

## Gideon

### **Judges 6:1, 6, 11-16**

The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. Thus Israel was greatly impoverished because of Midian; and the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help. Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, “The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.” Gideon answered him, “But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian.” Then the Lord turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.” He responded, “But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.” The Lord said to him, “But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites, every one of them.”

This summer, we’ve been taking a look at some of the lesser-known characters in the Bible. The book of Judges is full of them – many of whom have such short stories I couldn’t make a whole sermon out of it. Even as we look to Gideon this morning, his story is contained in just three chapters.

The book of Judges gives us the history of the Israelites during a time when they really struggled to follow God’s law. The whole book is cyclical: first the Israelites fall away from God, God punishes the Israelites, then God sends a judge to restore order. Lather, rinse, repeat. Over and over. Some of the judges rule until their death – which leads to the next period of lawlessness. Other judges themselves struggle with following God, and they lead the rest of the people astray.

So it’s no surprise that our story this morning begins by revealing that the Israelites did what was displeasing to God. In this case, they had started worshipping one of the other gods recognized by neighboring cultures. So for seven years, God allowed the Midianites to overtake them. There was no political coup, but the Midianites raided the Israelite crops and livestock, which made basic survival a challenge.

After seven years, God decided the Israelites had suffered enough and it was time to show them that God was still faithful. God needed someone to be the new judge, to lead the Israelites and follow God's commands. So God sends a messenger to Gideon to call him to leadership. The messenger tells Gideon, "The Lord is with you."

Now Gideon is no slouch. He responds by saying, "If God is with us, then why has all this bad stuff been happening? Why haven't we seen the mighty acts of God's faithfulness that our ancestors have told us about?"

Gideon has a fair point. I'm guessing every one of us here has wrestled with his question. Why do bad things happen? Why does God let bad things happen? Worse yet, does God cause bad things to happen? Sadly, this is not a story that will answer these questions for us. The messenger ignores Gideon's questions and simply moves the conversation in another direction. He tells Gideon he has been commissioned to deliver the Israelites out of the hand of the Midianites.

But after seven years, Gideon isn't ready to believe all this change too quickly. He tells the messenger he's going to need a sign, some way to prove that God really is with him and the Israelites now. So Gideon brings out a meal for the messenger, who then touches the food with the tip of his staff. A fire suddenly springs up, consuming the food, and the messenger disappears. Later that night, the messenger speaks to Gideon again, telling him to tear down the altars to the god Baal and make sacrifices to the Israelite God instead.

In the morning, when the Israelites see that their altar has been destroyed, they are not happy. They want to know who has done this, so they can kill him. But Gideon's father steps in to defend him. He tells the mob, "Are you going to fight Baal's battles for him? Are you going to

save him? Anyone who takes Baal's side will be dead by morning. If Baal is a god in fact, let him fight his own battles and defend his own altar.”

So Gideon escapes the angry mob and starts assembling his army to go fight the Midianites. He calls people from all over the region, and they respond in great numbers. But Gideon is still not convinced that God is with him and this is what he should be doing. So again, he asks for a sign. This time, he tells God what sign he wants. He puts a fleece on the threshing floor and tells God that in the morning, he expects there to be dew on the fleece, but nowhere else on the floor. And that's what happens. But it turns out, Gideon is pretty jaded after feeling abandoned by God for seven years. So he tells God he's going to set the fleece out again the next night. But this time, Gideon wants to see the fleece remain dry, while the floor is wet with dew. And as you might imagine, God comes through for Gideon again.

So Gideon, finally assured of God's presence, assembles his army and marches toward the Midianites. God takes a good look at the army, and realizes that Gideon has been too successful in recruiting. When they defeat the Midianites, it will be easy for the Israelites to claim that they won because of their own strength, and not because of God's help. So God tells Gideon to trim down the army.

Following God's directions, Gideon simply asks the soldiers if anyone would rather go home than go fight. And about two-thirds of the soldiers headed home. But God still thinks the army is too big. Again, Gideon follows God's directions to divide the troops. He leads them to a river to drink. Some of the men kneel down, and using their hands like cups, lift water to their mouths. Other men kneel down and lap water up with their tongues, like dogs. Only 300 men used their hands, so God tells Gideon to take those 300 into battle with him.

They attacked in the middle of the night, and they sent the much larger Midianite army on the run. The Israelites pursued for days, finally capturing and killing the Midianite kings. When Gideon returned home, the Israelites wanted to make him their political leader – their judge. Gideon said, “I most certainly will not rule over you.” Can you imagine the dismay and shock of the people? They were so sure he was going to say yes. But then Gideon continued, “God will reign over you.” So Gideon became their judge, and he ruled over a period of peace for 40 years.

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## DISCUSSION

Doubt is part of faith. Sometimes we struggle with doubt even when everything in life is rolling along just fine. But Gideon illustrates how easy it is for us to question our faith when things fall apart. Even when God’s messenger tells him that God is with him, Gideon isn’t sure. Seven years of difficulty have made him somewhat cynical. Three times he asks for a sign before his faith is restored. What do you think about signs from God? Have you ever asked for one? Would you ever ask for one? Do you think God provides signs today?

This story presents God in a way that is somewhat troubling for us. First, when the Israelites don’t follow the commandments, God punishes them by allowing the Midianites to have the upper hand. I don’t know about you, but I don’t like to think of God as allowing bad things to happen. Second, God ends the period of punishment by sending the Israelites against the Midianites, in the violence of war. Again, not my preferred image of God. So what do we do when one image of God in the Scriptures conflicts with another one, one we may prefer? This is a really hard question, but I’m going to let you struggle with it for a minute. But don’t worry – then I’m going to tell you how I answer it.

So what do we do when we have an image of God in the Bible that conflicts with another one? Christians have often struggled with this question. It’s the reason different theologians throughout history have suggested we toss out the Old Testament altogether. After all, the God in the Old Testament can be pretty violent and angry, while the God we read about in the New Testament seems all love and forgiveness. How do we reconcile those images?

Well, there are two techniques that I find helpful. First, we have to remember that the Bible was written by *someone*. Actually, it was written in several pieces by several someones. And before those someones wrote it, these stories were all handed down as a spoken, oral tradition. And the tradition of storytelling had and has different rules than written history. Not only was it okay to give your interpretation of the facts, it was expected. When we read a history today, we expect just the facts. Or if there is interpretation, we expect to see that interpretation separate from the facts.

So when we read the Bible, we need to remember that we are reading one person or one group's understanding of that particular event. At some point in time, when Judges was written, the Israelites made sense of the seven years of Midianite control by understanding it as punishment for worshipping Baal. Had the text been put into writing at some other point in history, they may have understood those seven years as a time when the Midianites were more numerous and less scrupled than the Israelites. At another time, they might have recorded that during those seven years, God was testing them.

That, of course, opens a whole can of worms. If any story in the Bible could be interpreted in a different way, how can we trust the Bible at all? How can it have any authority for our lives? Well, that's where the second technique comes in. Another helpful thing to remember when reading Scripture is that we have to interpret the Bible in light of the rest of the Bible. We read this image of God in Judges chapter six, and we don't compare it to every possible interpretation and image of God anyone has ever thought of. We compare it to the other images of God we have in the rest of the Bible.

In order to do that, you have to know what else is in the Bible. Which is why it's so important to take time to read the Bible or sign up for a Bible study. After all, Gideon's story is

short, and not very well-known. But from even the shortest stories we can get a glimpse into God and our relationship with him. Amen and amen.