



## GIDEON: CALLED OUT OF WEAKNESS

Catalog No. 741  
Judges 6:1-24  
Seventh Message  
John Hanneman  
August 16, 1992

When we think of heroes, we think of strong, capable people. Tennyson's King Arthur, for example, is a prototype hero. Recall the memorable words as he grasps hold of his sword, Excalibur:

"There likewise I beheld Excalibur  
Before him at his crowning borne, the sword  
That rose from out the bosom of the lake,  
And Arthur row'd across and took it — rich  
With jewels, elfin Urim, on the hilt,  
Bewildering heart and eye — the blade so bright  
That men are blinded by it..."

Others, as the song goes, always think of their heroes as cowboys. We tend to identify as heroes those who are strong and rugged — people who are sufficient for just about any task. It seems odd to us, therefore, that God, by contrast, does not have the same criteria as ours when it comes to identifying heroes. His ways run quite contrary to how the world thinks. Today, in our study of the life of Gideon, from the Old Testament book of Judges, we will see just how true this is.

Gideon is the heart and soul, the pivotal figure of Judges. This man pictures for us a God of salvation and redemption. Surprisingly, when we first meet him he is a picture of humanity in weakness and fear. But this account of Gideon, which we will be looking at over the next four weeks, is a story of growing faith and trust in a living God.

A brief review of the historical context of this book will be helpful. Following Israel's 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, Joshua at last took the nation into the land of Canaan. There he defeated 31 kings in battle, and Israel took possession of the land. Following the death of Joshua, however, Judges says that there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in his own eyes. The nation fell into a pattern, a cycle of behavior that is repeated six times in the book. The sons of Israel would do evil in the sight of the Lord, forsaking him and serving the Baals. Then the anger of the Lord would burn against Israel. He would sell them into the hands of their enemies, and Israel would become enslaved. Following years of oppression, the nation would cry out to the Lord. God would be moved to compassion, and he would raise up a judge to deliver them from the hands of their enemies. Israel would then enter into a period of rest and peace all the days of the judge. But, when the judge died, the nation would revert to their former ways and act more corruptly than their fathers. Their evil would intensify, their idolatry become more blatant, and the cycle would repeat itself.

In our previous studies we have encountered several of the judges whom God raised up to deliver the nation. In chapter 3 we met Othniel, a faithful warrior who captured the area of Kirath-sepher, and married Caleb's daughter, Achsah. Then we encountered Ehud, a left-handed man, who delivered Israel, and in the process thrust his dagger in Eglon's obese belly. We have met Shamgar, an obscure peasant, who struck down 600 Philistines with an oxgoad. Then in chapter 4 we read the marvelous narrative of Deborah, the prophetess and judge. It was she who called Barak into service and supported

him in leading the nation to victory against Sisera and Jabin.

Today we come to chapter 6, and once more we see the cycle repeating itself. Judges 6:1-6:

**Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and the LORD gave them into the hands of Midian seven years. And the power of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of Midian the sons of Israel made for themselves the dens which were in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For it was when Israel had sown, that the Midianites would come up with the Amalekites and the sons of the east and go against them. So they would camp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel as well as no sheep, ox or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, they would come in like locusts for number, both they and their camels were innumerable; and they came into the land to devastate it. So Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried to the LORD. (6:1-6, NASB)**

Again we observe the formula for failure: "the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord"; and the results of their apostasy: "the Lord gave them into the hands of Midian" (6:1). Midian was the son of Abraham by his wife Keturah (Gen. 25:1-6). The Midianites, a desert people who lived east of the Jordan, were the first warriors to use camels. This gave them mobile, long-range, swift-attack capability, enabling them to gain military superiority over their enemies. So the Midianites ruled over Israel for seven years. And the method they used was to "destroy the produce of the earth." Every year they swept into Israel, robbed all of their produce, and returned to their homes. The effect was devastating, as we see in verse 6: "Israel was brought very low." This word means "to hang down." They were left dejected, with heads hanging low. Israel was in a hopeless situation. They were defeated, discouraged and helpless. They began hiding out in caves and dens in the mountains.

