

1. OUR FEARS

Last year Joy and I flew to Europe. The young woman next to us was on her first flight and I noticed as the plane took off she gripped the seat in front with white knuckles.

I heard about another very nervous flyer. During a trip from California to Indiana, it didn't help that the connecting flight from Denver was delayed twice because of mechanical problems. Then mid-flight he noticed the lights began flickering and got very worried. He called the flight attendant and told her. "I'll take care of it," she said. Moments later the lights went out. Clearly she had solved the problem by turning off the lights. A passenger across the aisle who had been watching him leaned over and said, "Whatever you do, please don't ask her about the engines."

We all face situations in life that cause us fear. It might be a job interview, standing up in front of people, health issues, tasks we are afraid of doing, facing someone we ought to talk to, worries about the future and so on. Sometimes there are things we know God wants us to do but we are afraid to do them.

Last week we met a man called Gideon in the Book of Judges. God was calling him to lead an army to defeat the Midianites and we saw his fear. First he protests that he is too weak to do the job. We see that he is afraid to destroy the community altar for Baal, and then he tried to get out of obeying God by seeking more signs. The Midianites were a huge powerful force that had terrorised Israel. We can understand Gideon's fear. But God understood Gideon's fear also and he gave him the assurance he needed. God tells him, ¹⁴ "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" ¹⁶ "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive." (6:14, 16) God promises to be with him and to give him success. Then God is very patient as Gideon still seeks more signs. God understands our fears. But still asks us to serve him.

2. KNOWING GOD

The time to fight has come. The combined forces of Midian, Amalek and other nations have invaded. ¹² *The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.* (7:12) Gideon has gathered 32,000 men but surely that's not enough against such an enormous enemy? However God says it is too many! ² *The Lord said to Gideon, "You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has saved me.'* (7:2)

God tells Gideon to reduce the number in two stages. ³ *Now announce to the army, 'Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.'* So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained. (7:3) 22,000 leave and Gideon is left with 10,000 men.

⁴ *But the Lord said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will thin them out for you there. ... 'Separate those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps from those who kneel down to drink.'* ⁶ *Three hundred of them drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs. All the rest got down on their knees to drink.* ⁷ *The Lord said to Gideon, "With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go home."* (7:4-7)

Gideon is left with only 300 men facing this vast enemy. God wants it to be clear. *"You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, 'My own strength has*

saved me.” (7:2) God has to convince Israel that only he can save them. It is to be God’s victory not theirs.

Where do our fears come from? Deep down we believe it all depends on us. It depends on our own abilities, or numbers of people. It depends on our programs or strategies. God had to teach Israel to trust him; to know that it was God who would win the victory not them

The problem was that the people did not know God. They turned to idols because they had forgotten God’s power. The generation who had come out of Egypt and the generation that entered the Promised Land had experienced God at work. They had seen his power and faithfulness. But this generation had lost touch with God. They did not know God.

How well do you know God? Have you experienced God at work in your lives? Our fear can be because we don’t trust God for help.

3. GOD UNDERSTANDS

We can understand Gideon’s fear. So does God. So God provides encouragement.

⁹ During that night the Lord said to Gideon, “Get up, go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands. ¹⁰ If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah ¹¹ and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp.” So he and Purah his servant went down to the outposts of the camp. ¹² The Midianites, the Amalekites and all the other eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.

¹³ Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. “I had a dream,” he was saying. “A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed.”

¹⁴ His friend responded, “This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands.”

¹⁵ When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down and worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, “Get up! The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands.”

Once again we meet the element of Gideon’s fear. Fear is not dealt with once and for all. It needs to be faced often. Bravery is not having no fear. It is proceeding even with fear. God does not blame Gideon for being afraid but provides encouragement. God understands our fears. His word gives us many encouraging promises. He provides Christian fellowship for support & encouragement. We must not let fear paralyse us. Look to God for encouragement and strength.

With the assurance this experience gives him Gideon he worships God. He knows God is at work and will give him victory.

4. GOD AT WORK

So Gideon boldly calls his 300 men to war.

¹⁶ Dividing the three hundred men into three companies, he placed trumpets and empty jars in the hands of all of them, with torches inside.

¹⁷ *"Watch me," he told them. "Follow my lead. When I get to the edge of the camp, do exactly as I do. ¹⁸ When I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all around the camp blow yours and shout, 'For the Lord and for Gideon.'"*

So they follow his instructions. In the middle of the night they surround the camp; they smash their jars revealing the torches and blow their trumpets. It seems like the camp is surrounded by a great army. There is panic and the enemy start attacking each other. We see it is a God inspired panic that was revealed by the dream. *"God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands."* (7:14) We read, ²² *The Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords.* (7:22)

All the men of Israel had to do was stand in their positions and watch. ²¹ *While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled.* (7:21)

More men are then called in to do the mopping up and the enemy is destroyed. But it is clear that God has won the victory. God is at work.

OUR RESPONSE

It is a great story with lots of emotion and action. But we mustn't leave it in story-land. We see here the truth about God.

It is not our strength or ability that wins the day. We may be reluctant to take on some task because we feel weak and fearful. God can work through us in spite of our fears and weakness. Do we believe it? Do we act on it?

Do we express our dependence on God in prayer? If we believe it is God not us that changes people, not our own powers of persuasion, then we will pray.

We may look at our society and see how spiritually dead it is; we may look at the spread of ISIS and terrorism in the world; we may look at the church and wonder if God can use it. God is not restricted by evil times. He is in control. He is building his kingdom. We need to be positive, encourage each other not complain or lose heart. Trust God and play our part in serving him together.

Paul's prayer in Ephesians is a prayer of confidence:

²⁰ *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, ²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

(Eph 3:20-21)