

The Gideon Narrative

God is infinitely great. That means we dare not attempt to reduce His will or His purposes to something simple. If we did that, it would not be the God of the Bible that we know and love and worship, but an idol. This means there's unavoidable complexity in any attempt to understand life, the world, our salvation, or even Scripture itself. There's nothing simple about sin. There's nothing simple about the Incarnation. There's nothing simple about the cross. There's nothing simple about *anything*. God certainly doesn't expect us to deduce from Scripture all that He's doing, for we are finite and limited physical beings. But He does expect us to be faithful to what is in Scripture. I will use the Gideon narrative to illustrate my claim.

The Book of Judges is hard to read because of all the gruesomeness that it narrates. Yet, it's there in the Bible for all to read. But what does it mean? It's clearly more than just interesting history. Why is Judges in the Bible? Is there an essential spiritual lesson? More than one lesson? If so, what might it or they be? And how does this portion of Scripture apply to us today? There are no easy answers. Let's look at Gideon. He's a complicated character, just like most of us.

* * *

We first encounter Gideon hiding from the Midianites. He's a coward. He has no trust in the God of Israel—if he even knows who God is. He's weak morally, physically and spiritually. Fearful and faithless, he's a perfect *nebbish*. [That's a good Yiddish word—look it up.] A supernatural being, the "angel of the Lord" (perhaps the pre-incarnate Son), confronts Gideon. When Joshua met this unique Person, he fell face down to the ground. Gideon impudently talks back to him. Worse, Gideon betrays total absence of any moral or spiritual understanding of things. He has no clue why the Midianites are oppressing him or his people. To Gideon, the Mosaic covenant was irrelevant and there was nothing wrong with idolatry. The angel of the Lord graciously, patiently, lovingly refused to reply to Gideon's folly. God has work for Gideon to do.

Why Gideon? Evidently there is no one else! This wretch is all that God has to use. How gracious God is! He really could have just annihilated the idolatrous people of Israel in justice, but Satan then would have celebrated. He also could have defeated the Midianites Himself, but in God's cosmic plan for His creation, He purposes to use His human creatures, imperfect as they are. So although Israel doesn't deserve it, God will deliver them from their oppressors. So God calls and commissions Gideon.

But first, Gideon needs a sign from the Lord to prove that it really is He who is commanding him and that the effort therefore will succeed. Gideon is testing the Lord! God's word should be enough for this man, or for any man. Yet, the Lord grants Gideon the sign. The offering Gideon made is miraculously consumed by fire. And Gideon, not stupid, realizes the significance of this. The Lord then tests Gideon. Tear down the idols in your family's household. Be holy! And Gideon obeyed, albeit at night so he wouldn't be identified as the one defying Baal. But he was found out anyway, and his father had to defend Gideon. So Gideon passed the test . . . sort of. He's still fearful.

Then, impelled by the Spirit (the text says the Spirit only "clothed" him), Gideon raised up an army. But he's still the same weak *nebbish*. In the power of the Spirit he's obeying, but his character is the same. So, more tests. Baal is the god who, pagans generally assumed, sent the dew. Gideon tests to see if the Lord is really in control, rather than Baal. He can't exercise faith based on the testimony of his ancestors who were led thru the Red Sea out of Egypt. He can't exercise faith based on his own offering consumed by fire. He needs more confirmation. And in marvelous grace, God grants it. Twice! To repeat the test would be totally ridiculous, but that's exactly what Gideon demands. Do we get it yet? This whole story is ridiculous. Tragic is a better term.

So, indeed, God, not Baal, is in control of the dew. God is in control of all nature and He is in control of all history. God is sovereign. Can God deliver Israel from the Midianites? Of course He can, and He will. But just to make sure he'd have a chance at success, Gideon raises up an army of 30,000. Trust in God? Absent. Let's understand something else: Gideon's soldiers are all Baal-worshippers (see 6:30).