This pictures for us what happens when we regard as right in our own eyes that which is evil in the eyes of the Lord. All the resources, all the fruit, is stripped from our lives. We hide out in caves, living in darkness and isolation. We are defeated and beaten down. Our lives become a waste land. Even if we are not blatantly sinning, this is what happens when we do not trust in God. The land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey, is a picture of our life in Christ, the Spirit-filled life. But when we do not walk with the Lord in this land, our enemies, sin and the flesh, come in and enslave us. They overpower us, robbing us of all our vitality. What should be a life of joy, love and peace becomes instead a life of despair, hopelessness, hatred and conflict.

So what did Israel do? Verse 6 tells us: "The sons of Israel cried to the Lord" — and the Lord raised up a judge.

**Now it came about when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD on account of Midian, that the LORD sent a prophet to the sons of Israel, and he said to them, "Thus says the**

LORD, the God of Israel, 'It was I who brought you up from Egypt, and brought you out from the house of slavery. And I delivered you from the hands of the Egyptians and from the hands of all your oppressors, and dispossessed them 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 in whose land you live. But you have not obeyed Me."'

Then the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites. And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O valiant warrior." Then Gideon said to him, "O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian." And the LORD looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?" And he said to Him, "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manassah, and I am the youngest in my father's house." But the LORD said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man."

So Gideon said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Thy sight, then show me a sign that it is Thou who speakest with me. Please do not depart from here, until I come back to Thee, and bring out my offering and lay it before Thee." And He said, "I will remain until you return." Then Gideon went in and prepared a kid and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour; he put the meat in a basket and the broth in a pot, and brought them out to him under the oak, and presented them. And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so. Then the angel of the LORD put out the end of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. Then the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. When Gideon saw that He was the angel of the LORD, he said, "Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face." And the LORD said to him, "Peace to you, do not fear; you shall not die." Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and named it The LORD is Peace. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. (6:7-24)

This text identifies a two-pronged revelation to Israel. The prophet of the Lord speaks corporately, and the angel of the Lord speaks individually. The prophet of the Lord calls the nation to repentance; the angel of the Lord calls Gideon to be an instrument of salvation. This two-pronged approach calls to mind John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus. Repentance, a turning or returning to God, must come before salvation. And so the prophet comes and tells Israel that they have not listened to the voice of God. He talks about God's faithfulness in the past, and the faithlessness of Israel in response to the covenant God.

And then the Lord comes and talks to Gideon. We understand this angel to be the Lord himself, the pre-incarnate Christ. Obviously, this is what Gideon concluded, as we see at the end of our text. The Lord has come to call Gideon into service, to make him an instrument of salvation, to mold him into an example of faith.

He finds Gideon beating out wheat in a wine press. Gide-

on is hiding, trying to save a little food. Even though his name means "smiter," from the verb "to hew down, to cut in two," he is hiding, fearing for his life. Normally the work of threshing was carried out with a threshing-sledge drawn by oxen, and it was done in an exposed place so that the wind could carry away the chaff. But Gideon is trying to stay out of sight of the marauding bands.

Let's listen in on the conversation between the Lord and Gideon.

God: "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior."

("Who? Me?" Gideon must have wondered.)

Gideon: "Why has the Lord abandoned us?"

(This is what Gideon is thinking — that God had abandoned Israel.)

But God does not even answer his question. Instead he says: "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel."

God doesn't argue with Gideon about his theology of expectations. He simply gives him an assignment. He is not calling Gideon to go in his own strength, but in the strength of the Lord — and he is promising to be with him. God's answer to discouragement is never positive thinking, but rather the promise of his presence.

But Gideon responds, in effect, "How can I do that?"

God: "I will be with you"

Gideon: "Show me a sign."

God: "All right, if that is what you want."

