

A Faithful God for a Faithless People: A Study of Judges
Session 3: "Gideon" (Based on Judges 6-8)
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Summary of the lesson from Father Jonathan:

The story of Gideon is one of the most well-known stories in the book of Judges, and is often a favorite story used to teach children and students about humility, faith, and courage. But the truth is that Gideon is a very flawed man and a rather poor role model who seems to bring as much harm as good to the people of Israel. Gideon begins well but ends badly. In this session, we look closer at the story of Gideon by asking the question: who is truly sovereign over God's people? Is it the Lord? Is it a Canaanite deity? Or is it Gideon? And from Gideon's story we learn important lessons about the relationship between idolatry and power and about the nature of sin as both pride and sloth.

We often tell the story of Gideon as the story of a hero who starts off timid and afraid but becomes mighty and courageous when he trusts in God. The book of Hebrews lists Gideon as one of the models of faith!

But his story is more complicated – Gideon has good qualities, but he doesn't come off as a hero by the end of the story. But the story does communicate some deep truths about human faithfulness and the faithfulness of God.

GIDEON'S STORY AS A FIVE ACT PLAY

ACT 1: ISRAEL IN CRISIS

In chapter six, Israel is in a unique crisis, much more than the cycles of earlier in the book of Judges. The description of their oppression is more graphic. Midianites and Amalekites were robbing their harvest and forcing them to flee into caves.

They also first receive a message from a prophet to tell them the cause of their distress:

Judges 6:8-10

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel ... I delivered you from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. And I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites ... But you have not obeyed my voice.'

Act 1 ends with this prophetic indictment of Israel and their faithlessness toward God.

The question at the heart of the story is raised – "Who is truly sovereign in Israel?" Yahweh or Baal or someone else altogether?

ACT 2: GOD CALLS GIDEON

Unique in the book of Judges is this story of God personally appearing to Gideon and calling him to service.

There are parallels to God's call to Moses and the call to Gideon.

- Both are called to deliver God's people
- Both express doubt about their adequacy for the task.

But there are important differences, also.

#1: Gideon seems to doubt that God will be with him and he doubts God's character entirely.

Judges 6:13

If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us ...'

Understandable question? But we were just told that God had sent a prophet to explain precisely why they were in distress.

It was not because the Lord had abandoned them, but rather they had abandoned Him. Strangely, Gideon seems to be unaware of this.

#2: Gideon also is not entirely truthful in claiming inadequacy. He claims to be unworthy because he is from one of the poorest clans in his tribe. But we learn later that his father is a leading figure in the clan and the household in which Gideon lives has more than 10 servants (very affluent.)

#3: Gideon test God. Three times he asks for proof and assurance (test of sacrifice and twice the fleece.)

Gideon seems to be avoiding what God is asking him to do and is displaying fear because of a lack of trust in God.

But Gideon finally obeys God's request and goes into service.

ACT 3: GOD GIVES VICTORY TO GIDEON

Gideon tests God and God tests Gideon by having him break down a statue of Baal.

Gideon gathers an army. The Midianites have 135,000 men, but God has Gideon reduce the size of his 32,000 man army. Two more tests are given. Those who felt fear were sent home. Also a strange test about how they drank water. Gideon is left with 300 men.

It is clear that Yahweh is about to demonstrate his power. We still see Gideon cower in fear, however. To assure him, God gives him a sign by allowing Gideon to go into the Midianite camp at night to hear a soldier telling of a dream he had predicting their defeat.

It is ironic that Gideon finds courage by trusting what he hears from a Midianite soldier.

The battle is an incredible scene with Gideon's men putting torches under jars and smashing them and giving a battle cry in the middle of the night which creates confusion. His army is victorious!

It seems to be another story in the cycle of deliverance that we have seen in Judges. But something is not quite right:

Judges 7:18

When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the trumpets also on every side of all the camp and shout, 'For the Lord and for Gideon.'

God is performing the military miracle. But Gideon is taking part of the credit.

ACT 4: GIDEON SEEKS REVENGE

After the battle, Gideon pursues the kings of Midian and asks other tribes to help him. Notice God has told him to do none of this. God now goes silent and remains silent for the rest of Gideon's story.

Gideon seems to have become arrogant and vengeful. The men of the Israelite towns of Succoth and Penuel ask for proof when he requests aid. They refuse. He is merciless in taking out vengeance on them, even though proof is the same thing that Gideon asked of God earlier.

We also learn his reason for pursuing the Midianite kings. They killed his brothers who he says were sons of kings.

ACT 5: GIDEON'S TRAGIC LEGACY

The people ask Gideon to be king. But his refusal seems to be contradicted by his actions. He is already acting like a king – accumulating wives and demanding tribute from the people.

He creates a golden ephod (priestly garment) that is treated as an idol and worshipped.

The story ends with Gideon acting much more like Moses brother Aaron (when he creates a golden calf for the people and tells them it is their god.)

Gideon began by tearing down an idol to Baal but now is erecting an idol in its place.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS STORY?

#1: The power of the temptation toward idolatry.

John Calvin

"The human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual factory of idols."

Human beings are prone to creating idols and moving toward idolatry of one form or another.

Gideon is just one generation since God had delivered Israel in magnificent fashion. Already shrines had been set up to pagan deities (Baal and Asherah). When Gideon dies, the people worship Baal again and make Baal-Berith their covenant god.

Idolatry was present in the middle of this story of victory as well. The people begin to treat Gideon as the real sovereign.

Idolatry seems to be wrapped up in the question of power.

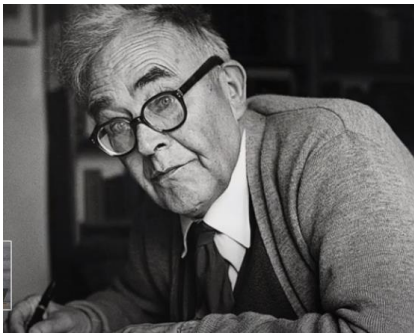
"Who do you trust in a moment of crisis?"

"Where do you look for strength?"

These are the questions that reveal where we actually set our faith, hope, and trust.

#2: The nature of human sin

Carl Barth once summarized human sin by saying that it tends to take two forms: either pride or sloth. Both of these stem from the same problem - the rejection of God.



Gideon illustrates both of these very well. At the end of the story he is led astray by pride. He begins to take credit for Israel's success and he starts to act self-sufficient and act like a king.

Earlier in the story, his timidity seems to be driven by sloth, not so much by humility. Gideon just doesn't trust God and tries to evade his calling.

Both of these stem from a rejection of God.

We all tend toward these sins. Self-sufficient pride or evasive sloth. Both come from a lack of faith.

Yet, we continue to see God remain faithful. When his people rebel, he sends a prophet. When Gideon evades God, God gives assurances.

God could have allowed Israel to continue in their pride and sloth and self-destructive behavior, but he doesn't.

- He intervenes.
- He shows up in the story.
- He delivers them from their enemies.
- He delivers them from themselves.

The story of Gideon ends in tragedy, but thankfully that is not the end of the story.

For the next lesson, please read Judges 10:6-12:7.