

Exhausted Yet Pursuing



Gary Wilkerson February 6, 2012

"Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, *exhausted yet pursuing*" (Judges 8:4, my emphasis).

Gideon's life is a perfect example of how God creates impossible circumstances for his servants in order to demonstrate his glory. The Lord called this shy man to lead Israel into battle against an overwhelming enemy: 100,000 Midianites, compared to Israel's army of 22,000.

Talk about not having resources — these weren't just overwhelming odds, they bordered on impossible. But Gideon believed and acted on God's word — and guess how the Lord responded? *He made things even more impossible!*

That's right, God pushed the limit — well beyond Gideon's limit — in order to bring himself glory.

The Bible holds some amazing lessons for us about God's resources and his desire to supply them. I've found that one of those lessons is how often God brings us his incredible supply *only after we've gone beyond our limits*.

He longs to demonstrate to a watching world that he brings impossible victories to those who put their trust in him.

I see four great lessons for us today in Gideon's story.

Lesson 1: Limited resources never limit God.

God is never limited in his resources when he calls us to do something. If we were in Gideon's shoes we might think, "Lord, you've got to deliver, right now. We need reinforcements, better weapons, more supplies — otherwise, we don't stand a chance."

But God did just the opposite. He said to Gideon and his men, "Are any of you distraught or discouraged? Then head on home. Take time off, get some rest and enjoy yourselves" (see Judges 7:3).

Imagine what went through Gideon's mind when he heard this. "Whoa, Lord! You're supposed to be adding to us, not subtracting. We need more, not fewer."

Yet here was the message God sent to everyone in that gathering: "Those of you who have a willing spirit, set your minds now to do battle with an enemy ten times your size. The Midianites are much stronger and fiercer. But you have me on your side — and I'll give you something the Midianites don't have."

You can't blame Gideon for wanting to have his needs supplied in advance. Most of us would do the same. We might even quote Jesus' parable about "counting the cost," where he gives an example about a king going to war:

"What king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace" (Luke 14:31-32).

We read this and think, “Jesus says it’s foolish to undertake something without having the proper resources. It could bring dishonor to God’s name.”

That’s an honorable approach, and it should be commended. But it isn’t what Jesus is talking about in this parable. In fact, he begins with a rather bold statement:

“Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple” (14:27).

Wow — Jesus isn’t referring here to having enough resources. He’s talking about *not going halfway with him*. He wants our total trust — and that means forsaking everything to follow him. He ends the parable with an equally strong word: “So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” (14:33).

Our Lord has made it pretty clear: We are to be “all in” when we follow him. And that means abandoning all self-reliance — all trust in our own abilities and resources — and trusting him to supply.

God often purposely limits our resources to ensure he receives all glory.

Here is where God made things even more impossible for Gideon. He told him, “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’” (Judges 7:2, my emphasis).

At this point Gideon must have thought, “I need to stop praying. Every time I do God takes something away!” Think about it — Gideon was responsible for the entire nation’s survival. If he started reducing the army, people would think he was crazy. Yet that’s exactly the circumstance God created to glorify himself.

Some of our battles exist to teach us to worship. That’s just what happened with Gideon: When he saw that God was going to supernaturally deliver them from the powerful Midianites — even before it happened — he went straight to his knees. “As soon as Gideon heard (this)...he worshiped” (Judges 7:15).

This is God’s plan for us all along. When we see that he alone can bring about victory — and that he promises to deliver in a way only he can do — our hearts turn to worship and praise, and the world steps back in awe.

Gideon clearly had his eyes heavenward as he sent soldiers home — all 12,000 of them. This reduced his army by more than half, down to 10,000. Now that the odds were ten to one, God once more surprised Gideon: “The Lord said to Gideon, “The people are still too many” (7:4).

Now Gideon must have been beside himself: “Lord, are you kidding? Still fewer?” But God instructed him, “Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there, and anyone of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall go with you,’ shall go with you, and anyone of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ shall not go” (7:4).

God was clearly up to something, and Gideon obeyed him: “So he brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gideon, ‘Everyone who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, everyone who kneels down to drink.’

“And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. And the Lord said to Gideon, ‘With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home’” (7:5–7).

This may sound like a strange process for recruiting soldiers, but God had a clear purpose. You see, the men who plunged their faces into the water were so thirsty they could think of nothing else. But those who cupped their hands to drink were staying alert; their eyes were roving to catch any movement around them. In short, these guys weren’t Sunday school teachers — God was honing Israel’s army down to a Special Forces unit.

With that issue settled, God set into motion his supernatural plan. That night he gave one of the Midianite soldiers a dream that spooked the whole camp — and he sent Gideon and his 300 — man unit forward into battle, winning a massive victory for Israel. The rout reduced the Midianites down to 15,000 soldiers who fled for their lives. Gideon and his men then quickly gave chase to make the victory complete.

Lesson 2: Discouragement can hinder — but never halt — God’s ultimate plan for victory.

The next morning Gideon and his men came to an Israelite town, where they were met by a group of men. Instead of congratulating the victors, the men confronted Gideon: “Then the men of Ephraim said to him, ‘What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?’” (Judges 8:1).

