

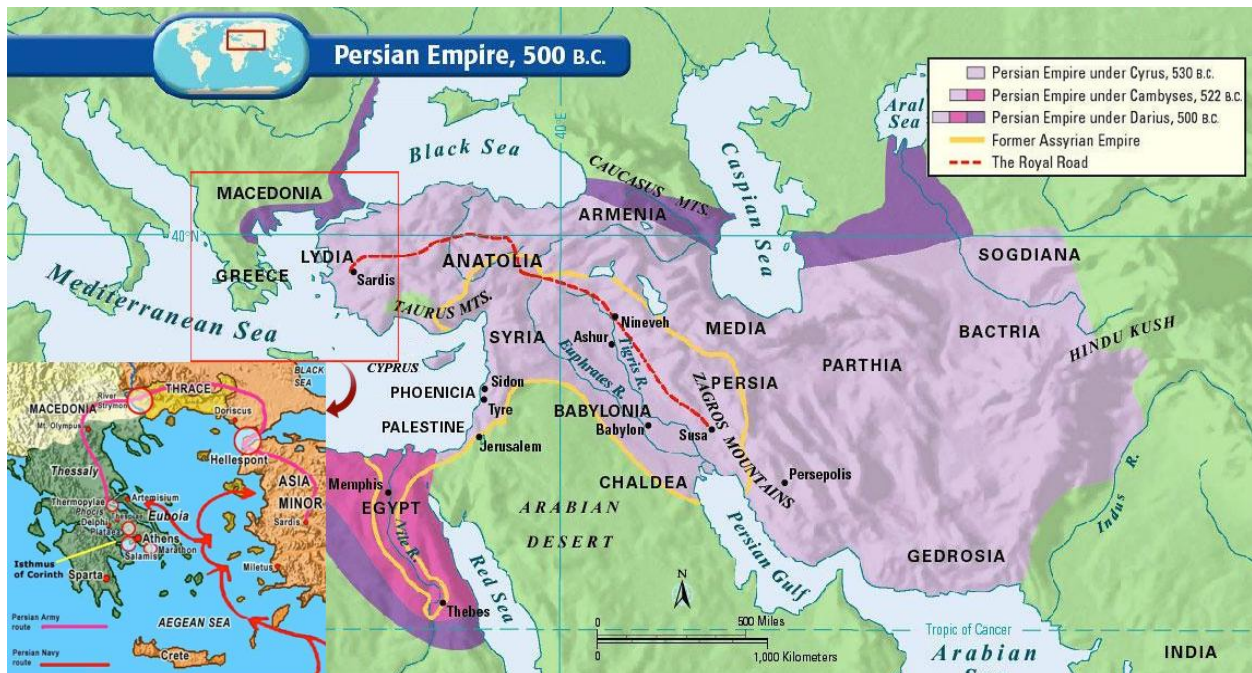
Gideon Part 2: The LORD Saves His People With I Against 450

Scripture Readings: JUDGES 7:1-8:3; 2 Corinthians 12:9-10; 13:4

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Congregation of Christ: Did you know that the Olympic Games starting next week, Queen Esther, the famous Battle of Thermopylae, and Gideon may all be part of a common thread?

The Book of Esther begins with a great assembly called by King Ahasuerus of Persia (modern-day Iran), also known by his Greek name Xerxes. The gathering was in the capital city of Susa, attended by all officials and servants, nobles and governors of his empire that stretched to India in the east and Macedonia (modern-day northern Greece) in the west.



Was this great assembly just showtime for Xerxes? No, for its main purpose was to convince all the rulers of his great empire to support the king's plan to invade and pacify the main part of Greece. They were to provide warriors and other resources for this massive invasion. Esther Chapter 2 then begins with “*after these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated.*” What happened between the king's feast in Chapter 1 and the beginning of Chapter 2?

