

The Hunt for Glory

Broken Glory

I don't know if you have noticed but trends among young people regarding which football team they support tend to shift depending on which team is having the most success. For example Arsenal were particularly successful around the turn of the century and you will find that among those who are 16-20 there are a large number of Arsenal fans. After this Chelsea had a period of dominance and so you will find among a slightly younger age group Chelsea are the popular team. It doesn't matter where you live or what is your local team this trend is seen to be true. We have a word for this, it's called being a Glory hunter. And by the way if you are a Manchester United Fan, it doesn't matter what age you are you're a Glory Hunter.

I don't find this trend particularly surprising as it seems clear to me that people follow success. They always have done. Sure there are the odd few long suffering QPR fans who will stand by their team through the bad years... and the bad years but generally speaking where there is success people follow.

And I think this demonstrates something about humanity. Our hearts long for our own Glory.

But the bible teaches that this wasn't what we were made for. We were made to bring Glory to God.

So it seems something has gone wrong with God's design. What's happened? Well it appears humanity is broken. We no longer serve the purpose God made us for.

We have seen this brokenness throughout the book of Judges. We have met some very broken people the Israelites who have rejected God's glory in favour of idols. We have also met some very broken leaders. And we have seen the consequences of this brokenness in one of history's most bloody and immoral eras. But in the midst of all this brokenness we will see one story emerge.

God rules, over broken people lead by broken leaders.

Broken People

That same story is here for us in this passage.

Chapter 8 of Judges starts immediately after Gideon and his 300 men have routed the Midianite army. They are now pursuing them in an attempt to drive them out of Israel forever.

Word has gotten out about Gideon's victory and you would expect everyone to be celebrating but not the Ephraimites. As soon as they can they confront Gideon demanding to know why he hadn't called them to fight the Midianites in the first place! The dialogue that follows requires a little bit of background information to make sense of.

Ephraim is one of the tribes of Israel and during Gideon's time they were perhaps the largest and most powerful of all the tribes. They had experienced many successes and had a proud history of leaders including Joshua who lead Israel into the Promised Land. Gideon on the other hand was from the smallest and least successful tribe Manasseh which is the brother tribe to Ephraim. The Ephraimites regularly looked down their noses at their unsuccessful brothers the Manasites. But imagine their shock when they discovered that Gideon from the tribe of Manasseh with 300 men had won the greatest victory over their enemies since Joshua conquered Jericho! Not only that but he had tried to take all the glory for himself, not even calling on them for help until after the battle was won. They were furious.

Gideon does his best to supplicate them by appealing to their pride. "What have I accomplished compared to you!" he says. His cunning diplomacy pays off and the Ephraimites calm down. But it is clear to everyone that the dispute is fuelled solely by Ephraim's pride. They are just another example of glory hunters looking to follow where there is success.

None the less there is something admirable about the Ephraimites. They had recognised that God was at work through Gideon and they wanted to be part of it.

However, there was no such desire to be found at Succoth or Peniel. They were unconvinced by the miracle of the 300. They wanted to see the Kings of the Midianites in Gideon's hands before they would risk siding with him.

The reaction Gideon experience from these three groups of Israelites is the same reaction many leaders experience. People are unlikely to follow leaders before they see success and when they do witness success they often join the band wagon for all the wrong reasons. This is particularly true in the church.

It is easy to attend a prayer meeting when there are 100 people present and their prayers are answered in dramatic and even supernatural ways. It's easy to support a mission when you see hundreds attending meetings and revival breaking out around you. We long to see these things happen in our time and in this place but what the history of the church teaches us again and again is revival is built on the unsuccessful years. Following Jesus doesn't always mean following success. To follow Jesus you have to be willing to be unsuccessful trusting that God will use your faithfulness for his glory. Are you willing to be unsuccessful for Jesus?

Or like the Ephriamites fuelled by pride are you hunting for your own glory? Do you find yourself regularly getting annoyed or angry with leaders because they don't let you have your say or don't properly acknowledge your gifts? There are probably times when you are justified in feeling like this as leaders are broken people also, which we will come to a little later. But following Jesus in his church often means to go unrecognised. To put out the chairs after every meeting, to serve tea and cake at the community café, to drive an elderly housebound lady to church every Sunday morning. God calls people who are unrecognised like little Gideon, son of unsuccessful Manasseh and he may raise them up to be successful leaders. Or he may not, but either way whether others recognise you or not, you will have the joy and privilege of serving God. Are you willing to go unrecognised for Jesus?