So Gideon goes into his house and prepares a very costly offering, especially so considering his circumstances. The angel ignites the offering, right on the rock, calling to mind the story of Elijah in 1 Kings 18. It is then that Gideon recognizes he has been talking with the Lord himself. He has seen God face to face, and he is fearful of dying. But the Lord assures him, saying, "Peace to you." Then Gideon builds an altar to "Yahweh Shalom."

So here we have the opening encounter in this story of Gideon from the book of Judges.

I will make five observations from the narrative. First, *it is obvious that in Gideon, God chose a weak, fearful man*. Gideon is characterized by fear and inadequacy; he has little or no self-confidence. God comes to him as he is beating out wheat in a wine press. He is hiding because he is afraid. Gideon has three problems. First, he has a problem with discouragement. Together with all of Israel he is disillusioned with God. He is blaming God for his circumstances.

Second, Gideon has a problem with inadequacy. When God gives him his assignment to deliver Israel, he responds in amazement, "How can I deliver Israel? My family is the least of all Manassah, and I am the youngest, the baby of the family." Third, he has a problem with faith. This is why he asks God for a sign. At last, however, he goes into his house and prepares an offering. We do have to give him credit because his offering is very expensive, considering the depressed times in Israel, but it is fair to say that Gideon is a physical and spiritual wimp. He is like the man who went to a psychiatrist because he felt he had an inferiority complex. After a while, the doctor told him that he had some good news and some bad news for him. "The good news is that you don't have a complex," said the doctor, "the bad news is that you are inferior!" Gideon is inferior all right, yet God chose him.

I can relate to Gideon. I recall many difficulties and struggles in my life, but at the root of several of those things lay a deep sense of inadequacy. Like Gideon, I was the youngest in

my home. My family was not wealthy or socially prominent, so I could take no confidence in that. Between 7th and 8th grade we moved, and I remember going to my first class in my new school. It was a drafting class. I had never had a drafting class before, but obviously everyone else had. When the teacher gave the first assignment, everyone knew what to do — everyone except me, that is. I was overwhelmed to the point of tears with my feelings of inadequacy.

For many years I felt that everyone but I knew what they were doing. That wasn't true, of course, but that was how I felt. Now I can see that everything I did or tried to do was motivated wholly or partly to build self-confidence. I was trying to build walls to protect my feelings of inadequacy, to build callouses so as to become a hard person because, of course, feelings of inadequacy make one very sensitive, and that is just not approved of in our society. I became an 'A' student and had a tuition scholarship all through school. I became a very good golfer, and I put great stock in that. I worked at being popular in college, to the point that I became my fraternity social chairman. But none of these things could take away my feelings of inadequacy. They were merely callouses to hide an underlying softness.

I can relate to Gideon. I can feel his deep ache of inadequacy, the pain of unworthiness. It is an ache that really isn't based on reality — it is based on feelings, not facts — but it is real nevertheless.

This is probably the most difficult problem facing young people today. We have many social problems — AIDS, rape, abuse, sexual promiscuity, economic upheaval — but I would say that these deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, which are at epidemic proportions, often lie at the root of other social problems. Manifestations of anger, depression, jealousy and strife often arise out of these feelings.

In his book, *Men and Women, Enjoying the Differences*, Larry Crabb points out that this is man's, as opposed to woman's, biggest need. Here is what he wrote:

Every man, somewhere deep within his soul, struggles to feel adequate. It is true that some men, including forceful Christian leaders whose strength is more intimidating and distancing than attractive, would report no such struggle. Typically, they have covered over their worry with such a thick blanket of success (business, ministry, financial, athletic, and social) that the only evidence of internal inadequacy is a strength that seems more displayed than deep. Exhibited strength always has in mind one's own welfare and, as a result, is experienced by others as less than caring. Most men, however, in moments of painful honesty, would admit to some uncertainty about their own effectiveness in achieving something of real value.

