

+ Judges 7:1-8 + Only Grace Can Explain It + 14th Sunday after Pentecost + 30 August 2015 +

“That was impossible!” A spectacular catch or unbelievable play is made and the announcer blurts it out in disbelief. A magician performs an eye-popping illusion and the crowd reacts with shock. A firefighter, a police officer, a soldier make a daring rescue that defies explanation—ordinary people achieving what seems to be impossible. Look at the history of technology or medicine and how so much that once was considered impossible is happening today, but was any of that really “impossible”?

For something to be truly “impossible,” it cannot possibly be accomplished no matter the innovation, no matter the effort. There are some things that are impossible. For example, it is impossible for me to jump all the way across the Grand Canyon or leap over Mount Everest. It is impossible to achieve total world peace. It is impossible to completely eradicate disease, hunger, poverty, and conflict from our world. It is impossible to avoid death.

Many have tried to achieve those “impossible” tasks, but they still prove to be impossible. Oh, they’ve been able to accomplish brief periods of peace. They’ve been able to fight disease, nearly eradicating a few here or there. They’ve tried to solve hunger and poverty and conflict. Of course, no matter how hard anyone tries, death still comes to every one of us.

Still there’s one impossible task that most people see as very possible— going to heaven. Some simply try to deny any life after death and the God who gives it. Others try to cooperate with either the true God or their own god or gods. “If I just work hard enough or do enough or prove I’m worthy or if I just do what God wants, then he’ll let me in.” We’re tempted to think salvation or eternal life is something very possible, that it’s really no big deal. Then we hear Jesus speak of the narrow door to heaven and how many will not enter it on their own, and we begin to realize how truly impossible saving ourselves truly is. We realize how desperately we need Jesus to enter heaven. In Judges 7, our God beautifully illustrates our desperate need to depend totally on his help. You’d think the whole thing was impossible, but that’s why **ONLY GRACE CAN EXPLAIN IT!**

Fear reigned in the land of Israel. Generations before, God’s people had entered the Promised Land with his blessing and strength. They had conquered the land, but soon they let the demonic gods and fertility cults of Canaan conquer them. God allowed the pagan Midianites to descend on the land and terrorize the people. The people cried out for deliverance and the Lord called them to repent for their unfaithfulness. So God chose a deliverer for his people, but even his deliverer didn’t seem like much. The man’s name was Gideon, but he was the youngest man from the smallest family in the weakest clan in one of the smallest tribes in all of Israel.

The Lord found Gideon threshing wheat in a winepress because he feared that the Midianites would rob him of all his wheat. Yet the Lord brought peace and boldness to Gideon’s heart, even as roughly 135,000 Midianites and their allies crossed the Jordan to pillage Israel once more. The Lord moved Gideon to boldly summon his fellow Israelites to defend their country. Thirty-two thousand soldiers gathered on one side of a low wooded mountain, while the Midianites camped on the other side.

You’d think the odds would be better, but these were 32,000 untrained Israelites against 135,000 Midianite marauders. Just imagine the fear within the Israelite camp. Even the place where they had camped implied fear! They had camped near a spring whose name was similar to the word “fear” and near a mountain whose name meant “Fear Mountain.” You’d expect the Lord to somehow amplify the size of the Israelite army, but instead he told Gideon, ***“You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’...Twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.”***

What was God doing? ***“Too many men”***? Gideon knew his soldiers were as afraid as he had once felt, but surely he didn’t expect 2/3 of his army to turn tail and run home. How were 10,000 going to defeat 135,000?

As with all that the Lord does, he had a reason. God knows how the human mind works. One writer explains it this way, ***“The fearful, if given an unexpected victory, are prone to exchange deep fear for intolerable boasting.”*** Surely the Israelites would boast of their own strength in conquering the mighty Midianites. Surely they would be quick to forget the Lord who had given them the victory, just as their forefathers had forgotten him years before. God wanted Gideon’s army to have an attitude that echoed the words of Psalm 115(:1), ***“Not to us, O LORD, not to us but to your name be the glory, because of your love and faithfulness.”*** He wanted them to find their strength and their salvation in him alone—the Lord of grace.