For God to be glorified in the coming deliverance, Gideon must be weak. He'll have to go against Midian with one percent of what he thought was needed, 300 men. That's all. Now Gideon must be terrified. So, in absolutely

insuperable grace, the Lord grants Gideon one more confirmation: a dream. Gideon has to hear victory not from God but from the enemy to be convinced. So, a loaf of cheap barley bread topples a military tent; agrarian Israel, weak and desperately needing food, overthrows the huge, powerful Midian army. Now Gideon is convinced. He worships the Lord. And he forms a strategy, a good one if also a bizarre one. We should assume that in the same way that the Lord supplied the dream, He supplied this strategy. But wait. Gideon wants his army to shout, “For the Lord and for Gideon.” This quickly, he goes from fear to proud self-confidence! Gideon wants to take credit *along with God* for this victory. Suddenly, Gideon is no longer fearful but arrogant. The narrative changes sharply at this point. From here on, Gideon is obnoxious. He refuses to give God the glory that He deserves. Yet, God gives the people the deliverance that they need.

So, success. A rollicking good defeat. An almost *comical* defeat. [By the way: If you suppose that it was Gideon’s strategy that produced this rout, the joke is on you.] But nothing is funny about any of this. If the people of Israel had been faithful, as they should have been, there would never have been that Midianite oppression. In this Book of Judges, God judges His own people. According to the Mosaic Covenant, Israel would be at peace and prospering in the Land if they were obedient to the Law. But Israel ignored the Law; worse, they seem to have had contempt for the Law and for their God. And yet God responded with love for His people and delivered them, repeatedly. Does this make sense? Is this justice? The Gideon narrative, in fact the whole book of Judges, indeed, the entire O.T., screams at us: God is glorious. He loves His beloved people; He is merciful, He is good, He is patient, and He is in control. He is in control of *everything*.

Are the people grateful to Gideon? No, the Ephraimites criticized him sharply. Other people declined to support him. So although the Lord showed grace to Gideon, he responds by showing cruel vindictiveness. It’s as if Gideon were saying, “Don’t you cross me because I’m a powerful man, and if you do I’ll hurt you bad.” Gideon doesn’t know and doesn’t learn—and can’t learn—anything of moral or spiritual value.

After this victory, the people want to make Gideon king. The people are no better than Gideon. They foolishly suppose that it was Gideon who delivered them from the Midianites. And Gideon says, “No, the Lord will rule over you.” Sounds terrific, huh? Real piety? No, Gideon names one of his sons Abimelech, which means, “My father is king.” Gideon’s pious words are rank hypocrisy. This is actually an unintended prophetic utterance. (And the book’s author recognized it as that.) With these few words, the author of Judges reveals the story’s deep lesson: Wait!

Gideon then asked for gold, spoils of war. Instead of depositing the gold at the Tabernacle, as he should have done, he reprised what Aaron and Israel did in Exodus 32. He made an idol for his people to worship. Nevertheless, God gave the people another 40 years of peace. This was the last peace that Israel would have in this era prior to David.

So. Was Gideon transformed from coward to courageous? Hardly. He’s no hero, although he does get a mention in Hebrews 11. Then, is he evil? No, not that either, because he served the Lord as he was called to do. He took many wives, though, as Solomon had done in crass disobedience to the Law. Then too, Gideon did other good things for his people, although nothing good that he did lasted, because the people lapsed into Baal worship as soon as Gideon died. Gideon’s leadership resulted in the very wickedness he was called to deal with.

The author is narrating not just failure writ huge, but both faith and faithlessness in the presence of overwhelming tragedy. In the presence of deep moral and spiritual pathology, God’s goodness can’t be missed. Good and evil are mixed together in a great big jumble. God is the hero of this story. So, I’d conclude that the Book of Judges and its Gideon story is prescriptive in this one sense: Love and obey God in the here-and-now if you know what’s good for you.

* * *

How should we understand this story? Scripture was authored ultimately by God, the Creator of all language and communication. That means, there’s nothing simple about Scripture. So we should look into it for deeper meaning than just its historical context. So let’s try to deduce some lessons from the Gideon narrative. Here are a few:

1. All the tumult and failure and apostasy and confusion narrated in Judges must mean that there has to be something better to come. In fact, all Scripture seems to teach this very truth: Something better is yet to come. God doesn’t have to spell out for us exactly what it is, He simply says, “Look around you at all the violence and hatred and lies and confusion and failure. I’m a good God. And I’m in control. The best is yet to come. So wait for it. But in the meantime, be faithful to

My Word.” For Israel in the era of the Judges, what was to come was David. For Israel in the Monarchy and Exile, what was to come was Jesus. For us today, what is to come is the Messianic Kingdom. We’re to live now in view of the future.