Xerxes ruled the Persian Empire from 486-465 B.C. It was in the the third year of his reign, 483 B.C., that this gathering took place. With his massive army, estimated from anywhere from 60,000-1 million, and 800 ships, Xerxes overran much of northern and central Greece. By 480 B.C., the only obstacle in the way to Athens and all of Greece was a very narrow pass at a place called Thermopylae. The Greeks assembled a tiny army of about 7,000 to meet the Persian horde. Why so few defenders? It was because of two major religious festivals: one was a Spartan feast in honor of the Greek god Apollo; the other was the famous games in Olympia in honor of Zeus and other Greek gods. After these two feasts, the Greeks expected to send more warriors.

But for the moment, only 7,000 Greeks were available to their commander, Leonidas. At the pass, there were only 300 Spartans, plus about 1,000 other Greeks. The Spartans held their ground for two days, but because of a Greek traitor, the Persians outflanked and overran the Spartans on the third day. The way was now clear for Xerxes to take all of Greece. But alas! The small Greek navy defeated the great Persian navy at Salamis, and more defeats followed. Xerxes had no choice but to abandon his grand design and go back to his palace in Susa. It was after he returned from this ignominious defeat that Esther Chapter 2 begins with the words, *“after these things.”* Four years had passed from the great feast given by Xerxes in 483 B.C. and his selection of Esther to be his queen (Est 2:16).

So, how does all these history relate to the story of Gideon? For one, both Gideon and Leonidas faced impossible odds with only 300 warriors. Some liberals who don't really believe the Bible and consider the story of Gideon's 300 as a myth, may even say that the story of Gideon was plagiarized from the heroic story of the 300 Spartans. But you may recall that the consensus of scholars is that the Book of Judges was written at least a century before the Battle of Thermopylae.¹

Our theme today is **“Gideon Part 2: God Saves His People With 1 Against 450.”** The overarching theme of this story is that God delivers his people with a weakling who faced overwhelming odds. We have three headings: first, **The Necessity of 1 Against 450**; second, **The “Battle” of 1 Against 450**; and third, **The Power of 1 Against 450**.

The Necessity of 1 Against 450

Why did I choose the sermon title, “1 Against 450” for today? If we looked ahead to Judges 8:10, we learn that the Midianite army was 135,000. Since the LORD whittled down Gideon's army to a tiny 300 men, the ratio is 1 Israelite against 450 Midianites.

Why did God prune Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300? We find the answer in verse 2, when the LORD said to Gideon, *“The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”* If they were many like the enemy, Israel has reason to boast of their own strength and power. So the LORD told Gideon to send home *“whoever is fearful and trembling.”* So all but 10,000 men remained in the camp by the spring of Harod, a place name which actually means fearful or trembling.

Why would all these men be fearful? Because, for one, they were facing impossible odds. Second, even Gideon was fearful and lacked faith and trust in the LORD. Didn't the LORD give his word that he would give the Midianites into his hand? Even after *“the Spirit of the LORD clothed”* him, he still asked twice for a sign from God with the fleece and dew. This is also our usual reaction to God's will, when God's will is not according to our own plans, or doesn't suit our taste. When the Spirit was moving me to change course in midlife from a lucrative career in engineering to an uncertain life as a missionary, my wife and I were both fearful and uncertain. What if we didn't get enough support? What will happen to our children? What if they didn't like living in a third world country?

¹ Most of these information were gleaned from Gordon Franz, “Thermopylae and the Book of Esther,” <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2013/04/24/Thermopylae-and-the-Book-of-Esther.aspx>, April 24, 2013. Accessed July 28, 2016; and Mark Cartwright, “Thermopylae,” Ancient History Encyclopedia, <http://www.ancient.eu/thermopylae/>, April 16, 2013. Accessed July 28, 2016.

Do we sin when we fear and tremble before our life's battles? We all have financial battles, relationship battles, and work battles. How can I, a single Mom or Dad, continue to support and raise my children alone? As Christians, we face constant spiritual battles against sin and temptation. These next several months, we are facing an uncertain future as a nation. We worry that we are losing our battle against overwhelming forces opposed to our religious freedoms as Christians and as a church. It seems that the odds are stacked against all that the Scriptures teach.

