

## **BROKEN VESSELS**

### **JUDGES 7:12-23**

Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude.

And when Gideon had come, there was a man telling a dream to his companion. He said, "I have had a dream: To my surprise, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed."

Then his companion answered and said, "This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp." And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, "Arise, for the LORD has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand."

Then he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers. And he said to them, "Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do: When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, 'The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!' "

So Gideon and the 100 men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers - they held the torches in their

left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing - and they cried, "The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!"

And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled. When the three hundred blew the trumpets, the LORD set every man's sword against his companion throughout the whole camp; and the army fled..."

I want to start with a familiar nursery rhyme...

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall; all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again." But I've always wondered why would anyone *want* to put Humpty Dumpty back together again? *Humpty was an egg...*

And eggs are supposed to be cracked. What good is an egg doing sitting on top of a wall in the first place?

It needs to be broken - put in a pan - and cooked.

This past week I ate at the Waffle House, and those are some people who know what to do with an egg!

Crack open the shell - spill its insides into a pan - fry it up - put it with some sausage, and a slice of cheese - then slip it between two pieces of buttered toast...

Now that's what you do with an egg! *Humpty Dumpty never tasted so good!* I suppose if Humpty were human we'd regret his brokenness. Poor Humpty would just be "*a shell of a man.*" The *yoke* is on him!

But Humpty Dumpty wasn't a man - he was an egg - and if an egg is to do any good it has to be broken.

*Why would all the king's horses and all the king's men try to put Humpty Dumpty back together again?*

The purpose of an egg is to provide nourishment.

Thus, it's worthless unless it's broken. In fact, even "good eggs" - like you and me - can't really be used to feed others, and be digested until we've been broken.

It surprised me to learn that the "*Humpty Dumpty*" nursery rhyme has been around for at least a thousand years. Varying versions of "*Humpty*" appear in eight European languages. His story was first told in the form of a riddle, "**What, when broken, can never be repaired, not even by strong and wise individuals?**"

And as every child now knows, the answer is "*an egg.*" When Humpty Dumpty breaks he breaks.

And here's my question for this morning, *why does Humpty need to be put back together? Why this preoccupation with always wanting to fix broken stuff?*

My wife also suffers from this obsession - every time a household appliance breaks she wants me to fix it immediately. The dishwasher breaks, and she wants it fixed by the next day. I don't understand why she can't seize the opportunity - *take a week or so to enjoy the sensation of warm soap bubbles on her hands.*

When a woman pays for a manicure the first thing the manicurist does is soak her hands in warm water...

*So what's the difference?*

At the manicurist it's called "*pampering.*" Why is the same experience so unbearable in the kitchen sink?

Why can't my wife *close her eyes... imagine her hands being massaged... her cuticles cleansed...*

But no! Kathy is adamant. I need to fix the broken dishwasher. If something is broke it needs to be fixed.

*And isn't this how we all think? When an item breaks it should be repaired and returned to its original form.*

That is with two exceptions...

Sit your Humpty Dumpty on a wall if you'd like, but I like mine scrambled or sunny-side up. If an egg is to be most useful it has to *be broken and stay broken...*

**And the same is true with a servant of God!**

Before God uses us - before we're fit to minister for Him - before we're edible and digestible to the people around us - we too have to *be broken and stay broken.*

Remember how Jesus' illustrated this truth?

Before He miraculously multiplied the loaves and fish, and fed the vast crowd, Jesus did four things...

Luke 9:16, "He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, He blessed and broke them, and gave them to the disciples to set before the multitudes." He **took, blessed, broke,** and **gave...**

And He does the same with us... He takes us out of the world - blesses us in Christ (*that's what we learn in Ephesians*) - but then He breaks us of our pride and self-sufficiency - and gives us in service to others.

We all *love to be blessed* and *want to serve* - but in between the *blessing* and *giving* we have to be broken.

If Jesus gives you away to a hungry world without you first being broken you'll cause indigestion - if not strangulation. People will choke on your pride, and your self-righteousness, and your self-centeredness.

