

17th May, 2020
The Unlikely Hero
Judges 6: 16

Hi, we are certainly missing everyone! Trust you are coping and keeping connected to our community. It seems it could be only a couple more weeks before we are able to be together. What a great time of celebration that will be!

Today we look at Gideon, in the fifth of our Old Testament character studies. As mentioned, previously, it is my intention during this series to give an over view of their lives, reflect upon lessons we can learn from their lives, but above all, highlight ordinary people living extraordinary lives. Next week we will look at Daniel, then the following week celebrate Pentecost, and will see how God has provided for each of us to make a difference in an extraordinary way!

It would be really helpful if before you read the message notes to read Judges chapters 6-7. It helps to see clearly how this reluctant hero learned to trust and depend upon God in an extraordinary way. Gideon means, one who chops down or destroys. We will see today Gideon is an “Iconoclast”, a destroyer of images used in religious worship. 6:25

You all will remember that God had rescued the children of Israel from Egypt. He had cared for them in the wilderness, and brought them into the land that He had promised to give them. They had quite a struggle possessing the land because there were already people there. It might sound a little unfair of God to just decide arbitrarily to take the land off somebody and give it to the children of Israel. But you will remember that God had said, that in the land of Palestine — the land of Canaan as it was known in those days — the condition of those people was so bad that He would not allow them to continue to live there.

So, under the leadership of Joshua, they moved into the Land of Promise, and little by little they began to overthrow the people who were living there, take possession of it, and settle in the land. It was a blessed situation for the children of Israel. God had given them a land that was plentiful, and after the terrible time that they had experienced in Egypt as slaves, and the awful forty years that they had spent in the wilderness, it really was wonderful for them to have the chance to live in the Promised Land.

For a while things went very well, but, as is often the case, when things get easier people get a little lax. As time went on, the children of Israel stopped honouring and obeying the Lord, and they stopped observing what He had told them to do. You remember that God was intent on bringing the children of Israel into that piece of real estate, and having them as a unique people to show the other people all around what a difference it makes when the Lord is their God. But unfortunately, the children of Israel began to lose their distinctives.

Now, God had promised them blessing, but He had also promised that if they did not live in obedience, and if they did not follow His dictates, and if they did not continue to honour Him, they could not assume that everything would go well for them. And that was precisely what happened.

Now they were surrounded by enemies. There was one particular group of people who began to give the children of Israel a very hard time. They were called the Midianites. They were able to get the other tribal groups into a kind of alliance, and they began to make life very very difficult for the children of Israel. What they would do was, around about the time of harvest, they would come rushing down into the fields and into the farms where the children of Israel had been working on their crops. Just when they were expecting to harvest them, the Midianites and all their allies would come down and steal their harvest, or they would just set it on fire. They were having an extremely difficult time for seven years. Now it's in that situation that Gideon comes on the scene.

Then one day it suddenly dawned on them; the reason they were having a hard time was they were no longer trusting the Lord; they were no longer honouring Him; they were no longer living in obedience to him. So they began to cry out again to the Lord.

The problem they were confronting was not particularly political, and it was not particularly military, and it wasn't even primarily economic. The problem that they were confronting was quite frankly a spiritual problem! There was an air of despondency, and an air of despair about the people of Israel at that time.

Gideon is a good example of that despondency. He knew that it was getting about time for the Midianites and their allies to come down and mess up their crops again. So, he was doing something that was really quite strange, a bit silly really! He was threshing wheat in a winepress. Gideon is trying to thresh his wheat in the winepress. They're having such a hard time, and he is just trying to eke out a little bit of a harvest before the Midianites come down and catch him and steal it and take it all away.

While Gideon is threshing his wheat in the winepress, the Angel of the Lord comes and speaks to him. What he says to him is really quite startling: *"When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, 'The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.'" Now if there is one thing that Gideon did not think he was at that particular moment was a mighty warrior. He was a scared farmer — that's what he was. He was threshing his wheat in the winepress because he was frightened to death that the Midianites were going to come and steal his harvest. So, the idea that he was a mighty warrior just didn't make any sense to him at all. Neither did the other part of the statement, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior!"*

Immediately Gideon begins to question this, and this is how he responds, *"But sir, if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all His wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?'"*

So, the big question here in Gideon's mind is if the Lord Jehovah is present among His people. How come we are having such a hard time?

Gideon and the people of Israel were beginning to look at their circumstances rather than at their theology. When you begin to look at your theology through your circumstances, very, very soon when the circumstances become difficult you begin to find that your theology gets changed. Have you ever noticed that?

I've met people quite often who will say, "Yes, I believe certain things, and then their circumstances become rather difficult, and instead of looking at their circumstances in the context of what they believe about God, they allow their circumstances to change what they believe about God.

Poor old Gideon is allowing the situation to alter his view of God instead of holding firmly to what he knows of God, and looking at his circumstances through that. Now, he even goes so far as to deny a fundamental tenet of the faith, and he says, v13 *"The Lord has abandoned us!"* Well, that's despondency for you! I wonder if someone who is reading this feels just like that! Somebody who right now has a whole lot of discouragement, a whole lot of disappointment, a whole lot of despondency. If so, I hope that what we've got to say in the rest of this message will be a source of encouragement to you, because I want you to carry on this story with me.