Here is my second observation: *God meets Gideon in his weakness*. Thankfully, the Bible never leaves us in despair. We despair because we encounter difficult circumstances and we think that God is not working. But the reason we are not left in despair is because there is a God and he is working. There is a clue in the text that Gideon is thinking about God while he is in that winepress. The first thing that came out of his mouth reveals what he is thinking: "Why did God leave us in such a mess? How could God do this to me and to our people? I wouldn't be hiding if God was truly thinking about me." Don't you find it amazing that God meets Gideon in his place of weakness? It is he who approaches Gideon. God speaks first. He initiates.

This is where God begins too with us. Like Gideon, our theology might be wrong. We might feel that God is not working, but this is where God meets us — where we are, not where we would like to be. He doesn't start by requiring us to

meet him where he is. He comes to earth, down to our level, and he accepts us in our fallenness. No, we don't meet God in our strength, through our accomplishments, on our terms. We meet him in humility and prayer, in our place of deepest need. Jesus taught the disciples to pray: "give us each day our daily bread." He went on to say: "ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you." We meet God in our need, in our want, in our fear, in our inadequacy. And if we do not sense our need, we will never see him.

The very reason we feel inadequate, of course, the reason we come up short, is so that we can meet God. All too often we seek to build self-confidence by taking classes, by trying to achieve a goal, etc. Now these are not bad things, but there is something much better: it is meeting God and building God-confidence. The reason we are such an emotionally impoverished society is not because we lack talent, degrees, capabilities and awards; it is because we don't meet God in our weakness, in our need. We would do well to remember Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Here is my third observation: *God had a vision to make Gideon different*. When God came to him, he addressed him as a valiant warrior. The word "warrior" comes from the verb "to be mighty, have strength, be great." It is clear that Gideon was far from being a mighty warrior at this point in his life, but it was not who Gideon was at the time, it was who he was going to become that was important to God.

Others look at us and they see our flaws and failings. We look at ourselves and we see our fears and insecurities. But God looks at us and sees our possibilities. Deep down all of us want to be something different from what we are. We earnestly seek to achieve, to accomplish, to create. Unfortunately, however, we bypass God in our attempts to change. We seek to do this in our own effort, by our own strength, motivated for our own glory, in order to rid ourselves of our feelings of inadequacy. But we often crash and burn, don't we? We lose heart and we hide in a winepress. But then God finds us and, beginning in weakness, he starts to mold us and shape us into the image and character of his Son. We begin a journey — a journey of faith.

This is what God did with the heroes of faith in the Bible, isn't it? Abraham is an excellent example. God made a promise to him, and chapter after chapter of Genesis tell the story of this man's journey as he pursued God's promise by faith. Jacob, a deceiver, a manipulator, tried to do everything on his own — at least he thought so. Then one night, after wrestling with God, he finally came to that place of faith where God wanted him. Judah, the scoundrel, the rascal, at last was willing, for the sake of his father, to be a substitute for his brother Benjamin. Moses, the man who was commissioned by God to lead the nation of Israel out of captivity, demurred, saying he couldn't speak. But by faith he set out to do what God asked him to do.

Then we have the examples of the New Testament heroes of faith. Peter started out pretty confident in his own abilities, but he crashed and almost burned on the night when he betrayed his Lord. It was only then, through his weakness, that God was able to lead him on his journey of faith. Saul, the zealous persecutor of Christians, began his journey as an enemy of the cross. But then God met him on the Damascus Road. Blinded, struck down and weak, at last Saul was ready for his journey of faith in the risen Christ.

And this is how each one of us came to faith in Christ, isn't it? God had a vision to make us into something different, so he called us, and we began our journey of faith.

Here is my fourth observation: *God promises Gideon that he will be with him.* “I will be with you,” a phrase repeated twice in the text, is the promise that God makes to him. Gideon imagines that the God of his fathers has deserted them but, on the contrary, God appears and reasserts his covenant promise to Gideon: “I will not forsake you or leave you, I will be with you.”