The only admirable character in this exchange is Gideon. Having experienced God's power working through him and his army of 300 he is determined to finish the job and rid Israel of the Midianites. The fearful insecure man is gone, Gideon is now a man on a mission, convinced that God will give him the victory.

When Gideon's army finally catches up with the Midianites he finds 15,000 of them remaining. 120,000 had been killed in the fear and confusion God spread among them. But Gideon still has only 300 men who are now exhausted and hungry having been refused any support from their fellow Israelites. And this time Gideon has no clever tricks to play. They must attack them directly. But with new confidence, certain that God will give them the victory they see off the entire Midianite army, capturing their two Kings Zebah and Zalmunna and with this incredible victory they ensure Israel has peace and freedom for forty years.

Unlike the men of Ephraim Gideon is driven not purely by pride but with a passion to see God's will be done. And unlike the men of Succoth and Peniel he is confident that God can give him the victory.

Over the last couple of weeks we have done a fair bit of Gideon bashing and there is more to come. But it would be wrong of us not to recognise that as far as I have just described him the church could do with a few more Gideon's. Glory hunters like the Ephriamites kill churches. They bring down leaders with criticism and constantly compete for attention. What the church needs is men and women who are filled with a passion for God's will and are confident of His power. Who are willing to go unrecognised and perceived to be unsuccessful all so that He may be glorified. Are you willing to be a Gideon for Jesus?

Broken Leaders

If like the stories of the other judges the story of Gideon ended here, we might consider him a hero. Sure he was a little insecure and weak to begin with but God turned him around and he saved Israel. But unlike the stories of the other Judges this story continues and what we discover is, like his people, Gideon is a broken leader. It turns out for all Gideon's insecurities pride becomes his downfall.

We first began to see evidence of Gideon's pride back in chapter 7 when Gideon calls his army to attack with the shout, "For the Lord and for Gideon!". That seemed rather innocent at the time, but having just won arguably the greatest battle in the history of Israel, Gideon's pride has transformed into something much more sinister. He returns to Israel with only one thing on his mind he wants revenge against the men of Succoth and Peniel for their refusal to assist

him. First he tortures the seventy seven elders of Succoth then he goes one worse by destroying the town of Peniel and killing the men. What kind of hero is this? Why would God choose such a monster to lead Israel?

It seems Gideon is a leader who has forgotten where he came from. Back in Judges 6 God finds Gideon in a hole in the ground threshing wheat. He is effectively preparing a meal while hiding from the Midianites. When God tells Gideon he has chosen him to save Israel Gideon's response is,

'Pardon me, my lord, but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.' Judges 6:15

Gideon is so unsure of himself he requires not one but two miracles to be assured that God hasn't got the wrong man.

Fast forward to after the battle with the Midianites and Gideon seems to have forgotten all about his own fear and hesitancy to obey God as he punishes the men of Succoth and Peniel for theirs.

The humble Gideon we thought we knew has gone. Instead we see a vengeful, arrogant, hypocritical leader. Pride has turned Gideon into this.

The scary thing is pride can do this to anyone, all of us in roles of authority are at risk but particularly those of us who have experienced success. The drama the young people wrote and performed shows us there are pointers that can help identify pride in our own life. If you remember the main character encountered three people. Each encounter reveals how pride can be expressed.

Firstly, pride can be expressed as a sense that we deserve more than others. Think about the way the main character treated the busker. All she could think about was how she deserved a promotion and this no hoper deserved nothing but a few pennies. We can notice this kind of pride in us when we help others through charity work as we give ourselves a pat on the back for helping someone who is less deserving than we are.

Secondly, pride can be expressed as an attitude of self-obsession and lack of concern for others. Do you find sometimes you are trying to tell someone about a difficulty you are facing but they immediately change the conversation to their problems which are so much worse than yours? They don't really care about you, they are too caught up with themselves.

Finally, pride can be expressed as an unwillingness to recognise or accept when you are wrong. When the main character was approached by her boss she even went as far as to cover her tracks and place the blame on someone else.

If any of these ring true for you there is one sure remedy; remember where you came from. Remember, like Gideon you are a sinner who deserves nothing but God's anger and punishment. And remember all the more that God in his love has treated you with grace and mercy. Then go and treat others with that same grace and mercy that you have been shown.

We are all at risk of giving in to our own pride in any of these ways but it is particularly shocking when we see it raise its ugly head in our leaders. But should we be shocked?

