

Week 8 - Gideon's Battles - Judges 6:33-7:25

Scripture Reading: Exodus 17:1-7

Introduction

This morning we come to the part of the Gideon account that most of us have known and loved from childhood

And that's because it's the most uplifting and exciting part - it's the climax of the account that, in the end, allows us to show Gideon as a true hero for God

It also teaches us about "laying a fleece before the Lord" to determine God's will in a matter before taking action, which allows us to be wise and not hasty

And so we naturally teach this part of the account in our children's classes along with the implication that it's good to be like Gideon - at least, that's the lesson I got from the story when I was a kid

But once again, we are going to discover that the true hero of this account is God and, in many ways, Gideon himself should serve as a cautionary example for us

Because while he did, in the end, do as God commanded and was able to be used by God in delivering Israel from the oppression of the Midianites, he is not exactly someone to be imitated in most aspects of his demonstrated character

Last week, when we considered the rise of Gideon, we were introduced to a man who was thoroughly beaten down and defeated

Gideon was threshing a small amount of wheat in a wine press to hide his actions when a messenger from God appeared to him and addressed him as a "mighty man of valor"

And we saw the first glimpse of a character trait that we will see again in our passage today

Gideon was a man filled with doubt, and in need of assurance, so he asked the messenger of God to be patient with him as he prepared a meal to test the veracity of the messenger's words

And we saw the messenger give Gideon the sign he sought, which, rather than assuring him, caused him to fear for his life resulting in God needing to speak to him and reassure him once again that all was well

Then we saw God come to Gideon in the night and give him the task of tearing down the altars of Baal and Asherah that stood on his father's land and replacing them with an altar to God

And then Gideon was to sacrifice his father's ox on that same altar using the wood from the Asherah pole for fuel

Of course, Gideon's actions angered the townspeople, and they sought to kill Gideon for his indiscretion, but he prevailed and was given the name Jerubbaal which means "Let Baal contend with him"

That brings us to our passage today as we pick up the account in **Judges 6:33**, where we read that the invaders have returned to set up camp and devour the crops of Israel

This sets the scene for the confrontation that we, as the readers, anticipated from the start

After all, this is the book of Judges, so we naturally expect Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites and not just tear down a couple of local shrines

But you'll notice that I titled my sermon this morning: Gideon's Battles - plural

Because Gideon actually fought two different battles - one against the Midianites on behalf of Israel, but he also fought one with himself

And I would dare to say that we have tended to place our emphasis on the wrong battle when we teach this account to our children

Let's dig into the text and see if you agree with that assessment

I. Prelude to battle

Our passage begins with the arrival of the Midianites along with the Amalekites and the people of the East as they came and set up camp in the Jordan River valley just as they had for the previous seven years

They are primed for another season of marauding and munching and expecting no resistance because, by this time, they have thoroughly cowed the Israelites, who have taken to hiding in caves in the hills

However, this year things will be different as we read in verse 34 [**Judges 6:34**] that great little word that indicates a contrast: "But"

But the Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon

Literally, this means that the Holy Spirit possessed Gideon, and when Gideon sounded the trumpet to call his clan to war, they turned out to follow him

Gideon then sent out messengers to the members of his tribe of Manasseh and to his countrymen in Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, who responded by coming also

And we can't help but wonder why

After all, Gideon has shown himself to be a hesitant, fearful man, and his own description of himself and his standing among his countrymen don't exactly show him to be the kind of leader people would flock to

And, as we will see here in a moment concerning the matter of the fleece, Gideon hasn't changed internally or personally - he's the same guy he always was

So the only explanation that makes sense is that the same Spirit that has taken possession of Gideon also compels the recipients of Gideon's summons to respond to his call

In other words, God gets the credit again because it's God who is orchestrating the events that are unfolding

While we might reasonably expect the next act in the account to be the Israelites marching off to battle behind their leader, Gideon, we have also come to anticipate that things don't always progress as they should

So we aren't overly surprised when Gideon has second thoughts and, once again, seeks assurance from God

And in verses 36-40, we have the well-known account of Gideon laying a fleece before the Lord

The account is so well known that I'm not going to spend a great deal of time on the details of it, opting instead to look at the motives behind it and what we need to consider from Gideon's example

I'll just say that I found the first test to be a hasty test that Gideon hadn't thought through

Having the fleece, which would be akin to a giant sponge, remain soaked with dew while the ground was dried by the sun seems only natural to me - maybe that dawned on Gideon, and that's why he reversed the test, I don't know

But here's what we really need to understand:

Gideon's test had nothing to do with discovering or determining God's will

Write that down because it's probably the opposite of what you have been led to understand

God had made his will clear to Gideon - otherwise, why would Gideon have summoned the troops?