The witness of a person who's never been humbled and broken is hard to swallow... Such a person can be tough to stomach. And if people can't swallow you... if they can't stomach you... then they'll spit you out.

To be used by God we've got to be broken.

An older version of the famous nursery rhyme reads, "Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall; three score men and three score more cannot place Humpty Dumpty as he was before."

And that's the point of spiritual brokenness - God doesn't want us to remain like we were before.

Realize, God's love takes us *just as we are* and *right where we're at*. But God doesn't leave us that way...

Ever watch a cook with a head of lettuce preparing a salad? She breaks it, and rips apart, and then divvies it up into little pieces - that are more easily digestible.

And this is what the hands of God do to us.

A humble person goes down a lot smoother than a crusty, prideful person. If we want to be used by God we'll submit to His breaking, and learn to lean on Him.

Billy and Polly Williams have been my friends and attended our church for 30 years now. And the Williams have one of the funniest stories I've ever heard told...

One Sunday morning they awoke to the sounds of laughter and giggling coming from their three year old son, Brandon. When they got up to check on him and find out why he was so amused - they were shocked!

The day before Polly had stocked the refrigerator with several dozen eggs. Brandon was now chasing the cat around the house trying to pelt him with eggs.

He had emptied the refrigerator... covered the walls and furniture with several dozen eggs. Mom and Dad were horrified - but Brandon was delighted - he was having the time of his life... *And God is like Brandon!*

God likes to break eggs - even *“good eggs.” In fact, especially “good eggs”* - like the people in this room.

For God knows that no matter how *good* we think we are - how sharp, and skilled, and spiritual we think we are - we're not the person He intends for us to be, until we've first become a broken vessel. It's true for us all!

Like Billy and Polly, when God starts breaking eggs we shutter - we're horrified - we want Him to stop! All we can focus on is the mess and the pain we feel...

But God has reasons for our brokenness. He knows the irony, *our brokenness produce a blessedness.*

We learn many lessons from the story of Gideon, but not the least of which is that God uses broken vessels.

In Judges 7 God wins a monumental victory that ends seven long years of Midianite oppression - and the decisive moment in the battle is when the army of Israel breaks their ceramic jars, and turns on the light!

**Brokenness brought blessing.** And Gideon's story teaches us that the light God wants to radiate from our lives is brightest when it shines from a broken vessel.

Understand, Gideon was an unlikely hero.

When God first called Gideon to serve Him, the man was defeated, frightened, and skeptical. It must've sounded like a joke when God's messenger greeted him, "**The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!**"

Gideon had a wobbly faith at best. He had a tough time believing. He was reluctant to take God at His Word. He would ask God for signs - lay out fleeces. His faith had to be propped up with tangible evidence.

In Judges 6:39 Gideon throws out a woolen fleece, and proposes a test. When he awakes, if the unusual happens - *if the wool is wet from the dew, yet the ground around it is dry* - he'll know God is with him.

And God obliges! He provides Gideon the green light. But it's still not enough. Gideon's feeble faith needs more assurance, so he asks God to reverse the special effect... This time, *let the fleece be dry and the ground wet...* The next AM, God again signals a "Go!"

Gideon reminds me of a lady in our church who was struggling with an issue in her life. She decided she needed a sign from God, *and that's how she prayed...*



Until one day she was driving home in a thunderstorm when a huge gust of wind blew a medal sign off the front of a building. The sign flew across the street, and smacked the front of her car as she sat at the intersection. She said it was as if the Lord were saying, *“All right, you want a sign. I’ll give you a sign.”*

From then on she was finished asking for signs. She decided to just trust God and take Him at His Word.

In the OT God indulged people like Gideon with signs, but after the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost, God’s people never again relied upon signs or fleeces to discern His will. The Church was led by God’s Spirit.

Twice in Judges 7, God fortifies Gideon’s anemic faith... Gideon goes to spy on the enemy. He slips down the mountainside within earshot of the soldiers...

