

THE ARMY OF GOD

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Scripture Reading: Judges 7:1-8

General Douglas Mac Aurther once wrote: "You are as young as your faith, as old as your fear; as young as your hope, (and) as old as your despair."

Through experience, Mac Aurther had learned that a few good soldiers were much more valuable to his army than a large number of men who lacked courage and hope.

And the same is true with God's army. As Christians, we are members of God's army, engaged in spiritual warfare. We are called to release people who are being held captive by Satan's power.

It is a risky type of warfare to which we are called. Last week we talked about the importance of evangelism and being filled with the Holy Spirit to do evangelism. Now evangelism can sound almost fun when we define evangelism as simply verbally proclaiming the gospel to other people. But it is much more than that. When we engage in evangelism, we are also entering into a struggle to help release people from bondage. We are not only asking people to agree to certain truths about God. Even more than that, we are challenging people to change their behavior.

Now suggesting to people that they change their behavior is a very difficult and risky thing to do. In general, people do not like to change, and they resist those who suggest that they need to change.

The Bible promises us that if we proclaim the truth with our words and with our actions then we will be persecuted. 2 Timothy 3:12 says, "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted." And Jesus warned us in Mark 4:5 that there will be those who will fall away when persecution comes. In other words, a lot of people who set out with the high goal of being a witness for Jesus Christ will drop out when the going gets tough, and it is guaranteed that the going will get tough. With the help of the Holy Spirit, no one has to drop out, but many will drop out.

A person who lacks courage and hope will not do well in the God's army. We rejoice when we see large numbers of people coming to a worship service, but we should rejoice even more when we know that those who are coming are serious about fighting the good fight of faith. When we are talking about God's soldiers engaged in spiritual warfare, quality is always more important than quantity.

In today's scripture lesson, we find what is probably the best example to illustrate the point that God considers the quality of His soldiers to be more important than their quantity. In Judges 7:1-8 we find two basic kinds of people. The first kind, because of their fear and lack of discipline, were not fit to fight for the Lord. The second group of people was qualified to

fight for the Lord, because that group demonstrated courage and self-control in doing necessary things.

Let us attempt to understand the story a little better. In Judges 8:10 we discover that the Midian army numbered 135,000 men. Pitted against them was Gideon's army with 32,000 men. So we have an army of 32,000 fighting against an army of 135,000. With those odds, it seems evident that Gideon's army doesn't stand a chance. No wonder so many soldiers in Gideon's army were afraid. Then, in Judges 7:2, we read God's strange words to Gideon, "You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands..." There are too many, so God must reduce the number. And so a sifting process begins.

But we must not forget who those 32,000 men were. They were all volunteers from a nation that was experiencing one of the greatest periods of oppression and persecution it had ever experienced in its early history. For seven years the Midians had cruelly treated the Israelites. So severe was their oppression that the people left their homes in large numbers to hide in the dens and caves of the earth, hardly daring to show their faces. But then God called a new leader to the forefront. His name was Gideon, and in Judges 6 we see this man blowing a trumpet and calling his people out of hiding to fight for the Lord. From a military point of view, these people were poorly equipped and poorly trained. But despite this fact, these 32,000 men heard the call and responded. They are to be commended, for certainly there were some who heard the call and did not respond.

But then we hear God saying to Gideon, "You have too many men..." So, in verse 3, He gives them a very simple test. "Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead." Immediately we see 22,000 men return. Remaining are 10,000 men. Again we hear the strange words of God. In verse 4 God says, "There are still too many men." And so God gives them another test.

Man's most basic necessity for physical life is water. Let's see how these people behave in dealing with their basic needs. What we see is 9,700 men getting down on their hands and knees and, lowering their heads, they drink the water directly. Then we see 300 men standing at the water's edge. They do not get down on their hands and knees, but instead we see them bending over, scooping the water up with cupped hands. And then we see them lapping the water from their hands, drinking and watching at the same time; watching, lest their enemies come and take them by surprise. 9,700 men, in dealing with their basic necessity, temporarily forget the danger and put their heads to the water. 300 men, while doing necessary things, are always mindful of the task at hand. 9,700 men go back. And then, in Judges 7:7, we hear the words of the Lord, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands."