2. Gideon could certainly represent all Israel. Gideon embodies the Nation of Israel oppressed by its surrounding gentile nations. Israel’s history mirrors Gideon’s indifference to the Covenant and the Law. The Nation fulfills God’s purpose by bearing testimony of their great God (by their very existence), although they do it diffidently and indifferent to God’s glory. Israel forfeited the peace and glory they could have had thru faithfulness to the Mosaic Covenant. So Israel’s entire history all thru the O.T. was a reprise of the Gideon narrative. Even today, the Nation of Israel is as if it’s still in the Book of Judges. Although deeply flawed, God loves His people Israel, and He will one future day redeem, restore and transform them into a nation that glorifies Him. The promised redemption will be so supernal, even Gentiles will be invited to participate.

3. But more, I submit that Gideon represents or embodies all humanity, tyrannized by Satan and his horde of minions and demons. Life as we know it is a tragedy. The world has always been exactly as it is today: a godless mess. Sin and rebellion necessarily make it that. There’s chaos and tumult everywhere. Including in the Church. So we’re all deeply and seriously flawed. Yet God calls us to know Him and love Him and serve Him. Gideon is one of us; we should see ourselves in this story as another Gideon. In spite of failure, in spite of admixed evil and good, in spite of fears and pride and selfishness, and in spite of spiritual ignorance and indifference, God loves us and seeks our love in return. And one day in the future, God will transform us—certain of us, that is—into the kind of person who serves Him and glorifies Him and enjoys His presence forever. Judges is a cameo, a miniature, a microcosm of all human history. In God’s real-life, cosmic conflict with evil, for which this physical creation exists, man serves God as His test-subjects for good or for evil. A tragic figure, beset by sin and failure, he nevertheless is able, however weakly, to respond to God with love and obedience and so participate in God’s ultimate triumph.

4. Gideon was a pathetic specimen of a man, overflowing with moral and spiritual pathology. He was deeply flawed. Yet, amazingly . . . God used him! We’re all Gideons in a sense—or at least, we can be. In our evangelical churches, even, there’s over-abundant compromise, idolatry, disobedience and unfaithfulness if not subconscious contempt for God. Our very church meetings are little more than a ritualistic religious exercise. Evidence of the empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit is absent. Failure is as much with us today as it was in the Land at the time of Gideon. But it doesn’t have to be this way! However weak we may be, however flawed we may be, God can use us for His great purposes. We don’t need to test the Lord and we don’t need confirmations, we just need to obey the wise and sovereign One who has revealed how lovely and trustworthy He is and what He has called and commissioned us to do.

5. I further submit that Gideon anticipates Israel’s Messiah and King, Jesus. A better, more faithful servant than Gideon has to come, someone who actually defeats evil and who delivers Israel from all her oppressors and from idolatry, forever. Jesus glorifies God and leads His people into a glorious relationship with God. He’s a flawless, godly, humble, wise and loving Person. He is everything that Gideon should have been but wasn’t. Jesus is our Redeemer and our High Priest whose intercessory work at God’s right hand gets us thru our present flawed life, our life of sin and failure, so that we make it to glory. The Father transcendently loves the eternal Son and wants us also to love and exalt Him.

6. God reveals Himself to be supernally good. In the presence of a ghastly failed nation, a failed humanity, God shows Himself to be long-suffering, merciful, and powerful to deliver. He is faithful although the people He loves and covenanted with refuse to be faithful. God is lovely in the extreme. Justice? It’ll come in His time and in His way.

* * *

God’s purposes are many and complex. In this study, we’ve touched on several of them. In this study we’ve also seen that human creatures are here to serve God in fulfilling His purposes. In spite of all his flaws, to his credit, Gideon didn’t say, “Not me. Let someone else do it.” This is what almost all evangelicals say every day to the Lord. We’re actually *worse* than Gideon! Let’s be clear on this one essential truth: The key to life and blessing is loving Jesus. To love Him is to serve Him and to obey what He’s revealed in the Scriptures we’re to do in this life.

We dwell in an ugly, hate-filled, chaotic world. If we love the Lord and we’re faithful to Him, He will see to it that we bring deliverance to those elect whom He loves. Let’s therefore commit to being faithful to His call.