

A JOURNEY OF ENCOUNTER



Chapter 3: 'The little army who couldn't - a paradox of power' Based on Judges 6 and 7 and Philippians 2:5-11

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INSPIRE

Our world is experiencing a shaking, the like of which we haven't seen for generations. There is sadness, suffering and death, there are protests and unrest, but there is also hope: hope that the world can be different; hope that these things can have a deep, lasting impact.

In Chapter 3 of our 'Into the Wild' prayer adventure, we meet Gideon - an unlikely hero who is most famous for his weird threshing habits, his tiny army and, of course, his soggy fleece. Gideon's world was being shaken to its very foundations, yet he had an encounter with God which gave him hope; more than that, it gave him the faith and determination to fight for a different future.

Theologian Walter Wink writes, 'History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being.' Amidst the shaking, God is giving us a vision of what the future might look like. What do you see? What do you hope for? Gideon's story is an invitation to wage war in prayer for the future we long to see.

Read alone or with a friend, reflect on the discussion questions over the phone with someone or in an online small group/Bible study, try the prayer activities... and see what happens when you exchange fear for faith.

If you'd like to receive regular updates throughout the 'Into the Wild' journey over the coming year, including invitations to our regular Zoom prayer gatherings, [sign up here](#).



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EXPLORE

Introduction

I frequently find myself having to sit on my hands to stop myself from intervening to help a toddler who's struggling fiercely along, shouting, 'I can do it!'. It seems we are hard-wired for self-reliance. We want to do it all by ourselves. We hate asking for help, hate that it makes us look like we don't have it together. Sometimes it feels harder to ask for help than to struggle on and make it happen ourselves.

Context

Gideon, the judge and battle commander, is best known for his weird threshing habits, his tiny army and his soggy fleece. By the time we meet him, he and the Israelites are under an oppressive occupation by the Midianites, who are doing everything they can to drain them of all hope. Years of being disappointed with God and frustrated with their so-called allies have left Israel relying on themselves and their idols. God's quest is to teach Gideon and the Israelites how to let go of their idols, how to unpick years of self-reliance, how to find hope in spite of their circumstances and how to rely on him again.

Gideon considers himself the least of the least, but in the strength of God's Spirit he blows the battle-trumpet, calling the Israelites to fight. Incredibly, 32,000 men respond. Maybe they show up because they have a sense of duty and responsibility. Maybe they think they stand a chance against Midian after all. God hears their thoughts and wants them to learn that their own strength is not enough to save them. God releases anyone who is afraid to return home - and 22,000 men leave, with no shame or dishonour.

Deepen

We are good at showing up for our responsibilities, faithfully keeping on with them, but maybe we aren't so good at knowing when it's the right time to lay them down. Are you carrying responsibilities which God isn't asking you to carry at this moment? If we do that for too long, it can lead to a build-up of resentment against God because we're doing it in our own strength.

Amazingly, 10,000 stay to fight. But that's still too many for God, so he shrinks the army even further by choosing only those who are battle-ready - wary and watching while they drink from the river.

While some of us may be carrying responsibilities we need to lay down, others of us have had duty and responsibility stripped away from us in this season of lockdown. Have we continued to lap at the water of God's presence even when we didn't have to, or have we discovered that we tend to drift away from prayer when duty and responsibility don't hold us to it?



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Finally, when a tiny force of just 300 men face the vast hordes of Midian with no hope of success in their own strength, God is ready to fight.

Have these past few months been a time of refining and focusing, committing ourselves to stay and fight for the future we long for, no matter how impossible the odds seem? We're not just here out of blind loyalty. We've been given every opportunity to be released and to let go, yet we're still here.

Gideon and his army were learning *kenosis*. *Kenosis* means 'self-emptying', and it's the beautiful theological term for the emptying described in Philippians 2, where Jesus left all the glory of Heaven to become a fragile human baby. As Charles Wesley put it, 'emptied himself of all but love.'

What God is asking of Gideon and his army is an emptying, and emptying is what God asks of us as we grapple with what the world looks like since the advent of Covid-19 and the wake-up call we've been hearing to the persistence of racism. It's a time to discover how we cope without so many of the activities, services, relationships and facilities we normally rely on.

