

BY MANY OR BY FEW
A Devotional Meditation from
Judges 6:6-20, 7:19-25; 1 Samuel 14:6-23; 2 Kings 6:16-17;
Psalm 44: 17-26; Romans 8:31-39
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Classic Westerns never go out of style. We all want to see the good guys win. We watch movies because we want to see wrongs righted and justice prevail, especially for ordinary people who find deliverance from longstanding oppression.

Consider, for example, the classic 1960 movie, *The Magnificent Seven*, in which an unlikely assembly of gunslingers answer the desperate call of Mexican villagers to save their community from a marauding band of outlaws. The seven heroes bond with the villagers, together they take a stand against the marauders, and after much struggle the bandits are defeated and the village is free. At the close of the movie, we have a bit of wisdom offered by the village elder to the surviving heroes:

Only the farmers have won. They remain forever. They are like the land itself. You helped rid them of Calvera, the way a strong wind helps rid them of locusts. You're like the wind - blowing over the land and . . . passing on.



Photo from The Magnificent Seven, 1960 film starring (L-R) Yul Brenner, Steve McQueen, Horst Buchholz, Charles Bronson, Robert Vaughn, Brad Dexter, and James Coburn. [Imaged by Heritage Auctions, HA.com.](https://www.heritageauctions.com)

These lines harken back to *The Seven Samurai*, a movie by the renowned Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa that inspired *The Magnificent Seven*. The story of the Japanese original is the same: farmers seek protection from evil men who oppress them, seven warriors come together to answer the call, and somewhere along the way both the warriors and the villagers find out they are intricately connected. That connection gives them all a strength they did not know they had, and in that strength they prevail.

These two successful movies produced a world apart by two very different cultures teach us about the common threads that define our shared humanity. Decent people go about their business, seeking little more than to have their children grow up in peace. Nothing interrupts this routine until those who take advantage of their apparent passivity make life so difficult that the decent people have no choice but to rise up and become strong. Then they go back to their normal lives, but with the memory that they have done what was necessary when the time came – and will do it again if they must.

The truth is, there are far more decent people than there are wicked people. They just don't realize it until the crisis comes. While they are busy making their way peacefully and

lawfully, the wicked seek to pervert justice and bend others to their will. It takes a crisis to wake up the people so they can see that they are many, and they are strong.

This is biblical. Elisha the prophet taught that lesson to his servant when they were surrounded by a foreign army. In answer to his servant's fearful report, he said:

"Fear not . . . for those who are with us are more than those who are with them."
Then Elisha prayed and said, "*ADONAI*, please open his eyes that he may see."
Then *ADONAI* opened the eyes of the young man and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:16-17 TLV)

This incident reassures us of the spiritual forces guiding and guarding the righteous, but the Bible also has illustrations of how those spiritual forces manifest in the natural realm. Consider the story of how King Saul's son Jonathan initiated the deliverance of Israel from Philistine domination. The situation was so desperate that only 600 men remained in Saul's army, and even they were poorly armed; only Saul and Jonathan had swords, and the rest carried whatever farm implement or tool they could find and turn into a weapon. This is where we pick up the action:

Then Jonathan said to the young man carrying his armor, "Come, let's cross over to the garrison of these uncircumcised ones. Perhaps *ADONAI* will work for us, for nothing restrains *ADONAI* from delivering whether by many or by few. . . Here, we'll cross over to the men, then let them see us. If they say to us: 'Wait till we come to you,' then we'll stand still in our place and will not go up to them. But if they say, 'Come up to us!' then we will go up, for *ADONAI* has delivered them into our hand—that will be our sign." So they both let themselves be seen by the Philistine garrison. "Look, some Hebrews are coming out of the holes where they were hiding," the Philistines said. So the men of the garrison shouted down to Jonathan and his armor-bearer saying, "Come up to us and we'll teach you a lesson!" Then Jonathan said to his armor-bearer, "Follow me, for *ADONAI* has handed them over to Israel!" So Jonathan climbed up on his hands and feet, with his armor-bearer behind him. Then they fell before Jonathan, his armor-bearer behind him finishing them off. That first assault that Jonathan and his armor-bearer made struck down about 20 men within about half a furrow in an acre of land. Terror then spread through the camp, in the field, and among all the troops. Even the outposts and the raiders also trembled, when the earth quaked—it was a trembling from God. . . Then Saul and all the people with him rallied and rushed into the battle. Behold, every man's sword was against his fellow in utter confusion! Now there were Hebrews who had defected to the Philistines previously and had gone up with them to their camp round about—even they joined the Israelites that were with Saul and Jonathan. Also when all the men of Israel who had hidden themselves in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines had fled, they also chased after them in the battle. So *ADONAI* delivered Israel that day. The battle spread as far as Beth-aven. (1 Samuel 14:6-23 TLV)

The victory that day was almost unbelievable, just like the victory in the days of Gideon, when a beaten and oppressed Israel hid away from their enemies, praying that someone might deliver them. That was when the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon,

greeting him as a “mighty man of valor.” That greeting caused Gideon to look at himself, his people, and his God in a new way. It took a bit of convincing, but eventually he accepted the Lord’s commission: “Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have not I sent you? . . . Surely I will be with you, and you will strike down Midian as if it were one man.” (Judges 6:14, 17)

And that is what happened. Gideon, with only 300 men, boldly set forth and surprised the Midianite hordes at night. The terrified Midianites and their allies began to fight among themselves in a panic to get away. Before long, Israelites from the surrounding territory arose to pursue and cut them off, completely destroying the invaders.

And then Israel went back to their peaceful lives, and all went on as before.

Which is where the real peril lies. Israel forgot that they had been strong when they remained faithful to God.

This is another common human trait, even for the people of God. We forget that we are strong in Him. While we go about our ordinary lives, evil creeps in, and before long we are in need of a deliverer. We don’t need to be strong every day, or even most days. Because of that, when the time comes to be strong and united, we must be reminded. Someone must be called by God and anointed to do that reminding, and to set the example for standing firm against the forces of darkness. With that example, the silent majority of righteous take heart and vanquish the darkness in their day.

Not without hurt, mind you. This struggle against evil is very real and very painful, just as the Psalmist reminds us:

If we had forgotten the Name of our God or stretched our hands to a foreign god, would God not have discovered it? For He knows the secrets of the heart. But for Your sake we are slain all day. We are counted as sheep for slaughter. Awake! Why do you sleep, my Lord? Wake up! Do not cast us off forever. Why do You hide Your face and forget our misery and oppression? For our soul sinks down to the dust. Our belly cleaves to the earth. Arise, be our help, and redeem us for Your mercy’s sake. (Psalm 44:21-27 (20-26))

Apparently, this cycle is to repeat until our Messiah returns and completes His victory over the forces of darkness. In the meantime, He wants us to be at peace with each other, but not lose any of that which He has entrusted to us. What He says to the church at Thyatira He says to us all: “Only hold firm to what you have until I come.” (Revelation 2:25 TLV)

He has given us not merely His standards of righteousness, but Himself. This is the secret. If we can hold on to Him, then we will be more than conquerors, and will occupy this world until He comes.