved, you can trust the One who is in control of the minutest details of life.

C. Gideon experienced God's transforming power (15). Verse 15 explains:

"When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped God." Talk about a change! Because of the transforming power of God, Gideon is a new man. The trip to the Midianite camp prompted him to do two things.

1. *He worshiped God.* Wait a minute. How can you worship God in a field? Don't you need hymnbooks, bulletins, and an organ? That's one way to worship. But fundamentally, worship is declaring God's worth.

So yes, we can worship God by singing "How Great Thou Art." But we can also worship by closing a business deal and giving God the glory. And by obeying His Word at school so our peers see something different about us.

Having experienced God's patience, sovereignty, and transforming power, Gideon worshiped God. That's not all he did...

2. *He returned ready to obey God.* Verse 15 concludes, "He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, "Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands."

Answer this. When Gideon left his camp he was full of fear. When he returned the fear was gone. What had changed? Was the enemy still there? Yes. Did Gideon still have only 300 men? Yes. Were the odds the same? Yes. Was he still outnumbered? Yes.

Then what had changed? Gideon had. Gideon had just experienced the patience, sovereignty, and transforming power of God. Gideon is now seeing the problems of life from God's perspective. And he's ready for battle, as we'll see next time. But first...

Implications: Think about the following lessons...I'll mention four...

1. *Little is much when God is in it.* You say, "I'm only one person. What can I do for God?" It's not what we can do *for* God. It's what He can do *through* us.

Are you available? Is your life surrendered to Him?

2. *God doesn't need big numbers to do something big.* He took Gideon from one to 32,000 and back to 300 to make that point. He sent people home to prove that point.

Beloved, do you know why I believe God has something great in store for this church? It's because He is a *great* God. If He wants to prune His church, He can do so. And if He wants to cause His church to grow, He can do that, too.

You see, God loves to bless people who will trust Him, people who will say, "Have Thine own way, Lord, have Thine own way." And God loves to use people who will give Him the glory for what He does.

So our task is clear, isn't it? We must strive to have a God-centered ministry, a ministry that exalts His grace, His Word, and His Son. And leave the results up to Him. People may measure success by numbers, but God measures it by faithfulness.

3. *God hates self-sufficiency.* He is sufficient. We are not. We need Him. Sometimes God takes steps to uncover our self-sufficiency, as He did in Judges 7. Perhaps He's doing that in your life. Here's the bottom line...

4. *God wants us to trust Him.* "Be not dismayed whate'er betide. God will take care of you." He is trustworthy, so trust Him today.