Think about it, there stood Gideon, empowered by the Holy Spirit and confirmed by the response of his countrymen as their divinely chosen leader - but he still hesitated

Gideon's problem was that he didn't believe God when God said he would be with him and give him the victory

Gideon didn't have a problem with the unknown; he had a problem with unbelief

And he used every means he could think of to find an excuse to get out of the mission he knew God had called him to

That's the reality

But I want to stop short of condemning Gideon for it - possibly because I have empathy with Gideon

"God said it, I believe it, that settles it" makes for a pithy Christian saying to put on a refrigerator magnet or bumper sticker, but I haven't always found it to be quite that simple

That's the way things should be, but our reality is often a far different thing because of disbelief, doubt, or even denial

Remember, it's okay to seek clarification, as we saw last week when Gideon sought to make sure he was hearing from God - in fact, it's only wisdom to do so, and God's Word tells us to test the spirits [1 John 4:1]

And the way we "test the spirits," that is to say, check what we believe God is telling us, is by comparing it to what we find in God's Word because we know that God will never lead us to do anything contrary to what we see in the Bible

And that's a good practice

However, it's another thing when, having clearly heard from God, we devise a test or a series of tests that might allow us to wiggle out of what we know God wants us to do

Gideon knew what God had told him - he indicated as much in verse 37 when he challenged God with his first fleece test [Judges 6:35] as we note that he was asking God, "Will you do as you have said?" and not "What did you say?"

Then in verse 39 [Judges 6:39], he admits to "testing" the Lord much as the Children of Israel had done in Exodus 17, making it clear that Gideon is trying to manipulate God

Remarkably, God allows himself to be manipulated, and he goes along with Gideon's tests

And we are once again confronted by God's mercy and grace as he demonstrates how he is more concerned with preserving his people than they are with preserving themselves

And how he is more interested in guiding Gideon toward obedience than he is in correcting Gideon's every flaw

The transition between chapters 6 and 7 is a bit awkward as the episode of the fleece is left hanging, and with it, the question of whether Gideon would accept the second outcome as definitive

And in 7:1, we suddenly discover that Gideon has finally accepted God's call to divine leadership as he and the military force that has answered his summons are said to be encamped beside the spring at Harod in preparation for battle

Of course, we should rightly anticipate that the next thing we read would be that Israel moved against the Midianite forces but, once again, this is the book of Judges, and we discover that two events are going to delay the action

II. Two delays on the way to battle

The first of the delays is the reduction of Israel's troop numbers

Given what we have already been told about the Midianites, we would expect to read, "The Midianite forces are too many for me to give them into your hand. Go round up some more guys and weapons."

But what we read in verse 2 [Judges 7:2] is just the opposite

The Lord said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'

In **2Corinthians 12:9**, we read the Lord's words to Paul when he prayed to have his thorn in the flesh removed:

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness

And now we see God deliberately making Gideon's already outmatched army even weaker

If you've spent time in the company of men setting out to tackle some task, you can easily envision the chest-thumping and fist-bumping, and bravado that would have been present in the Israelite encampment

And God knew that, even though they were still vastly outnumbered, should they prevail while going at the Midianites in full strength, they would be tempted to credit themselves for the victory God would give them

So God instructed Gideon to announce to his 32,000 troops that if any of them were afraid, they should return home hastily

And 22,000 of them were smart enough to be afraid, leaving 10,000 men behind for the battle

But God looked over the 10,000 and declared that Gideon's army was still too big so he devised the drinking test to separate the forces into two groups

The way this scene is describes is awkward to say the least with all of the lapping and kneeling that seems to apply to both sets of men

But the gist of it is that some of the men drank by putting their faces down to the stream to draw in water from the surface and some picked up water in a cupped hand to drink

I'm sure you, like me, have heard sermons and read study guides that make a big deal out of what the different drinking styles revealed about the two groups

You will likely hear that the first winnowing had to do with courage while the drinking test had to do with alertness

That may well be true - but it's just as likely that God's method of selecting the men through whom he would achieve Midian's defeat was purely arbitrary - we aren't told and any conclusion is based on speculation

The point of the whole exercise is to reduce Gideon's troop size down to where it was small enough and weak enough for God to use it

You can just imagine Gideon's dismay at seeing his 32,000 man force whittled down to 300 but he obeyed God's voice and sent the remaining 9,700 back to their tents and prepared to meet the Midianites with his 300 men

With the excess troops eliminated, God seems eager to press the battle as he tells Gideon [**Judges 7:9**]

"Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand."