It's an opportunity to explore humility; to shed prejudices and biases and the power we possess which may squash others. It's an opportunity to remember we don't have all the answers, that we are not the answer to all the world's problems. It's a humbling reminder that we may have forgotten how to trust God, to know that he can save and heal and transform. Emptying is frightening, but it exposes what we have become accustomed to relying on, and identifies the places where we need to learn to rely on God.

Conclusion

When Gideon first meets God, he makes him a loaf of bread so huge that it must have emptied out his flour stores completely (Judges 6:19). When Gideon needs reassurance about the coming battle, God causes him to overhear an enemy soldier recounting a dream about their camp being crushed by a huge loaf of bread (Judges 7:13). That's the moment Gideon realises that, when you empty yourself and give it all to God, God can take your humble offering and do something impossible with it.

Having emptied themselves, destroyed their idols and stripped away their self-reliance, Gideon and his army of 300 have only God to rely on. They are filled with boldness as they approach with their jars and torches, and they succeed in terrifying the Midianites into retreat and defeat. When we empty ourselves, letting go of our idols and choosing not to rely on our own strength, we come to the place where God can use us to overthrow oppression and help others live in freedom.



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A truth to hold on to

The more we pray, the more we're choosing to rely on God instead of relying on ourselves.

Challenge

If there's something you rely on instead of God, try letting go of it and see what God does. This may be a gradual process but make a start.

WATCH AND LISTEN

This month we share two video stories with you - two stories of people who have seen God set them free from addiction and help them find hope and life in abundance. Andrew Warriner and Sarah Johnson both encountered God in very different ways during their journeys to recovery, but, like Gideon, they both found that surrendering themselves fully to the God who loves them beyond measure was the key to finding freedom.

[Watch here](#)

DISCUSS

- Have you built protective barriers around yourself because of past hurts or disappointments? Do they stop you letting God in to save you?
- Is there an idol you need to destroy? Is there something you rely on too much which God is asking you to let go of, so you can rely on him instead?
- What have you learnt during lockdown about the things that you rely on? What has surprised/challenged you?
- What distractions do you need to ruthlessly eliminate in order to pursue God with your whole being?
- What might it mean for you to empty yourself of all but love?
- What are the big issues in this rapidly changing world that God has given you to wage war in prayer for?



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PRAY

1. Practising the discipline of lament

Make a list of things or people you have lost. Those losses may have happened in the past few months, or at other times in your life:

- Sit with your list and think about the people and things you've written down. Ask God to draw near as you remember them.
- Allow yourself to grieve for them. You may find it helpful to speak out loud to God, telling him why you miss them or what life feels like without them.
- You may find it helpful to pray with your hands open in front of you as a sign of letting go. Open hands also help remind us that God wants to fill our emptiness with his unending love.
- Before you finish your prayer time, take a moment to ask God to fill you with his peace and comfort.

2. Mapping the journey

Philippians 2:5-11 maps out Jesus' journey from glory to humility on earth and back to glory.

- Make a map of your own life, marking the times of abundance and times of stripping away. You may wish to draw out your map on paper as a way of helping you reflect.

Look back over your journey, giving thanks for God's presence and blessings along the way, and asking him to show you how he was at work in those times of stripping away.

3. Life audit

Make a list of all the obligations and commitments in your life at the moment.

Think prayerfully about each item on the list.

- Are there any items where you'd have to say your heart just isn't in it any more?
- Ask God to show you which ones he may have released you from, those he's not asking you to carry any more.



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4. Finding your fight

Use your social media newsfeed or a newspaper to make a mood-board/collage of the things that are going on in the world at the moment.

There are so many things to pray for, but God has particular things he wants each of us to carry in prayer. As you look over your board, ask him to show you which of those many issues he wants you to wage war for in prayer.

Having done that, you might like to consider keeping a permanent notice board, whether real or virtual, where you post images and information to help you pray about that issue.

WEBSITE AND CONTACT EMAIL

For resources and sign up: www.salvationarmy.org.uk/resources/into-the-wild

Email Prayer Network: saprayernetwork@salvationarmy.org.uk



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