V14-16 He first says, *"Gideon, you're going to go in the strength that you have, and that isn't much,"* as is very obvious from the circumstances in which he is operating. *"You will go in the strength that you have, then the second thing is, that I will be with you!"*

“You will go in the strength that you have, and I will be with you!” Those are the two things that are absolutely critical to our understanding of Gideon’s story. He is so unbelievably despondent. He looks at his resources, and they are utterly depleted. He sees absolutely no hope, and he certainly does not see himself as playing any major part in rolling back the forces of evil.

Somebody has put it this way: *“One person plus God equals a majority!”* “Go in the strength that you have. I know it isn’t much; in fact, you don’t amount to much at all. You’re of the tribe of Manasseh. You’re in one of the lowest clans of that tribe. But you’re just who I want, because I’m looking for people who don’t amount to much so that they will begin to realize the key is not what they have to offer. The key is that I have to offer all that they need to be all that I’m calling them to be, and that’s the key!”

Gideon then says, *“Well, if I’ve found favour in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really You talking to me”* (Judges 6:17). And the Lord gives him a sign, and Gideon begins to recognize that this is the Angel of the Lord, a special messenger from the Lord who has come to speak to him. The Lord says to him, in v23, *“Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die.”* So, Gideon does what should have been done a long time ago. He builds an altar to the Lord, and he calls it, *“The Lord is Peace!”*.

So, Gideon is beginning to turn a corner. He is no longer the despondent Gideon; he is now the dependent Gideon, and he builds an altar. The Lord then says to him, *“All right Gideon, this is what I want you to do.”* *“I want you to go and knock down the altar that your Dad has built to Baal.”*

Baal was the god of the local people; he was the antithesis of all that Jehovah stood for. This was how far the children of Israel had declined in their spirituality in those days. They were actually worshiping Baal rather than the Lord. They were also worshiping the goddess Asherah, the goddess of the Phoenicians and the Syrians.

So, this is what the Lord said to Gideon. He said, *“You are going to break down the altar to Baal. You’re going to chop down the Asherah pole. Then you’re going to get your father’s prize bull and you’re going to build a new altar to me, Jehovah Is Peace, or Shalom. You’re going to chop up the Asherah pole, and that will be the wood for the altar, and you’re going to kill your father’s prize bull as a burnt offering before me.”*

Gideon is going to tear down what is wrong, and he is going to build up what is right, and that is how we begin to turn things around. We look at what is wrong and we tear it down. We look at what has been omitted, and we build it up, and at that particular point, Gideon comes, and he makes the burnt offering.

When his family wakes up in the morning, boy are they offended! The altar to Baal has been destroyed; the Asherah pole has been chopped up, and the prize bull is there smouldering on the altar, and the burnt offering is ascending to the Lord.

V29 Now the people want to know who did this? They very quickly find out it was Gideon, and so they want to get rid of Gideon, but Joash, his Dad, comes to his aid, and he says: *“Listen, if he’s done this against Baal, and if Baal is any good, he can look after my son anyway.”* So, they gave Gideon a new name, Jerub-Baal, which means *“Baal is going to get after him.”* What a nice name to be given. Now he walks around with a constant reminder that they’re expecting Baal to get after him for what he did to the altar of Baal and to the Asherah pole

Then the word of the Lord comes again to Gideon, and He says, “Gideon, now I want you to round up the people. I want you to go into the surrounding tribes, and I want you to start telling them, ‘Listen, the Spirit of the Lord is come upon me. He has given me insights as to what is wrong with us. We have got to acknowledge that for seven years we’ve strayed from the ways of the Lord. We’ve got to

acknowledge that we must come to repentance! We've got to tear down the altars to Baal. We've got to chop down the Asherah poles. We have got to make our burnt offerings and come and worship the Lord in deep dependence and deep repentance.

That was the word that was given to Gideon, and he goes out and he begins to round up the people, but he has a slight failure of nerve again. You see, the nice thing about these heroes is, that in and of themselves, they're not very heroic. It's the fact that the Lord is with them that makes very ordinary people into heroes, and the same is true for us today! So, Gideon says, "Well Lord, if you're really going to do this, if you're really going to be with me, would you give me a sign?"

Gideon says, *"Here's the sign, Lord! I'll put out the fleece in the morning. If it's wet with dew and it's dry all around, I'll know that this is a miracle, I'll know that You are with me!"* Well, the Lord did it for him! Then he said, *"Excuse me, Lord, but would you mind just one more time? Please don't get upset with me, how about maybe it could be coincidence, couldn't it? It might be beginner's luck, mightn't it? There could be an explanation for this happening, so would you mind very much if I put the fleece out again tonight. In the morning, the fleece will be dry, and it will be wet all around."* So, the Lord humours him and does it again for him.

Now, apparently, it's all right to ask the Lord for a sign. But be very, very careful how you do it. There are some people who ask for signs, and they ask for such a ridiculous sign that they know that they're very, very safe. In other words, you can so load the sign that there's no way it's going to work, and so you can get what you want.