Surely the odds were impossible enough, but the Lord told Gideon, ***“There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go; but if I say, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go.”*** Amazingly Gideon didn’t question the Lord’s will and he took the men down to the spring, where they drank water. Of the 10,000 available soldiers, only 300 drank water with cupped hands. Those 300 the Lord chose for Gideon’s army and 9,700 went home—not because they drank water that way, but because God wanted the odds to go from 14 to 1 to 450 to 1. Victory was now humanly impossible, but the Lord promised, ***“With the three hundred men that lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the other men go, each to his own place.”***

That night the Lord—true to his word—used the 300 to surprise the Midianites with torches and trumpets and shouting. The Midianites turned on themselves not knowing who their enemy was or how many and the Lord gave victory to Gideon and the Israelites. The Lord made the odds humanly impossible so he could win the victory. It defied reason. **Only God’s grace could explain it.** Only his undeserved, unbelievable loving kindness for hostile, undeserving sinners could accomplish what was truly impossible.

...But why is it so easy for you and me to forget that? Why is it so easy to forget the strength and promises and grace of the Lord? Why is it so easy to take credit for the good you’ve done or to boast in your own efforts and your own achievements? Why is it easier to boast in yourself than in the One who has made it all possible? Such a self-righteous attitude comes naturally because inside each of us is a sinful nature that only wants to glorify me. It’s very tempting to boast in your own spirituality, your own accomplishments for God, your own understanding. After all, God’s way of giving us eternal life doesn’t make much sense anyway. Surely you can earn it yourself!

Such a self-righteous attitude is no different than that of the Israelites in Gideon’s day. They were quick to boast of their own strength to save. Such an attitude is no different than the Jews in Jesus’ day, who were quick to boast that they were God’s chosen people on the way to heaven because they were related to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Sound familiar? The Lord gives you personal victories over your sinful nature. So Satan puffs you up with pride. The Lord blesses the work of our congregation. So your sinful nature takes your hand and pats yourself on the back. The Lord calls you to be in his Word and worship and calls you to serve him in every aspect of your life. So Satan fills your mind with arrogance when you see a brother or sister in Christ not do as much as you or with envy when you see a brother or sister honored for doing more. Such attitudes are all too familiar for each one of us, but such an attitude makes it impossible to please God and enter heaven.

The door is narrow. Many will not be able to enter it because they forgot where their strength and salvation came from or because they depended on their own spirituality. Still the door is open. You didn’t open it. I didn’t open it. It was impossible for any of us to open it, but Jesus did. Jesus had to actually do the impossible to make it possible for us to be with him in heaven.

Jesus lived a perfect life free of all pride and self-righteousness because you and I have not and could not. From conception to death, he went up against impossible odds: the old evil foe Satan, the world with all its temptations and attacks, and the dark specter of death—all foes we couldn’t possibly defeat on our own. So Jesus put himself in our place to open the door for us.

To win the victory, to save self-righteous sinners like you and me, God’s Son had to give up his life. Jesus had to make himself last so you could be first. He had to give up glory and power and might for poverty and humility and weakness. He had to give himself up to die the death of a lowly criminal. That God would give himself up for us makes as much sense as 300 soldiers taking on 135,000, yet like the 300, Christ won the impossible victory. By his life, he overcame the world. By his death, he defeated Satan. By his resurrection, he conquered sin and death forever. Jesus did the impossible for you because his undying love for you moved him to do it.

Now the narrow door to heaven stands open for you. The impossible was made possible for you through your Savior Jesus Christ. For that reason, one day by God’s grace, your Savior will bring you through that door to be with him in the comforts and glories of heaven forever.

Until then, how will you respond? With fear? Self-righteousness? Idle laziness? Or will you live each day with the humble confidence that Jesus has opened the door for you, that Jesus has done it all for you, and that Jesus now enables you to serve him in your every calling every day of your life? Seems impossible, doesn’t it? Jesus really did the impossible for you. It defies all human reason. Not even in our wildest dreams could we

have come up with that plan, but in a manger, on a cross, in a tomb, Jesus did it all for you. In the end, only God's grace can explain it. Amen.