

God's R.I.F. [Reduction in Force] in Gideon's Army

Judges 7.1-8 [6.1-16, 7.16-22a]

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The story of Gideon's army in the Book of Judges chronicles one of the most preposterous military organizational operations in history.

The entire Book of Judges contains exciting accounts of a series of astonishing deliverances of the Israelites during the long period of settlement in the land of Canaan. These deliverances were necessary because of the repetitive cycle of defection (sin), punishment because of sin and turning away from God, and the Israelites cry for God's help. One of the very familiar stories of God's deliverance is the one from the Philistines at the hand of the judge, Samson. (Judges 13-16)

This time the enemy is from Midian, south of Canaan, and God's appointed deliverer-judge is Gideon.

The Israelite's problem's beginning is stated in Judges 6.1, "The children of Israel did what was evil in the eyes of the Lord." They had begun to worship other gods, and each person was doing whatever was right in their *own* eyes.

The Israelites problems would last for seven years, and God would use the oppression of the Midianites to get their attention. Every year, for seven years, the Midianites would wait until after harvest time to show up and then come screaming down on top of the Israelites in the Plain of Esdraelon and steal the harvested crops. Now, after a few years and several occurrences of the Midianites' "Annual Harvest Raid Festival" you'd think the Israelites would wise up and defend themselves; but they didn't have adequate resources for defense. Finally after seven years they began to pray for God's help.

Gideon was the deliverer-judge chosen by God, and he was from the poorest of poor families (Judges 6.15). Our first view of the chosen commander-to-be was not the bravest, since he was hiding in his father's winepress (about the size of a modern day corn crib) to harvest his wheat in secrecy so as not to be seen by the Midianite raiders and thereby salvage his crop (Judges 6.11).

But great things would be done by God through this farmer-turned-commander of an army. It would be done, however, as God said through the prophet Zechariah, "Not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit." (Zechariah 4.6) This mission would require a special kind of soldier.

GOD CHOSE SOLDIERS WHO WERE LEADERS

Even though he had tested God twice (with the fleeces and the morning dew), Gideon was a willing leader. He was fed up with the Midianites' tactics and their annual

harassment and thievery; and the call for an all-volunteer army produced 32,000 soldiers who showed up for active duty (Judges 6.34).

But that huge number was too many for God's plans! The soldiers would think they won a battle on their own with sheer numbers. So God's first downsizing of Gideon's army came in Judges 7.3 when Gideon was directed to say, "Anyone of you who is afraid can go home." Well, 22,000 walked out of basic combat training on the spot that day! (Imagine a drill sergeant saying to a brand new group of trainees, "Okay, if you really don't want to be here, you can leave!")

The remaining 10,000 men were leaders who were willing to fight; but the odds were still almost one Israelite to fourteen Midianites! Still, those soldiers were willing to take on the enemy. Imagine the dismay of Gideon and his whole army of volunteer soldiers when God said to Gideon, "You still have too many!" (Judges 7.4)

GOD CHOSE SOLDIERS WHO WERE DISCIPLINED

Notice the word *discipline*. From it comes the word *disciple*. The 10,000 men who remained in Gideon's army followed orders without question. One might think that the next order was not very definitive, and was probably issued without much thought; but they followed without question when Gideon said, "Everyone go down to the spring and get a drink of water." Can you imagine selecting special forces troops by just watching how they drank water? Well, consider what Gideon, and God, were watching.

One group got down on all fours and stuck their faces in the water, lapping like thirsty dogs. With their faces in the water they couldn't do much in the way of reconnaissance, unless they were checking out the bass for their next training holiday!

The other group got down on one knee, lifted the water to their faces with one hand while carefully controlling their weapon (sword/spear) with the other. Their discipline was to keep their eyes on the horizon, not buried in the shallow water.

The 9700 who were more concerned about reckless than careful drinking and careful soldiering were SERBed (Selective Early Release Board) on the spot. God would use the remaining disciplined 300 to go against the 135,000 Midianites!

Those odds were pretty skewed: one Israelite to every 450 Midianites – but, as Zechariah wrote, this battle would be won "...not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord." (Zechariah 4.6)

These 300 men followed what was possibly the most preposterous combat equipment issue order ever published! They were to stop by the Central Issue Facility (CIF) and pick up one each: clay pot, torch, trumpet! No weapons? No questions. They were given an order and they followed it. They were disciplined. But leadership and discipline were not enough.

GOD CHOSE SOLDIERS WHO WERE COMPETENT AND OBEDIENT

Without question, these three companies of soldiers obeyed another unusual field order. That night, they were to position each of their three companies just below the far crests of three hills that surrounded the Midianite army camp in the valley. They were to have their torches lit, but hidden from view by being placed inside the large clay pot they each were carrying. [This is the derivation of the symbol of the Gideons found on the many bibles we see in so many hospitals and hotels as well as on our bulletin cover today: a burning torch mounted inside a large clay vessel.]

The Israelites were to use sight and sound as a means of command and control during that night attack. (Field radios were a tactical addition to combat that would arrive thousands of years later!) Gideon depended on their competency to carry out yet another preposterous order.

“When you see me break the clay pot and expose my torch, and begin to blow my trumpet, all of you do the same!” One by one the soldiers moved quietly to their positions behind the high ground of the hilltops with their equipment. Once the signal came from Gideon, they all broke their clay pots and exposed brightly burning torches across a wide battlefield, and blew their trumpets as a symbol of attack. [I’ve always wondered if there weren’t a lot of trumpets that had to be DXed (turned back in as unusable) if they were used to break the clay of each of those clay pots! Ah, well; it happened all right.]

The Israelites’ competency and obedience paid off. The Midianites were awakened in the middle of the night to the sound of 300 Israeli trumpets blasting from the hilltops surrounding them. Immediate confusion was created by the trumpet sounds flowing down the hills and into the ears of the Midianite soldiers. In that “fog of war” and darkness, the Midianites assumed that they were surrounded and that the enemy’s main body was already in the middle of their campsite. In the darkness they drew their swords and began killing everyone they could find! As the Israelites watched in amazement from the tops of three hills, they saw the Midianites killing *themselves*, their own soldiers! By the time the Israelites ruse and the Midianite’s terrible self-decimation was discovered, the Midianites had slain 120,000 of their own soldiers in mass fratricide!

With only 15,000 soldiers remaining when they realized what they had done, they began an immediate retreat southward toward their home! As they looked back to the hilltops, they saw and heard what looked like three companies in the first wave of a massive three-pronged attack! What they didn’t know was that it was the “only” wave, and that they weren’t attacking. Three companies of disciplined (and quite amazed) Israelite soldiers were overtaken with awe at what they saw. God had delivered them! And they hadn’t used even one weapon!

Imagine the scenario of 15,000 Midianites beating feet in retrograde as fast as they could go...with 300 Israelites in hot pursuit! These 300 soldiers had exercised their natural and

acquired competence; but they trusted Gideon's leadership, and Gideon's God. The Lord had clearly been the One to give them victory. All they had to do was obey.

God still uses those same three characteristics in people today: *leadership, discipline and competence/obedience.*

We all fight various types of battles in our own lives; and God still uses the same, proven victory traits demonstrated by Gideon's significantly downsized army: *leadership, discipline, and competence.*

There is no *direction* without *leadership.*

There is no *discipleship* without *discipline.*

There is no *victory* without *competence/obedience.*

Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge God, and God will direct your paths. (Proverbs 3.5-6)

Our Lord demonstrated *leadership, discipline and obedience* when He invaded the earth to pull off "Operation Rescue" in order to bring us a new and deeper life.