This is why the Bible is full of exhortations for us not to fear the future. Jesus encourages us not to be anxious about what we will eat and wear tomorrow (Mat 6:31-33). He gives us his peace so that we will not be troubled or be afraid (John 14:27). He didn't give us a spirit of fear, but of power (2 Tim 1:7). His promise to us is that, through all our troubles, he will never leave us nor forsake us. So do not fear anyone, for God is our helper (Heb 13:5-6).

This was the LORD's promise to Gideon. But the LORD again said to him, "*the people are still too many.*" What? 1 untrained warrior against 14 professionals is too many? But God was not in a joking mood. He had a plan. Gideon must take all the 10,000 men to Harod, the Spring of Trembling, and tell them to drink there. So there were men who drank as dogs lap, putting their hands to their mouths. And then there were the kneelers who drank kneeling down. Surprise, surprise! God picked the lappers, who numbered only 300! The rest were sent home.

Many pastors praise the lappers for their vigilance and watchful of what's happening around them, especially in the face of an invading horde. The problem is, this is not in the text. This was simply a way that the LORD used to further prune Gideon's army. In fact, my guess is that the 300, like Gideon, were not even close to being mighty warriors.

So from a ratio of 1 to 14, the LORD just lowered the odds against Israel to 1 to 450. How would Gideon and his 300 react this time? If they were fearful before, now they were exceedingly fearful! How did the LORD ease their fear?

The "Battle" of 1 Against 450

Unlike the two signs with the fleece and dew on Gideon's threshing floor, the LORD gave Gideon one last sign before the battle against the Midianites. After Gideon armed his 300 with – another surprise! – trumpets, empty jars, and torches, not swords, the LORD told Gideon to spy on the enemy's camp that same night with a servant. When Gideon and his servant arrived at the camp, they overheard a conversation between two Midianites. One of them told the other of his dream, "*a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian and came to the tent and struck it so that it fell and turned it upside, so that the tent lay flat.*" The other interpreted the dream as Gideon and the Israelites defeating Midian – a tiny bread flattening a tent!

The LORD gave these two Midianites a prophecy about their defeat before an army of 300. Throughout the Bible, God gave prophets, apostles and other men and women dreams and visions to reveal his will. Today, are we to rely as well on dreams and visions to know God's will? No, we are to depend on God's Word. The Bible is sufficient and is complete for all of our doctrines, worship and life. What happens when people today rely on dreams and visions and direct chats with God? In 1977, televangelist Oral Roberts told of his dream of a 900-foot tall Jesus, and promptly raised millions. Pat Robertson reveals false prophecies every New Year as

a result of his direct talks with God. And Harold Camping's claims that God revealed to *him and him alone* God's endtime timeline resulted in three embarrassing false prophecies.

By human standards, Gideon's espionage of the enemy camp was an eerie episode. Out of a huge camp of 135,000 men, how did Gideon and his servant come exactly to these two men? And how is it that on the same night and at that moment when Gideon was spying, they were talking about a prophetic dream? It was all in God's providence and sovereignty. To deliver Israel, God perfectly ordained that place in the camp, those two Midianites, and the timing.

When in our lives, we say "It just so happened," we are actually affirming the Biblical doctrine of God's providential care of his people. For God, there is no such thing as "luck" or "coincidence" or "fortune." [no "potluck"!] He works all things for the good of all who love him and are called by his name. If the odds seem impossible, and his people are still saved, then it is the LORD's doing. Let us remember "it just so happened" that Joseph was a slave in Egypt, but became the Prime Minister. Or Pharaoh's daughter bathing by the river when the basket carrying Moses floated by. Or Ruth gleaning in Boaz's field. Or Jews from all over the Roman Empire were in Jerusalem to hear the gospel preached to them by Peter on Pentecost Sunday.

And because "it just so happened" that Gideon heard the two Midianites' chat about a dream, Gideon was greatly assured of victory that "*he worshiped*" the LORD right there and then. What a reaction! But in the whole Gideon story, and in the rest of the judges, no one comes close to the worship of God by Deborah. The whole of Judges Chapter 5 is her song of praise and thanksgiving to the LORD for giving Israel victory over the Canaanites.