How crazy does this sound? Gideon had just defeated 85,000 soldiers with an army of 300 — and he was being criticized by the couch potatoes who stayed home! They accused him, “Why didn’t you call us? We would have fought with you.” Yeah, right — easy to say after the battle is won. They were questioning Gideon’s leadership: “They accused him fiercely” (8:1).

This scene is easier to understand if you put yourself in Gideon’s shoes. Sometimes our most disheartening, soul-draining, energy-sapping experiences come not on the battlefield of life, but from our own spiritual family. We expect criticism from our enemies, but we’re caught off guard when it comes from our brothers and sisters.

I love how Gideon reacted to this affront: He refused to be discouraged. In a moment when he could have let every ounce of glorious victory drain from his spirit, he did the opposite. He actually praised the men, saying, “What have I been able to do in comparison with you?” (8:3). Gideon then recited those men’s past victories against great enemies.

I’m astounded by Gideon’s wisdom here. Many of us would have argued, “Why are you trashing me? I just saved your skin!” It’s so easy to spend energy battling with family and lose focus for our God-ordained mission. But Gideon resisted that temptation, and it took all the air out of his critics: “Their anger against him subsided when he said this” (8:3).

I love what Scripture says happened next: “Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over” (8:4). He left the argument behind and kept moving forward. What a lesson for us: When we resist the distraction of lesser battles, we’re truly living out our mission.

Lesson 3: Grace for victory is extended to the exhausted.

The time comes when every Christian needs to refresh his or her spirit — it’s just a fact of our spiritual walk. Jesus often called his disciples away from the tough, exhausting work of ministry, knowing they needed time to find peace in God and regain their focus.

But at a time when there’s a battle to be fought, discerning Christians tell themselves, “I can’t rest right now, even though I’m spent. The Lord has called me to this fight.”

What an incredibly draining day it was for Gideon and his men. It had all happened in one 24-hour span: the gradual winnowing of the army, the intense preparation for warfare, the all-night battle against 100,000 warriors. Only the next morning did Gideon get a break (if you can call it that, when he was confronted by his critics). It’s why we read that Gideon and his men were “exhausted yet pursuing” (8:4). Their focus was on God’s mission!

Here is the point: Sometimes, at the end of a long day, the battle God has been preparing you for is only just beginning. When we count the cost to follow Jesus, we have to expect long days. We have to expect early-morning summons, days of tension and stress, all-night battles. We can expect few breaks for rest and pursuits that take us beyond our strength. We can expect to feel spent and depleted. But when God determines, he’ll break through with his promised victory.

Yet Gideon had more exhaustion to face — again from his own people. He and his men were pursuing the Midianites when they came to the town of Succoth ravished with hunger. “(Gideon) said to the men of Succoth, ‘Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after...the kings of Midian’” (Judges 8:5).

Gideon’s request was denied. So Gideon was forced to press on in weariness to the next town, Penuel — but again the people rejected his request for food. Gideon responded by saying, “When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower” (8:9). I don’t believe Gideon meant this in anger. He was saying, “God will give us victory in this battle — and then I’ll come back here. When I do, you’re going to feel the natural consequences of having rejected God.”

These people had refused the good report of Israel's amazing victory the night before. Even in the face of exhaustion, Gideon knew that God was about to bring victory. May the same be true of us: As we continue to trust the Lord through our own difficult circumstances, then — just as happened with Gideon — we can know God's complete victory is coming.

Lesson 4: God doesn't stop at half a victory.

When we follow Jesus, we can't settle for a partial victory because we're exhausted. God won't allow it. His plan is always for our full deliverance — and sometimes that comes only in the last half hour, when we're frustrated, tired and can't go one more step.

After all these disappointments, Gideon could have said, "You know, men, we've accomplished a lot — more than we ever imagined. We've had all we can handle for a day. Let's return to our homes for now. We can start again tomorrow."

Thank God, Gideon never let go of the mission. I believe he heard God telling him, "Keep going, Gideon. Fight for your children. Fight for your city. Yes, I have already foreordained your victory — but I am calling you to trust me by moving forward."

Friend, God is saying the same to you in your battle. Maybe you're in a tense marriage that you think can't last another day. Maybe after all your praying for your children, things seem just to get worse. Maybe your future looks utterly bleak. God is speaking to you as he would to the 300: "I want you to set your heart and mind to battle an enemy ten times bigger than you. You can't overcome this enemy on your own. But I'm going to give you something they don't have."

The fact is, every battle we face has an eternal purpose. It isn't just the defeat of an enemy — it's the exaltation of Jesus. When we trust in God beyond our own capability, he provides all strength to finish the battle — and he does it in a way that brings all glory to himself.

Here is the long and short of it: We are not a people who are called to seek comfort and pleasure, to seek to have every blessing handed to us. We are called to do battle. Yes, God is in control — but he asks us to act in faith, for his eternal purposes. We have to get on our knees, and we have to go when he says to go. Whatever he calls us to do, he will supply all strength to accomplish. Only then will the world see God's miraculous triumph in a people "exhausted yet pursuing."

This makes for a joyous, worshipful church that boasts in one thing alone:

"God has brought about this victory. He has shown us he is the source of all life, power, victory. And we give him all glory, knowing he will draw all men to himself."

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