

## Cloud of Witnesses - Gideon

Judges 6-7, Hebrews 11:32-34

One of the common themes for people in the Bible is how long they have to wait. Abraham wasn't called by God until he was 70, and didn't receive his promised son, Isaac, until he was 100. Moses was a prince of Egypt for 40 years, and then a shepherd in the wilderness for another 40 before being called by God at the burning bush. Noah doesn't build the ark until he's quite old, and the flood doesn't come until he's 700.

The other common thread of all of these people is that they aren't who we'd think of to do the tasks they are set up to do. Noah wasn't a skilled shipbuilder that we know of, though as a common bumper sticker says, "Professionals built the Titanic. Amateurs built the ark." If we were picking someone to be the father of a great nation, we'd pick someone who was young and fertile, not Abraham and Sarah, an old man and his wife who are both past child bearing years. If you wanted to pick someone to face down a king, you'd pick another king, not a stammering shepherd like Moses. Yet they are who God chose. They are who God used. By using them, God showed that the only way things could have succeeded were because it was really God in control.

That brings us to Gideon, who is a prime example of this. But first, some context. We heard last week about how the Israelites entered the Promised Land under Joshua, but failed to follow God's command to eliminate the people already living there, people who were worshipped fake gods with detestable practices. During the time of the judges, we see the price they paid for failing to follow God's command. The idols are within easy reach for the people to be tempted by, and the other peoples are right there to oppress the Israelites.

The people went through cycles of sin, oppression, repentance and redemption.

When we first meet Gideon, he's in hiding. He's threshing wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites, the people who have been stealing Israel's crops for the last seven years like a plague of locusts. When an angel appears to him and calls him a mighty man of valor, Gideon knows the angel must have come to the wrong person. He wonders how God can be with him given all that's happened. He wonders how he can be the one that God will use to save his people, because he's the least in his family, his clan is the least in his tribe, and he's not from one of the big tribes like Judah. He's like Steve Rogers before he becomes Captain America. If you needed a great military leader, he wouldn't be on the top of the list. He probably wouldn't even be on the list at all!

Even as he starts going on missions from God, he seems to not be the best choice. On his first mission, he tears down the pagan altars in his town, one of which was even built by his father, but he does so at night so no one knows he did it. When the townspeople wake up and see what happened, they demand his head, because he wasn't as sneaky as he thought. He's still in hiding, though, and his father refuses to give him up. In fact, he gets a new nickname, Jerubbaal, which means "Let Baal contend [against him]". If the fake god can't defend himself against Gideon, maybe he isn't that much of a god.

And then we get into his faith. For a man listed in the heroes of the faith chapter of Hebrews 11, he tests God a lot. When the angel first appears to him, he prepares a meal for it and only believes when fire springs up and

consumes it. When he is about to embark on his mission to rout the Midianite army, he asks God for a sign not once but twice. The first time, he lays a fleece on the ground and says the he'll believe God if the fleece is wet but the ground is dry. After that happens, he asks God to do the reverse: keep the fleece dry while the ground is wet. Only after God gives him signs does he trust enough to go on the mission God gave him.

Then we see God at work in weird ways. Gideon is able to raise an army of 32000 men to lead into battle. It sounds like a lot, but they were still vastly outnumbered by a Midianite army that was as numerous as sand on the seashore. But then God has him shrink it. First, Gideon says that anyone who is afraid can leave, and 22000 of them take that offer. But 10000 is still too much. So God has Gideon send his men down to the river to drink. Those who lap the water like a dog, 300 of them, get to stay. The rest get sent home. With only 1% of the original army, Gideon is sent.

God uses Gideon and his 300 men to defeat a Midianite army. Gideon does it not through superior numbers or superior firepower. They use trumpets and break clay pots to create confusion and surprise, and the army is defeated, and Israel is rescued. Gideon is able to do what he does because God was with him. Because of the strange way it happened, there was no doubt that God gave the victory.

Gideon frees the people of Israel. His faith allowed God to do many miraculous things through him. Yet it wasn't enough. Israel was in peace during the 40 years of Gideon's life after he defeated the Midianites, but after he dies, the people go right back to where they were, chasing after false gods. The cycle would continue.

And so, in regard to their enemies, Israel always seemed to live between the now and the not yet. That was their story. In the book of Judges we read that when their enemies oppressed them because of their "spiritual adultery," they were forced to turn to God who sent the enemies in the first place, and look to the future for their hope. When God sent his judge, his redeemer who fought and defeated their enemies, the future hope became present reality for Israel. God revealed that he was still their God and all eyes could see it. The victory was visible and overwhelming and done in such a way that it came not through military might or superior strategy or terrific tactics. The victories came in such a way that only God could have given it. Yes, God still loved, and would always love, his Israel. And yet, the glorious victories never seemed to last too long. Israel's enemies always seemed to loom just over the horizon.

One other interesting note is where Gideon defeats the Midianites. He does so in the north of Israel, in the part that not only was the land given to Manassah, but to the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali. Those were the two northernmost tribes of Israel, as far away from Jerusalem as you could get and still be in the nation of Israel. That, of course placed them in a very precarious position. First of all, it meant that they were the ones who were most exposed to other nations, most easily able to be caught up in the culture of those other nations. Secondly, it also meant that they were the ones most likely to be caught when invaders came. And when the Assyrians came and invaded the northern kingdom for the first time in 738 B.C., those in Zebulun and Naphtali were the first to be caught, taken into exile. It was the first place where the light of God's people was replaced by darkness.

Yet, Jesus begins his ministry in that place, where the darkness first fell. As Isaiah

prophesied, “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” The Light of the World would come and shine in the land that kept falling under darkness. Jesus would come to redeem not just Israel but the whole world. He came to redeem the world not from an invading army but from sin, death, and the power of the devil. And unlike Gideon or Sampson or any of the other judges, the redemption earned by Jesus was done once and for all.

We have in our church some men who have taken on the name of Gideon as they share God’s Word with people throughout the world. The Gideons International website describes why they chose this man as follows: “Gideon was a man who was willing to do exactly what God wanted him to do, regardless of his own judgment as to the plans or results. Humility, faith, and obedience were his great elements of character. This is the standard that The Gideons International is trying to establish in all its members, each man to be ready to do God’s will at any time, at any place, and in any way that the Holy Spirit leads.”

That’s what we can learn from Gideon, as well. God doesn’t choose the strongest or the best, but the weakest and the worst. God’s plans don’t always make sense, even to those he uses. God will do things in such a way that there is no other explanation except for God did it. That’s something to look forward to. That’s a God to hope in. That’s a God to trust, no matter what.

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