And so the sifting process is revealed. Out of a whole nation, 32,000 men respond and follow Gideon. From their midst 22,000 men tremble with fear and must be sent home, leaving 10,000. But out of the 10,000, 9,700 use too much time doing what is necessary. God tells them to go home. Now, in God's army, there are 300 fighting men.

I believe that this is one of the best pictures in the Bible we have which reveals to us God's

method of sifting His people. After reading this story, we are better able to understand why Jesus at times would use words that would cause the multitudes to want to leave Him. We can also understand why it is necessary in God's church today for there to be a decline in numbers so that new life may spring up. But, perhaps, most important of all, the story serves as a reminder to us that the quality of people in God's Church is more important than their quantity. God will use His way to choose for Himself those who will fight for Him.

So let us look briefly at the two kinds of people portrayed in this story. First, let's look at those who are not fit to fight in God's army. Secondly, let's notice those who are qualified to be used by the Lord.

I will first talk about those unfit for warfare. Here, the main point is not personal salvation. It is service that we are talking about. Every soul, regardless of its state, is a candidate for salvation. God's grace demands nothing from a man who is truly seeking that grace in repentance. Any person may come to God with all his weakness and cowardice, and God will make him into a new person, fit for service.

But there are those who are not fit for service, even though they may use the name of Christ as a means of identifying themselves. Among them there are the ones who fear and tremble in the face of the enemy. And who are those who fear? They are the ones whose vision of the enemy appears bigger than their vision of God. This is always the cause of fear. But isn't this a common reaction of all of us? Isn't it perfectly natural to count numbers and figure the odds of winning? Who is there among us who could say that if we were among the 32,000 men looking at the large army, more than four times their size, who had assembled to fight against them; and then beginning to count them...who among us wouldn't be filled with fear?

I would be lying if I told you that I never experience feelings of fear when I think about what I am trying to do here at CCCNJ. If those 22,000 men were unfit for service simply because they had fear in their hearts at the thought of facing such terrible odds, then I'm afraid most of us have committed the same kind of sin.

But it is more than just fear that we are dealing with here. There is also trembling. In verse 3, God said "anyone who trembles with fear may turn back..." The trembling helps us to understand the reason behind their fear. It suggests to us that, as they looked at their enemy and considered the odds, they became more concerned about their own safety than the importance of the cause. They were not prepared to suffer and die. Whenever a person becomes more concerned about his own safety and ease than he is about winning a victory for the Kingdom of God, then that person will become unfit for service. Trembling, in this case, represents panic, panic which results from placing too high a value upon things which are sure to pass away.

And why was God unable to use these who were more anxious about their own safety than they were about the cause? First of all, in the mist of battle, men like that are bound to have a negative affect on everyone else. If you begin a battle with 32,000 men, among whom 22,000 are trembling for fear of losing their lives, it won't be long before the other 10,000

are also trembling.

And then there is a second reason why God cannot use them. It is that those who are trembling do not have the strength needed for battle. The soldier who is not afraid of dying is the one who will be able to shoot the arrow accurately and with force. Those who are afraid of dying are actually at a higher risk of being killed or injured.

And then we see that those who are unfit for service not only include the ones who tremble with fear, but also those who spend too much time doing the necessary things in life.

What are the necessary things of life? Eating, drinking, sleeping, dressing, and exercising may be considered basic necessities. Beyond these things, there are also other things that people consider as basic necessities. Now the question is, are we spending unnecessary time doing necessary things? When we eat and when we sleep and when we dress and when we recreate, are we keeping in mind the greater matters of the Kingdom of God? Do we feel a constant sense of urgency to do the will of God? Do we realize that a constant battle is being waged, and that God is looking for soldiers, and that we cannot afford to waste one minute of our time collecting to many things or eating too much food or over-indulging in some other way?