And we would normally expect the narrative to continue with Gideon and his troops marching off to battle

But in verse 10 we encounter the second delay

The first delay was initiated by God to eliminate any cause for smug self-satisfaction on the part of Israel but this one is different

It's also initiated by God but because God anticipated Gideon's reluctance stemming from his lingering lack of trust

God was ready to roll but understood that Gideon likely wouldn't be so he made allowance once more telling Gideon that if he were afraid, he could sneak down to the Midianite camp and get assurance

Again, it's hard to find fault with Gideon here

Consider that he had little experience with God working on Israel's behalf and, whereas attacking a superior force with 32,000 men had to seem like a bold move, reducing one's fighting force down to 300 men had to seem positively insane

And in verse 12 [**Judges 7:12**] the author inserts another description of what Gideon and his men were up against to make clear just how lopsided the odds were in Midian's favor

But God continued to be patient with Gideon and provided for his timidity and lack of trust

So we see Gideon and his servant, a man named Purah, crept down to the edge of the Midianite camp where they providentially overheard a conversation between two sentries

From the advance notice we come to understand that God is orchestrating these events and has planted the dream in the one sentry's mind specifically for the purpose of having him relate it to his comrade and bolster Gideon's courage

The imagery of the dream itself is crazy, as many dreams are, and the dreamer relates that he saw a barley cake, a small griddle cake like a pancake, roll into their camp and knock a tent over

And God even provided an interpreter of the dream as the sentry's comrade determined that the pancake was the sword of Gideon and that God had given the Midianite camp into Gideon's hand

This dream and its interpretation leave us with a lot of questions

How did the interpreter link the pancake with Gideon?

Better still, how did he even know Gideon's name?

And why did he come to the interpretation that he did?

None of the answers seem all that obvious from the dream itself until you read the rest of the account

So clearly we must understand that God planted the dream and its interpretation and made it so Gideon and Purah would arrive at just the right moment so that they could overhear it just to fulfill his promise of reassurance

Once more, in spite of his reluctance, Gideon, once reassured, does what he should as he immediately worshipped God and rallied his men for battle

III. The battle is engaged

What we see beginning in verse 16 [**Judges 7:16**] is a transformed Gideon - he seems to be a different man altogether as he gives detailed instructions to his troops

And it becomes clear to us as readers that this battle will not be won by conventional means because the battle plan appears to be totally absurd from a human perspective - much like Joshua's taking of Jericho

Gideon divides his 300 men into three companies and passed out trumpets and jars with torches inside to each man

Then he tells his men to surround the Midianite camp and to follow his lead so that when he blows his trumpet they will all do likewise and after the trumpet blast they are to break the jars and call out in unison

The battle plan goes off without a hitch and the result is that the Midianite camp is thrown into complete disarray

In verse 21 [**Judges 7:21**], we see the Midianites described as running, crying out, and fleeing

Confusion and panic would be the natural response of being sound asleep in a battlefield camp only to be awakened so abruptly in the middle of the night

I suspect the sight of 300 torches surrounding you and the sound of 300 jars breaking, 300 men shouting in unison, and 300 trumpets blowing would be rather disorienting - it was psychological subterfuge and it worked just as planned

The Midianite army was so disoriented that they turned their swords on one another and those who survived ran off into the night

But the key to the battle is found in verse 22 and we don't want to overlook it [**Judges 7:22**]

*When they blew the 300 trumpets, **the Lord** set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army*

The confusion and the victory were God's doing

God devised the plan, God picked the troops, God set up the reassurance, and God caused the confusion in the camp

The glory for what has taken place in the battle thus far all belongs to God because frankly, the plan should not have worked as it did and the Israelite forces should have been slaughtered

The enemy has been devastated by their own hand and a remnant is on the run toward the Jordan River in hope of crossing it to safety - so to this point, all is well

But, sadly, things are about to take a subtle but significant turn

Gideon has thus far kept to God's plan and he and his 300 men have achieved God's intended goal

And it's only natural that Gideon's 300 would pursue the enemy to finish them off - in fact, it reminds us of Barak's forces chasing down Sisera's army

But in the heat of the battle, Gideon appears to have forgotten why God had reduced his troops down to 300

Instead of calling on God for guidance, Gideon has become confident and he relies on his own initiative and human strength as he call out the remainder of his force to chase down the Midianite remnant

