
GIDEON'S 300

The Battle of Thermopylae is one of the most famous military engagements in history.

In 480 BC, desperate to halt the advance of the Persian empire into Greece, 300 Spartans (along with another couple thousand Greeks who are generally forgotten about) rushed to the mountain pass of Thermopylae. There they met the immense Persian army head on—no one knows for sure how big of an army it was, but even modern, conservative estimates suggest that it was at least 200,000 men, or a ratio of 100 Persians to every Greek.

This was possible because the Spartans were amazing warriors. From childhood, Spartan males were trained and hardened, and by adulthood, they were the world's best fighting machines. The Spartans also employed good strategy in the battle, occupying the narrow pass of Thermopylae where the massive Persian army couldn't overwhelm them all at once. King Leonidas of Sparta and his men held the pass for three days against overwhelming numerical odds, but were eventually defeated when the Persians discovered a mountain path that led behind Greek lines.

Ultimately, the battle was a success—the Spartans' three day stand delayed the advance of the Persian army and afforded Athens the time it needed to prepare for the decisive naval battle which would end up determining the outcome of the war—but every Spartan was killed.

Some 700 years prior to the Battle of Thermopylae, during the Old Testament period of the Judges, God appeared to a man named Gideon and told him to defeat the Midianites who had been oppressing Israel for seven years.

There would be some similarities between this battle and the Battle of Thermopylae. Like the Persians, the Midianites had a vast army—as numerous as the sand on the seashore (Judges 7.12). On the other hand, the Israelite army was tiny, as God had Gideon trim it down from an original size of 32,000 to just 300.

Although the Israelite army was outnumbered like the Spartan army would be hundreds of years later, the similarities pretty much stopped there. The Israelites weren't the world's best soldiers—they were mainly farmers, and it seems possible that many of them

had never fought before at all. Furthermore, their battle plan seemed to be lacking, as they entered into battle armed with only trumpets and torches.

But most different of all was the outcome of the battle. There was no way the Israelites should have won, but they did. The Bible says that when the Israelites blew their trumpets, God caused confusion in the Midianite camp, and they panicked and turned on each other. Israel left the battlefield victorious.

In the Battle of Thermopylae, Sparta, the world's best warriors, against great odds managed an amazing accomplishment, but they ended up losing the battle and every man was killed in the process. Meanwhile Gideon and his ragtag army defeated the Midianites with ease. Why the different results?

I think the lesson to be learned by comparing these two stories is that human ability can lead to amazing achievement, but ultimately, it falls short.

Isaiah 40.28-31 is one of my favorite Old Testament passages:

*“Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth
Does not become weary or tired.
His understanding is inscrutable.
He gives strength to the weary,
And to him who lacks might He increases power.
Though youths grow weary and tired,
And vigorous young men stumble badly,
Yet those who wait for the LORD
Will gain new strength;
They will mount up with wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary.”*

When times get tough, where do you turn? Do you rely on your own strength and abilities? On other people? Sooner or later, all of those things will fail you. But if God is the source of your strength, you'll never run out.

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