He’s close enough to eavesdrop in on their campfire conversation. In verse 13 he hears one Midianite say to his buddy... *“I have had a dream: To my surprise, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed.”* Then his companion answered and said, *“This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp.”* How the man identified the loaf of barley with Gideon we’re not told - *perhaps divine revelation.*

But this was an odd connection. A victorious army epitomized as a tumbling loaf of barley bread - *strange!*

Imagine being an army battalion, and having as your insignia a loaf of whole wheat bread. A rolling loaf of barley bread is not a very intimidating mascot...



It reminds me of the wimpy names adopted by some college football teams. Here's a list of the sissiest names in college football... "Virginia Tech Hokies (*what's a hokie?*), Boston Terriers, Oregon Ducks, Akron Zips, Presbyterian Blue Hose, Maryland Terps, and my all-time favorite, Santa Cruz Banana Slugs."

How do you get fired up for *the Banana Slugs*?

But what if Gideon was coach of a football team?

How does this sound for an intimidating, ferocious nickname, "the tumbling barley loaves." Imagine the alumni getting whipped into a frenzy over, "the fighting donuts," or "the battling bagels?" *Yet I can't think of a more fitting name for Gideon's out-matched army!...*

You recall the story, Gideon ended up with just 300 soldiers. It was refuse recruitment! God sent home 32,000 men before they started. The Midianites had 135,000 troops. Gideon was outnumbered 450 to 1.

And the men God left Gideon weren't exactly trained professionals. A good soldier is always on the look-out. He's conscious of what was going on around him.

When he drank from a spring he would drop to one knee - cup his hands - and bring water to his mouth. *His head was high - his eyes open - his guard up...*

But Gideon's 300 men were the guys who took a drink of water by sticking their heads in the spring, and lapping up the water like a dog... not a very good picture of alertness and vigilance. The Hebrew troops were sloppy and untrained. Yep, "the rolling jelly rolls" sounds like an appropriate name for Gideon's team.

But here's what God was up to... Early in the story God gives us His reasons for thinning out the troops...

In 7:2, "The LORD said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'"

God knew the glory-grabbing hearts of the Hebrew people. That's why He stacked the table against them.

He created astronomical odds - a situation so impossible - a scenario so preposterous - that when the Hebrews were successful there could be no other explanation in anyone's mind than God's intervention.

He wanted there to be no doubt as to the author of this victory. God insured that He got all the credit.

And that's the reason behind the ammunition Gideon issues his troops. Don't look for hand grenades, and M-16s, and missile-launchers. There aren't even any spears, or swords, or shields... God outfits His troops with [a jar, a torch, and a trumpet - or a bottle, a blaze, and a bugle...](#) *How's that for some real firepower!*

Gideon's army was the military equivalent of a jelly roll. But realize this is *the beginnings of brokenness...*

When we come to God we receive the forgiveness of our sin - we're set free to know and follow Him - we love Him and desire to serve Him - *but we're still so full of ourselves.* We don't realize how self-confident and self-sufficient we are... We step out to serve the Lord, and serve Him the way we once served ourselves.

Rather than rely on Him, we take the attitude, *“I can do this... I’m a resourceful, capable, can-do person! If God wants to help, fine, but I can do this all by myself.”*

And that’s the attitude God intends to break!

He wants to teach us that spiritual, eternal business is never accomplished through material and human means. *A true work of God is a work of His Holy Spirit!*

We bring God nothing He doesn’t already possess. The work depends on Him, not us! Our role is minor.

In January 2000 an Arizona State basketball player, Eddie House, scored an unbelievable 61 points in a game against California. By himself, Eddie put up more points than 55 other NCAA teams scored that night.

After the game, one of Eddie’s teammates, Justin Allen - who scored just 3 points in the game - made the statement, *“Now I can tell my grandkids that Eddie House and I combined for 64 points against Cal...”*

Eddie can’t miss. He lights up the scoreboard for 61 points, while Justin sinks a single basket... *but they combine for 64? Yep, that sounds just like us!* God scores 61 - I chip-in 3 - *but we combine for 64? Sure!*

Yes, our walk with God is two-sided - *God has a part and I have a part.* But compared to God’s role my part is minor. All the credit belongs to Him. *Brokenness keeps me from getting my grubby hands on the glory!*

Paul Harvey tells of a sign he saw in an automobile repair shop. The sign read, *“Labor: \$10 per hour. If you watch, \$12 per hour. If you help, \$15 per hour. If you worked on it first, then brought it in, \$27.50 per hour.”*

I think that sums up God's opinion of the importance of our contribution. When we overstep our bounds and inflate our importance, we make God's job more difficult. Never forget, we're **the fighting jelly rolls!**...