There are times when I believe in many other ways where we ask the Lord for guidance, it is appropriate for us to ask him to confirm things in this way. You can ask the Lord for a sign. He wants you to discover His will. But you don't just manipulate the things, you ask Him in accordance with your study of scripture, in accordance with your own prayer life, in accordance with the advice of godly leaders, in the "coincidences" that come in your life, when your internal aspirations and your external opportunities come together.

I've heard people come up with all kinds of strange ideas about God's guidance. I've heard some of them say, "I believe that God is calling me to do this, this, and this, and the other," but they have absolutely no aptitude for it. If God is calling you to do something, He will have given you the aptitude for it. The internal desires, and the external circumstances will fit. The Word of God will undergird it. The Spirit of God will assure you of it. The advice of reliable believers will affirm it, and then, as all these things come together, ask Him for a sign, ask Him for something that only you and He will know about. He will direct your path!

Now he is going to take on the enemies of the Lord. So, he sends out word, rounds up the people, and amazingly they come. There must have been something compelling about the difference in this man, Gideon, that made them come. Thirty-two thousand men showed up.

There's only one problem, when he looked at the Midianites and their allies he discovered that there were so many of them. They had so many camels that they used in their military activities, that it says, "they couldn't count how many camels they had" — enormous numbers of people. So whilst he had a good crowd there, they were hopelessly outnumbered, and to his horror, the Lord says to Gideon, "How many men have you got?" Thirty-two thousand. "Far too many!"

What do you mean "far too many?" "If you go with an army of 32,000, they might get the idea that they're a pretty good army, and they could think, if you win, they did it! There's no way that they're going to run away with that idea because they've been self-sufficient long enough, they've got to get back to realizing that the battle is the Lord's!" "Get rid of most of them!"

"I don't want to get rid of most of them." "All right, I'll tell you what to do then." "Get them all on parade!" Thirty-two thousand men on parade! Major General Gideon gives the announcement the like of which you've never heard in a military parade before! "All right men, I want all those of you who are frightened to take one pace forward, right turn, quick march, get out of here!"

Twenty-two thousand men left! Poor old Gideon, “Lord, look what you’ve done! You’ve got rid of two-thirds of my group.” “Yes, I’ve noticed that, and you’ve still got far too many!” “Got far too many?” “Yes! This is what to do! Give them a break. Tell them to go down to the river and get a drink — 10,000 of them.”

So, they all go dashing down to the river to drink. The Lord says, “Watch them!” They rush down there, and 9,700 of them take a dive head first into the river, stick their heads under the water, and drink, and drink, and drink! Three hundred of them are soldiers who know that this could be an ambush! So, they kneel down by the water’s edge and they keep their swords handy, and they dip their hands in the water and keep their eyes open.

Then the Lord says, “Send that 9,700 home, and give me the 300! Because I can do more with 300 men who trust me and who will be alert and who will be willing to be soldiers. I could do far more with 300 than I can through 32,000 divided by fear and self-sufficiency.

Three hundred men are all that’s left. The Lord now says to Gideon, *“This is what I want you to do.” “I want you to equip them all with an earthenware jar. I want you to give them all a torch. I want you to round up all the trumpets you can find around here and give them each a sword. Have you got it?”* “Earthenware jar, torch, trumpet, and sword.” “I want you to break up your 300 men into three companies of 100 each. In the dead of night, at the beginning of the middle watch of the night, the most eerie time — the time for a military manoeuvre — I want you to surround the camp of the Midianites, one hundred over here, one hundred there, and one hundred here.”

“This is what I want you to do, Gideon; I want you to give them the signal, and at the signal, having lit their torches and put them inside the jars, I want them to take a brick and break the jars. There’ll be a tremendous crash all around the camp in the middle of the night, blow the trumpets, there’ll be a flare of light all around the place, and shout at the top of your voice, ‘For the Lord and for Gideon!’”

Not much of military strategy, but in actual fact what it did, it struck terror in the hearts of the people. They turned on themselves, and the Lord gave them a mighty victory, for the battle is the Lord’s!

Lessons learned from Gideon’s life:

1. The problem the people faced was not a political, military or economic problem, it was a spiritual problem
2. Don’t allow circumstances to change what you believe about God.
3. Sometimes we need to tear down what is wrong and build up what is right.
4. Victory is not dependant on status or numbers
5. Victory is won by men & women of faith -fear and faith are incompatible.
6. It is OK to ask for a sign or a confirmation of God’s leading, but be careful how you do it!
7. Victory is won by people of spiritual calibre, stamia, and discipline, not by the self-indulgent and proud.

Prayer:

Footnote:

a) After this resounding victory the people wanted to set up a hereditary monarchy. But he refused.

As a judge Gideon’s administration enabled Israel to experience 40 years of peace. Chapter 8:28

b) As a reward for his service, although he did not covet the throne, it appears he coveted the gold captured in their victory. Chapter 8:24. Which became an object of worship 8:27 It became a snare to Gideon and his house.