It appears that Gideon was able to marshal once more the 22,000 who had returned home in the first reduction and the 9,700 who were winnowed out by God with the drinking test and together they completed the mopping up exercise

The author even includes the detail of how two of the Midianite commanders were captured and beheaded and their heads presented as trophies to Gideon

Rallying the troops seems perfectly normal when we read about it and the account relates a thorough victory for Israel

But what we will soon discover as we continue next week is that the voice of the Lord was stilled when Gideon stopped listening to it and we will not hear from the Lord again during the Gideon narrative

It seems that, just as will happen with Saul in a future time, the Spirit of the Lord that had clothed Gideon and given him power over Israel's enemies and his own nature, has slipped from his shoulders unnoticed

And from this point on we will witness the decline of Gideon

Conclusion

In this account, we see God once again orchestrating events as he is revealed as the true commander of Israel's army

We also see God's seemingly infinite patience on display as he allows himself to be manipulated by Gideon and providing all the support and reassurance Gideon needs to act in faith

So, once more, we have to acknowledge that God is the hero of the account and take careful note of how who God is and how God works

It's truly good news for each of us that God is longsuffering, patient, and gentle with us because we all have a little Gideon in us

We should be grateful that God is more interested in urging us to obedience and conformance with his will than he is in harshly correcting every flaw that we have

But what can we learn from the example of Gideon in this portion of his narrative?

It would be easy to be hard on Gideon - he gives anyone who would want to criticize him ample material to work with Gideon is revealed to be a mixed bag of doubt and duty as he repeatedly wavers but always obeys

But what are we to make of the situation with the fleece?

Gideon knew he was treading on dangerous ground in testing God and he even pleaded for God not to be angry

We need to understand is that the Bible isn't instructing us to follow Gideon's lead in this practice and God's patience with Gideon shouldn't be seen as a tacit condoning of the practice

In fact, **Deuteronomy 6:16**, which Jesus quoted during his temptation by Satan, commands us to not put God to the test

Again, it's only wise to make certain that what you are hearing is indeed from God - and you do that by making certain that what you are hearing matched and doesn't contradict what you find in God's Word

But that's not what Gideon did in this account

Gideon *knew* what God wanted but he didn't believe God would hold up his end so he sought reassurance

Gideon wanted proof that God would, and could, do what he had said he would do and it's never right to demand God do anything to prove himself to us as Gideon does here

Still, I don't want to come down hard on Gideon for his actions - in large part because God doesn't come down on Gideon at all

Instead, God patiently honored each of Gideon's tests and provided him the assurance he needed

So we see God's nurturing nature on display along with his forbearance

But we need to be very careful because what Gideon did was still wrong and definitely not a pattern for us to follow because imitating Gideon would result in us putting God to the test

By his own admission, Gideon knew without a doubt what God had said

And we too often know without a doubt what God wants from us because we see it clearly expressed in the Bible

And when we know, we should act; we should exercise faith

Remember, faith is trust put into action

But what do we do when our trust is wobbly and weak?

Thankfully, God doesn't require perfect, strong trust that is devoid of any doubt, unease, or any hint of concern

But we do have to trust him enough to act on our trust

And, eventually, that's what Gideon did - his tests calmed his disbelief enough to act and God used him in a great way in spite of his weakness

Gideon didn't have much experience of God working to draw on but we have the completed Word of God

Whereas we can read accounts like that of Gideon to see how God worked in the lives of others

And we have the permanently indwelling Holy Spirit to guide and assure us

Still, our trust or our belief may be weak as was the father's in the account from Mark 9 of the child who was possessed

He asked Jesus to help them if he could and Jesus scolded him for the doubt he expressed in saying "If you can"

And the man cried out in **Mark 9:23**: *"I believe; help my unbelief!"*

What that means is that he had trust enough to ask for Jesus' help which turned his trust in Jesus into faith

But his trust was feeble, so he also asked Jesus to strengthen his trust so his faith would become stronger

And I have to suspect that that father's faith was quite strong after Jesus healed his son

Thankfully, God is still patient with the timidity of his people just as he was with Gideon and that unnamed father and he will work with us to strengthen us in our doubts and fears

But the best thing we can do is to test the spirits by searching the Scriptures and then, when we know what God wants from us, to get busy and simply trust and obey him

I think that would make a great hymn for us to end with so we'll finish up by singing it together in just a moment

First, next week we will finish our look at Gideon so read through Judges 8 in preparation

As you do you will encounter Gideon's sad end as you discover that, in spite of being used mightily by God, he didn't exactly finish well

Let's pray