And yes, God uses jelly rolls... but not because He needs them, but in so doing all the glory goes to Him.

When Gideon overhears the Midianite interpret the dream as a victory for the Lord and Gideon he's encouraged. He returns to his troops, and mobilizes them for battle. *But you'll never believe the battle plan!*

Following God's instruction, Gideon gives to each of his 300 men a trumpet and a torch. The torch probably consisted of smoldering rags on the end of a stick.

The stick was turned upside down, and stuck down the neck of a ceramic jar. The torch was in the jar, but you couldn't see the blaze until the jar was broken.

The 300 Hebrews spread out around the Midianite camp - then on cue - as a single man - they blew their trumpets - broke their clay jars - and they all shouted in unison, **"The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!"**

Try to picture in your mind what happened when each of Gideon's men broke his clay jar... The rush of oxygen into the jar fueled and flamed the smoldering rags. It set the torches ablaze. The sleepy Midianites awoke to see 300 blazing torches all round them.

In ancient times, a battalion of a thousand men would march behind a single torch. The groggy Midianites panicked. Their imaginations ran wild. They thought they were being outnumbered and surrounded.

Many of the Midianites retreated. Other soldiers were so discombobulated they drew their swords on each other. Thousands of men were slain by friendly fire.

Gideon calls for the back-ups - and then he mops up.

The Midianites were defeated by the sword of the LORD. To God be the glory - great things He had done!

But let's focus on what happened to those 300 clay jars in the hands of Gideon's men... To me, this one detail is a microcosm of the whole battle. You could say, [the lights on the mountainside defeated Midian](#).

Yes, the trumpet blast, and the shout of triumph played a roll - but their effect was temporary. The blast and shout lasted only a few seconds, but the torches stayed aglow. The mountain lit up. It was ablaze, and it convinced the Midianites that they were dead meat.

Let me remind you, God has called each of us to shine the light of His love and truth into a dark world.

Both individually and collectively the Church is called the light of the world! We reflect the sun - God's Son!

Yet all too often we forget our calling. We take off in a righteous rage to stamp out the darkness - *that's not our job description*. God hasn't called us to stomp out the darkness. He's called us to simply shine His light.

Too often the church is like the man who walks into a dark room, and starts swatting at the darkness. He flails until he collapses in exhaustion - yet the room is just as dark as when he started. His efforts were futile.

Then another man walks into the same dark room, and he simply flips on the light switch. Instantly, the room is flooded with light. The darkness dissipates.

And the moral of the story is clear - we win over spiritual darkness not by fighting and flailing at it - but by faithfully shining the light of God's love and truth!

But here's the secret to our shining - how to shine spiritually - **flames burn brightest from a broken vessel!**

Some of you carry a smoldering flame inside you. You're like the smoldering rags in Gideon's jar. You're ready to blaze for Jesus, but you need to be broken.

If left enclosed in the jar the fire that's been kindled will diminish - but break the vessel, and oxygen will rush to the smoldering rags, and ignite a red hot blaze.

Paul uses this idiom of clay jars in reference to Christians in 2 Corinthians 4:6, "For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us."

We're all jars of clay... We're ugly - and thick - and simple - and prideful - and selfish - and stubborn - and determined to have things our own way... and the light can't shine out of us until the vessel has been broken.

But once the shattering starts - and we realize how dependent and needy we are - suddenly the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit rushes through and fuels the fire!

Clay jars don't let in air until they're cracked. That's why your brokenness is actually the Holy Spirit's *big break!* It allows Him to ignite and fan the flame of our passion for God. Brokenness turns up the light!



As kids we use to buy and assemble balsa wood airplanes. They came as single sheets of balsa wood.

Its wings and fuselage were outlined by perforations in the sheets of flimsy wood. The perforated lines showed where to break the sheets - and get the parts.