Last week I took my son to the barber shop; and while Ben was getting his hair cut, I listened to the conversation of men as they discussed the best places to retire in the U.S. and the best hotels to stay in when you travel to Los Vegas. From that conversation, it would seem that life consists of nothing more than self-satisfaction. Nothing in their conversation even hinted at there being a higher purpose in living. As members of God's army, we must not allow ourselves to be lowered to such a level of thinking.

God has not changed. He still looks for quality among people in His Church today. He is still in the business of testing people, sifting them to find those who are worthy to do His work because they take His work seriously. The words God gave Gideon are the words He speaks to us, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you..."

And who are these 300 men? In this world, what kind of people belongs to God's army?

They are brave men. That is, they view God as being bigger than their difficulty. Moreover, they are not afraid to sacrifice themselves for the sake of God's Kingdom. They believe that sacrifice is worth the privilege of being able to fight in God's army. They are willing to die if that is what God would have them do. And you know? The wonderful thing about these people is that they affect other people in a positive way. People see how they sacrifice themselves and they are moved. And so the courage is passed on to others who in turn are willing to sacrifice for the sake of God's Kingdom.

God's soldiers also understand discipline; therefore, they are fit to be called disciples of Christ. They know how to use the proper amount of time to do the things that are necessary. It is this discipline which keeps them alert and ready for battle at any given moment.

And how do we measure up to this kind of person? How can a weak and fearing person be changed into a brave soldier for Christ? The answer is that we must first attain a correct vision of God so that our fear will be replaced by courage. If we see the difficulty as being bigger than God, then we need a better vision of who God is.

The most significant thing about ourselves is our correct concept of God. When a person is gripped by the facts of who God is and how God deals with man, that person is bound to have two reactions. First of all, he will see clearly just how weak he really is. And secondly, he will realize that the power of God can be demonstrated in his weakness.

In both the Old and New Testaments we are able to see the saints of God having these kinds of experiences. Job, after finally receiving revelation from God, first responds in Job 40:4 by saying, "I am unworthy--how can I reply to You?" And then later, in Job 42:2, we hear him say, "I know that You can do all things; no plan of Yours can be thwarted."

Isaiah, after receiving revelation from God says in Isaiah 6:5, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." In Daniel 10:16 we read that, after receiving revelation through a vision, Daniel proclaimed, "I am overcome with anguish because of the vision, my Lord, and I am helpless." But later, as with the case of Isaiah, he received strength for service.

The saints of the New Testament had similar experiences. We can hear the apostle Paul on one occasion saying, "I am a nobody," and then on another occasion saying, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

In 1976, just before I entered into the ministry, I wept before my peers as I realized how unqualified I was for the ministry of preaching the gospel. Later, after meditating on the words of Psalm 55, I was overwhelmed with the sensation that God was going to use me despite my weaknesses.

The only way we will overcome the fear that resides in us is to first admit the fact that we are weak, and then use a correct concept of God to drive out the fears. We gain strength by attaining a correct vision of God. And the second truth is also important. To be fit for God's army, we must practice self-discipline.

In our society the drive for self-satisfaction continues to increase. We are constantly being bombarded with television commercials and other advertisements which are reminding us that it is very important to attain a higher level of self-satisfaction. This barrage of propaganda confuses us, making it difficult to tell the difference between what we think we need and what we really need in this life.

The apostle Paul records the proper attitude in I Corinthians 9:24-27. "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. Therefore I do not

run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.”

Through God’s grace, we can become strong and we can become disciplined.

Do you desire to fight in God’s army? Do you desire to serve God? If so, you must first come to God for salvation. Admit your sins and your weaknesses, and ask Him to save you. If you have never done this, do it today. And then ask God daily to give you the strength and discipline you need to be counted worthy to serve Him.