Giving glory to the LORD was God's purpose in sending only Gideon's 300 against 135,000 Midianites. This has always been God's purpose in us as well.

The Power of 1 Against 450

Our role models are strong, bad, mean people like UFC fighters, Superman and Batman, The U.S. Dream Teams and Lebron James, Navy Seals and Green Berets, Muhammad Ali and Mike Tyson, who always overwhelm their opponents and enemies. We romanticize warriors like Leonidas and the 300 Spartans, and Davy Crockett and the Alamo's last stand defenders.

Christians also admire pastors who project on TV an image of someone who is dynamic, confident, fearless, witty, glamorous, even hip and good-looking. But those who simply preach the gospel on Sundays, in season and out season, do not even get a simple nod of approval.

But time and again in the Bible we read of ordinary and average people like Moses, David, Ruth, Mary and the 12 Apostles to name a few. Noah was drunk; Abraham was too old; Jacob was a deceiver; Rahab was a prostitute; Jonah ran away from God; Samson and Solomon were womanizers; Peter was fearful and denied Christ; and Timothy was very young. Not your typical, always faithful Hall of Famers of Faith.

Did the 300 actually do battle against the Midianite horde? They did not! What are they going to fight with? Trumpets, jars and torches? No, it was the LORD who surprised and terrified the enemy that they killed one another in confusion, that only 15,000 were able to flee. Hundreds of years later, we read a similar story. The nation of Judah under King Jehoshaphat was surrounded by an overwhelming coalition army. Jehoshaphat prayed, and

the LORD answered his prayer through a prophet, *“Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God’s... You will not need to fight in this battle. Stand firm, hold your position, and see the salvation of the LORD... and the LORD will be with you”* (2 Chr 20:15-17). The prophet’s words were true. As the king and his people worshiped and praised the LORD, the enemy troops slaughtered one another in great confusion.

Dear Friends: Herein lies the power of “1 Against 450”: not man’s own strength, wisdom and fame. Not the power of great armies of Midian, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, or Nazi Germany, for the psalmist warns against trusting in man, *“It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man. It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in princes.”* These are words of wisdom from Psalm 118:8-9 as we Christians agonize over our uncertain future these days.

As Christians, you are to trust God’s strength, heavenly wisdom, and fame because of his marvelous works for his people. Christ said to Paul as he prayed for healing, *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”* Paul was a persecutor, not eloquent, and the last of the apostles. He was in turn persecuted, tortured, imprisoned, shipwrecked, and finally martyred, just as the other Apostles were.

Paul boasted, but boasted in Christ alone, *“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong”* (2 Cor 12:9-10) And you too cannot boast of your good works, for God has saved you by faith and repentance, so you may not boast that you have a part in your salvation (Eph 2:8-9).

Paul was a model of weakness and humility. But Paul extols Christ, *“he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him...”* (2 Cor 13:4). Christ divested himself of his divine honor and glory, and came down from heaven to earth to assume humanity’s weaknesses and limitations. Instead of receiving honor and praise, he was insulted, suffered hardships, rejected and persecuted by his own people, spat on, beaten, and finally was put to a shameful, accursed death on the cross.

But in the end, he was exalted and glorified as he was raised from the grave and ascended into heaven. He overcame truly impossible odds; him against the whole world. He sent, not 300 mighty warriors, but twelve uneducated fishermen into a world full of God’s enemies. The Twelve were weaklings, but they turned the world upside down by spreading the gospel to the ends of the earth. Not by might or by sword, but by the power of the gospel through the Spirit of Christ. They overcame, not 135,000 in a wilderness in Israel, but untold millions in all the nations of the earth who have believed and trusted in Christ as King of kings and Lord of Lords.

If you are not one of these who believe in salvation by faith alone in Christ alone, pray that God will grant you this faith, so you may confess and repent of your sins and be saved.