

Judges 7:1-24

Aim of Lesson

To show how Israel learned to put their trust in God, and not to rely on their own strength.

Background study

Deuteronomy 20:1-8; Judges 8:4-10; 1 Samuel 17:47.

Suggested outline of lesson

Remind the children that because of the signs God gave to Gideon, he was sure that God had called him to lead an army against their enemy, the Midianites. Make a statement to the effect that: "Today we shall learn how the small army of Israel defeated the great and powerful Midianites, without using a single weapon". When faced with the tremendous task of mustering an army, Gideon drew support from the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali. He was eager to assemble as large a company of fighting men as possible. When they set up camp early in the morning, Gideon took stock of his troops and considered whether there were sufficient to challenge the enemy. There were 32,000 men, to the enemy's 135,000 - a ratio of less than one to four.

Try to help the children imagine the scene by describing the camp of the Midianites filling the wide valley. The enemy could be seen by the Israelite soldiers who were positioned on higher ground several miles to the south. The enemy soldiers seemed to swarm over the whole area, and were equipped with vast numbers of camels on which they were able to make swift charges. Use a visual aid (map, diagrammatic representation or model) to demonstrate the situation. Ask the children how they might have felt to have been soldiers in the Israelite army. Draw out the natural fear against such odds. Some children may, on the other hand, feel they would have been confident because of Gideon's faith, God's assurance, and the memory of previous victories. Point out that more than two thirds of the men felt afraid, because they were so heavily outnumbered.

How surprising, then, were God's instructions to Gideon to send home everyone who was fearful, and in so doing to reduce their number to 10,000 men. It had been a principle established by Moses that there was no place in God's army for those who failed to trust in the power of God to give victory, whether by many or by few. God also explained to Gideon that it was vital to restrict the numbers to such an extent that the task would become humanly impossible, so that when the enemy was defeated, the Israelites would not be able to say that it was their army alone that had gained the victory.

But even the remaining 10,000 brave men were too many and God outlined a simple test for reducing the numbers more drastically. Let the children participate in the story by getting them to suggest how the soldiers might have managed to drink the water without the use of drinking vessels. Group their answers into the two main methods adopted, and point out that a mere 300 of the men actually scooped up the water with their hands. These were made to stand on one side, while the other 9,700 fighting men were sent home.

Having carried out these instructions, which were a test of Gideon's faith and obedience, Gideon was again assured by God that they would defeat the enemy. Gideon and his servant set out on a dangerous mission - to eavesdrop on the enemy at dead of night - which required stealth and courage. This was not a spying mission, but the response to a command given by God for the specific purpose of inspiring Gideon with confidence. The words of the enemy soldier to his comrade suggest that, in spite of their numerical strength, there was fear in the Midianite camp because of the reputation of the God of Israel. When Gideon heard this, he worshipped God.

Eagerly Gideon hurried back to camp and rallied the 300 men to immediate action. He issued no weapons. Instead, each man was to carry a burning torch inside a clay pot, and a trumpet. Point out that with a torch in their left hand and a trumpet in the right, there was no hand free to hold a sword. What faith and courage it would require to go forward unarmed. Describe dramatically the way the Israelites quickly and silently encircled the valley and took positions around the perimeter. The Midianites were in the process of changing the guards on watch and would have been less inclined to notice any sound or movement nearby. Convey the impact of the sudden appearance of lights on all sides and the noise of hundreds of trumpets, the shattering of the jars and shouts of "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon". A shock wave spread through the Midianite camp, and panic ensued. Possibly they assumed that each trumpeter was leading a troop of men, and so thought they were being attacked by a vast army.

The Midianite soldiers, sword in hand, retreated in terror. Thinking they were completely surrounded, they could only retreat further into their own camp. In the darkness and confusion no one could recognise friend or foe, so the Midianites fought amongst themselves and destroyed each other. When, eventually, they broke through Gideon's ambush and fled, Gideon called on his reserve forces to attack the demoralised enemy and capture their lands as far as the river Jordan. There fell in that night 120,000 of the enemy, and of Gideon's band of 300 not one was lost.

Relevance to the children's lives

The Midianites were bad people, who had to be removed from the land. The Israelites could not do this by themselves and they trusted in God to help them. There is a lot of wrong done in the world today and we, who are on God's side, must try to overcome it. God has promised to help everyone who tries to do this. What can we do about the wrong things done by other people? What can we do about the wrong things we do ourselves?

Worksheets

The crossword reads:

Across: TREMBLED, CAMPED, KNEES, DOG, THE LORD, OWN, MIDIAN, ISRAEL, TENTS;

Down: THREE, LAPPED, TONGUES, HIS SERVANT, SAVE, GIDEON, TRUMPETS, WATER, BOAST, TEN.

Prayer

Dear Lord God, thank you for the story of Gideon, and for showing us how you helped him. Help us not to follow the bad ways of the world. Amen.

Memory verse

“The Lord your God is he that goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to give you the victory” (Deuteronomy 20:4).