Throughout this series we have seen how God uses weak or unexpected people like Ehud or Barak and now Gideon and there are even more dubious characters throughout Judges like Samson and Jephthah. God uses them despite their weaknesses and seeming unsuitability. We have been encouraged by this as we consider that God can and will use us despite our own weaknesses. But have you taken a moment to consider the consequences of God choosing weak people?

We often think being chosen by God is a little like a Karate Kid film. Let me explain. Karate Kid is the classic Hollywood zero to hero film. At the beginning of the film we are introduced to the hero who is a weedy little loser who gets bullied at school and can never get a girl. Then he meets Mr Miagi the slightly eccentric Karate instructor who takes him under his wing and cue training montage, transforms him into a martial arts machine which wins the trophy beating everyone in his path.

We think God is a little like Mr Miagi, he takes weak and incapable people and removes their weaknesses turning them into world conquering saints. Yes following Jesus means we live to be like him more day by day. But the truth is most Christians do not find that their weaknesses disappear, in fact if anything they become more aware of them. As John reminded us last week Paul says this to the Corinthians.

“I pleaded with the Lord to take (my weakness) away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” 2 Corinthians 12

Paul discovered what all Christians eventually discover. God doesn't remove all our weaknesses. And the consequences of that is there are no perfect leaders. All leaders are broken and flawed if anything particularly in the church and as a result they make mistakes, hopefully not as dreadful as Gideon's but often as costly. I don't say that flippantly, I say it from experience. I have made mistakes that have cost and I regularly regret them. John will make mistakes as will Karen as will every deacon and church leader.

But broken and weak as they are, these are the leaders God has chosen for RLBC, so what does that mean for us all as a church?

Firstly, it means we must not hold our leaders up on a pedestal but rather hold them up in prayer. Church leaders don't need your praise and admiration because the more you pump them up the more likely they are to come crashing down. Rather they need your prayers for God's grace to be enough for their weakness and failure.

Secondly, it means we must be willing to compensate for the weaknesses in our leaders. Some leaders seem to behave like they are the body of the church. God has given them all the skills to fulfil every role required. But that's just not true of anyone. We shouldn't expect leaders to be skilled in every area but rather we should encourage strengths and recognise weaknesses and function together as the body allowing for each other's weaknesses.

Finally, it means having a culture of honesty and forgiveness. It disturbs me when leaders feel unable to confess their weaknesses. Either that means they are too proud to admit them or they fear they will be rejected if they do so. But I can understand the hesitance among leaders to show their weak side. They fear it will be exploited. Rather than exploiting leader's weaknesses we should encourage one another to be honest with an attitude that is always ready to show the mercy and grace we have been shown.

Glorious God

It seems to me we are happy to accept that God uses weak people because that is a comforting message, it means God can use weak people like me or you. But we are less happy to accept the consequences of God choosing weak people, occasionally they may fail or let us down. But Gideon has some understanding of this. He understands because he is a broken and weak leader he has limitations. So when the Israelites come to him at the end of the passage asking him to be their King he declines saying

'I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you, the LORD will rule over you'
Judges 8:23

Next week when we read the rest of the chapter it will become clear that Gideon's heart is somewhat divided but we can still admire him for his initial response because in this He demonstrates the sole purpose of every broken, weak leader. He points to God.

The reason God chooses broken leaders is not so he is shown to be glorious. That was the whole point of the miracle of the 300. God had explained this to Gideon before he sent him to defeat the Midianites

He 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."
Judges 7:2

God intentionally weakened Gideon's army in order to make it all the more clear that it was His power that saved them. So that all Israel would give the Glory to God when they were miraculously victorious. So if you see weakness in your leaders, good! They are supposed to be weak so that you might look beyond them and see a Glorious God working in power through them.

God rules over broken people led by broken leaders so that he is glorified.

And nowhere can we see this story more clearly told than at the cross. For on the cross of Jesus we see our all our weakness and brokenness. We did not deserve Jesus to die for us, it wasn't any weakness in Christ that led him there it was because of our sin and our shame that he suffered. Yet because of God's great love and mercy, we did not receive what our sins deserved but rather God

made a way to forgive us, free us, heal us and restore us to his family. On the cross God's glory shines with power through our weakness. So that all the world may say...

Not to us, Lord, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness. Psalm 115:1

Don't you see, you have a Glorious God? That he would love such broken, weak people like you and Gideon and choose to die for them? There is none like our God. People will let you down, even those who are leaders. But God will never let you down. His love for you is never ending. Isn't he glorious? Isn't he worthy of our praise?

You won't find such glory in your achievements, your pride or leaders you follow. There is only one who's Glory you were made to hunt. The Glory of our Saviour and Lord, Jesus.