And in the same way, God knows exactly where you and I need to be broken. He's already outlined the strongholds of pride and self-centeredness in our lives.

*Hey, you're a nice, amiable, cordial person just as long as no one bothers your \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank!).*

You can be sure God will zero in on *your blank!*

God knows that your attitude and perspective in that particular area of life can't be reassembled according to His specs, until it first undergoes some brokenness.

Understand, God is an expert at orchestrating just the right circumstances to cause our brokenness.

He fashions situations. He adds pressures. God has identified what forces will bring us to the end of our resources, and teach us how much we need Him.

God knows how to break flimsy balsa wood into pieces that He can be reassemble, and make to fly.

But here's the soul-searching question... ***Will you submit to the breaking, or will you hold on to your pride?*** Are you determined to keep a stiff upper lip?

You've thought you'd just ride out the tough times you're facing, and eventually you'll return to business as usual. You'll be restored to your place on the wall.

But what if God doesn't want Humpty Dumpty - *or you, or me* - put back in our original place. What if God wants us to stay broken, humble, pliable - *thus usable*?

Here's a great quote from Oswald Chambers, "God can never make us wine if we object to the fingers He uses to crush us. If God would only use His own fingers, and make us broken bread... in a special way!

But when he uses someone we dislike, or a set of circumstances to which we said we would never submit, and makes those the crushers, we object. We must never choose the scene of our own martyrdom."

God knows how to turn up the heat on us.

He uses people in our lives - our job - an automobile accident - a conflict with a friend - perhaps a financial reversal - maybe professional disappointments - even the dissolving of relationships... to chisel away at the areas of our life that are cold, and callous, and carnal.

God knows how and when to pound down on us until His pounding produces its desired results...

I've heard it said, "A \$5 iron bar can be pounded into a couple of \$10 horseshoes... Or that same bar can be pounded further into \$350 worth of needles... Or that same bar can be pounded even further into \$250,000 worth of fine watch springs... It all depends on the amount of pounding you're willing to provide."

Another OT character named "*Job*," knew he was being pounded by the calamities he experienced.

That's why Job said to his friends, Job 23:10, "When (God) has tested me, I shall come forth as gold."

And here's God's word to us as individuals - and as a church - if we submit to God's breaking in our lives, God promises NOT to put us back as we were before.

He'll make us better... He'll turn us from clay to gold!

God used an army of broken vessels to win the victory for Gideon - and He wants our church to adopt a similar posture. Not proud and haughty, but broken and humble before Him. *Eager to go to battle - eager to see God work - and eager to give Him all the glory!*

It's been said, "When God wants to drill a man, and thrill a man, and skill a man. When God wants to mold a man to play a noble part - when He yearns with all His heart to create so great and bold a man, that all the world will be amazed... watch His efforts, watch His ways... How He ruthlessly perfects whom He royally elects. How He hammers him and hurts him, and with mighty blows converts him... How he uses whom He chooses, and with every act induces him, to try his splendor out. God knows what he's about." And God knows precisely what we need to be what He desires.

Here's our choice - **brokenness** or **barrenness**?

And there's no "in between." You and I can sign-up to serve, and do things for God, without His breaking - but God won't use us fully until first we're broken...

When the vessels of Gideon were smashed, a surge of air hit the smoldering rags inside the jars, and an explosion occurred - the torches ignited into a blaze!

And that's what God wants to see happen in us...

Don't be hard-boiled. Humpty Dumpty did nobody any good stubbornly sitting on the wall. **God doesn't want good eggs as much as He wants broken eggs.**

Your life will be far more meaningful and purposeful if you submit to the Lord's fingers. Let Him *beat you down* - then *build you up* into the person He desires!

I know it's hard. When God pounds away it isn't always pleasant. His crushing can be painful! But God can't assemble us to fly, until we've first been broken.

*And broken in just the right places!*

The message from Gideon is this... **submit to the breaking!**... Let Jesus be your adequacy. *God wants your life to count... but He only uses broken vessels!*

Today, let's all join *the Tumbling Jelly Rolls!*