



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

You Call This An Army?

Judges 7.1–25

David Anguish

Introduction

On a day in early 1954, 40,000 people descended on Milan, Indiana, population 1,150, lining the main highway for 13 miles. They came for a victory parade for the Milan High School Indians who had just won the 1954 state basketball championship (1954 Milan).

Milan's 1952–53 and 1953–54 teams inspired the 1986 movie, *Hoosiers*. The movie is probably more dramatic, but Milan's two-year run is more remarkable. Until 1997, Indiana held a single-class basketball tournament where all schools competed for the championship; this was in contrast to most states where schools compete in classifications based on school size. With an enrollment of 161, Milan was the smallest high school ever to win that title. The 1952–53 team shocked everyone by making it to the state semi-final game. In 1953–54, they went 19–2 in the regular season, and then won the seven sectional, regional, semi-state, and semi-final state games by no fewer than eight points. They won the final game by two points on a last second shot that broke a tie, finishing 28–2.

We understand why someone would make a movie (loosely) based on their story and why it would gross over \$28,000,000.00 at the box office (*Hoosiers*). We like stories where smaller, underdog teams upset larger and heavily favored ones; we find hope against long odds and tough times. We know, of course, that stories like these are exceptions to the way life usually works. But how thrilling would it be to be part of a movement where, historically, the seemingly impossible happened consistently? Would that increase our faith? Strengthen our resolve? Deepen our commitment? Let's recall one such case described in Scripture and reflect on some applications of it.

Israelites in Trouble

Judges 7.1–25, the text for this study, is part of one of several accounts in Judges that illustrate the tragic cycle repeated in Israel between the times of Joshua and Saul. The people would *sin* as they pursued other gods (Judg 2.11–13). They would be made *servants* to an enemy who was allowed to conquer them (vv. 14–15). They would cry out in *supplication* to God to deliver them

from their situation (v. 18b). *Salvation* would be granted via the work of a “judge,” i.e., a deliverer sent from God (vv. 16–18).

In Judges 6, the oppressors were the Midianites, desert dwellers from the south. In large numbers, they invaded and completely destroyed Israel’s land and livestock; they were so devastating that the Israelites went into hiding (Judg 6.2–6). In response to the people’s supplication (v. 7), the LORD sent an angel to call Gideon, a man who needed convincing (vv. 12–13). The LORD prepared him for what was ahead by telling him to tear down his father’s idol (vv. 25–35), and then agreed to his request for a series of signs involving a fleece (vv. 36–40).

The LORD’S Victory through Gideon

The LORD, who would lead the battle, began by eliminating the potentially debilitating effects that would come from those among the Israelites who were fearful (Judg 7.1–3). The text reveals that Gideon and the people were outnumbered by a margin of four to one: 135,000 Midianites (8.10) versus 32,000 Israelites (7.3). But the LORD didn’t tell Gideon to call for reinforcements. Instead, he told him he had too *many* men; according to the teaching of the law, he sent home the 22,000 who were fearful (7.2–3; cf. Deut 20.8).

The LORD then gave him a test for the 10,000 who remained (Judg 7.4–8). As they went to the brook to drink, those who knelt down to drink were sent home and those who lapped the water with their tongues remained. Although it is common to say that this tested their vigilance, the text does not tell us why the LORD administered this test. It does tell us that the test was intended to ensure that credit for victory in the battle would go to the LORD (v. 2). This aim was reinforced when we read the battle plan that was anything but typical:

So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, “A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!” Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. When they blew the 300 trumpets, the LORD set every man’s sword against his comrade and against all the army. And the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath (Judg 7.19–22).

The lack of a revealed reason and the battle plan described lend credence to the conclusion that the number sent home was an arbitrary choice by the Lord intended to further emphasize that he and he alone was Israel’s deliverer (Block 2009, 158; cf. Howard 2008, 451). And in fact, Gideon was left with just 300 men, leading an “army” that was outnumbered 450 to 1.

The remainder of chapter 7 records the final preparations and the battle itself. In verses 9–14, the LORD assured Gideon of certain victory. When he returned from reconnaissance of the Midianite camp, Gideon assured the men and revealed the plan to them (v. 15–18). The nature of that plan emphasizes yet again how improbable it appeared, for the battle would be fought with weapons that Near Eastern peoples would have thought ridiculous—and with good reason (vv. 19–25).

If we read it with fresh, honest eyes, we must admit that we are also incredulous. Gideon’s men would surround the Midianites as they slept. Each man would carry a “trumpet” (רַשָּׁפָה, *šāpar*), a

ram's horn used to sound an alarm or call troops. Each man would also have a jar, probably a small or medium size storage jar in which was a torch, likely "a stick with rags soaked in oil and wrapped around the end.... So long as the lit torches are covered by the jars, they smolder, but once the jars are removed they burst into flame" (Block 2009, 159). When signaled to do so, all the men would blow their trumpets, break the jars, hold the torches aloft, and shout, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" (Judg 7.20). When they did, the disoriented Midianites attacked each other and then fled in a panicked retreat. It was only when that occurred that more people from Israel were summoned (vv. 21–25).

A Realistic and Committed People of Faith

The principal lesson to take from this episode is that God's greatness is what ultimately matters. This is not a case that shows "the value of positive thinking." What God did was otherwise impossible—which is the point (Judg 7.2). That said, we should not miss the fact that, as improbable as the plan and events were, the episode shares a commonality with others throughout Scripture: God's method is always to use faithful servants.

That's important to remember, for we are also engaged in a war. Some may act as if we are in a live-and-let-live world where being religious is one choice, but not one to be pressed or seriously defended. The New Testament presents a different view, and evidence is ample that many who would challenge us agree with that view (though with little else in Scripture's pages). Paul called it a war that involves knowing God and opposing strongholds (2 Cor 10.3–6). Peter warned that the devil is relentless in seeking to conquer us (1 Pet 5.8). Both men called for servants to be prepared to engage the battle (1 Pet 3.15).

Being a spiritual combatant calls for an intense and purposeful approach to faithful service. Like Gideon and his 300, we need to be focused on the battle. God has called the church to be the people who declare his wisdom and take on "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph 3.10); what is needed is a single-minded focus that engages and commits completely to the battle. It will not be successfully engaged if we are distracted by other things, even things that are good.

Conclusion

As things now stand, Indiana will likely never see another run like Milan's. Urbanization, consolidation, and multiple classifications have changed their world. Fewer than half of the 751 schools entered in the 1954 tournament still exist. We'll need other stories to inspire us.

Whatever those stories will be, we know that even the most inspirational will not equal Gideon beating the Midianites. But we can hope to see a church surrender and commit to the mission given by God. It may look too big to tackle; it may not go like we expect. But Israel's God is our God, still able to do the impossible, still calling people to trust him to do so. It remains for us to commit and engage.

Works Cited

"1954 Milan High School basketball team." *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1954_Milan_High_School_basketball_team. Retrieved May 13, 2024.

Daniel L. Block. 2009. "Judges." *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary*. vol. 2. Ed. John H. Walton. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

"Hoosiers (film)." *Wikipedia*. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoosiers_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hoosiers_(film)). Retrieved May 13, 2024.

David M. Howard. 2008. "Study Notes on Judges." *ESV Study Bible*. ed. Lane T. Dennis. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

www.davidanguish.com