This striking phrase, “I will be with you,” occurs 104 times in the OT. It is a dominant promise throughout the Bible, given by a covenant God to a covenant people. This word of promise and assurance is repeated to Isaac and Jacob no less than 14 times. When God told Moses to deliver the sons of Israel from Egypt, Moses replied, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” God said to him, “Certainly I will be with you.” Then God told Moses his name: “I AM. I AM with you, and everything that you are not, I AM.” When Joshua was about to enter the land, God said to him, “Be strong and courageous. Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go” (Josh 1:9).

This promise of God, this reminder, forms book-ends for the gospel of Matthew. In chapter 1, Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel, which translated means, ‘God with us’” (1:23). And then the last word spoken by Jesus after his resurrection is a repetition of this promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (28:20).

Two and a half months ago my mother with diagnosed with a brain tumor. She had surgery, but it was discovered that the cancer was extensive and very aggressive. She has not recovered and she will never go home. On the day of her surgery I remember feeling her presence in our house. I could see her sitting in a chair by the front door. I saw some of her clothes hanging in the garage and I envisioned her wearing them. As I stood in the kitchen I had a strong feeling of her presence there. Everywhere I went in the house, she was there. Last week, I flew home again to see her. She can no longer speak or see. She is very close to going home to be with the Lord. My overriding emotion is that she will no longer be present with me. I will not be able to call her on the phone. There will be no more trips to Nebraska. I find myself thinking about what her presence meant to me: steak every Saturday night, pot roast on Sunday, rhubarb pie, playing canasta, getting grocery coupons and clippings of Nebraska football games in the mail. There are many reminders, but her presence will shortly be no more.

But God is transcendent. For three years the disciples walked with Jesus. They heard him teach in Galilee; they were on the road with him in Samaria; they entered Jerusalem with him to shouts of “Hosanna!” But they were left in despair as he went to the cross. His presence was no more. Their dreams were shattered, so they locked themselves in a room, fearful and trembling. Then his presence ignited them. At Pentecost, his Spirit empowered them, and then they understood what he meant when he said, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

We are not alone. As weak and inadequate as we might feel, God is with us. He is calling ordinary people, men and women like you and me, and when he calls us into service or into battle, what matters is who God is, not who we are. He does not call us without providing us with the same resources he promised to Gideon.

One man has written,

One of the great truths of Scripture is that when God looks at us, He does not see us for what we are, but for what we can become, as he works in our lives. He is in the business of taking weak, insignificant people, and transforming them by his presence in their lives. He begins with us where we are, as we are. He knows our weaknesses, failures, discouragements, doubts, and inadequacies, but he does not say, “You get rid of those, and then I can use you.” Rather, he comes to us in our weakness with the promise of his presence that will transform our inadequacy into his strength.

Hudson Taylor said, “All of God’s great men have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on his being with them; they counted on his faithfulness.”

Here is my final observation: *Peace is the result of Gideon’s encounter with God.* Gideon prepared an offering, and the Lord ignited it with fire. Immediately Gideon recognized that he had seen the angel of the Lord face to face, and he feared for his life. But the Lord said to him, “Peace to you, do not fear; you shall not die.” So Gideon built an altar, a place to worship, a place where he invited God into his life, and he named it “Yahweh Shalom” — the Lord is peace. This reminds us of the Lord’s words, spoken in the Upper Room: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful” (John 14:27). After the resurrection, the disciples were downcast, hiding in fearful seclusion, but then the Lord entered the room and said to them, “Peace be with you.”

Gideon was a troubled, confused, disenchanted young man, but then he encountered the living God and he built an altar and named it Yahweh Shalom — the Lord is peace. Why do you think he named it that? Certainly he was concerned about dying after seeing the angel of the Lord — although his fears subsided following God’s reassurance. But I think it was more than that. Gideon had admitted his weakness and yet he was accepted. He had expressed his confusion and had not been hammered. He had expressed his lack of faith and yet had been given an assignment. There is a great deal of freedom that comes with being honest with yourself and with God. Gideon admitted his weakness, and then he was free and at peace. That was why he built an altar and named it Yahweh Shalom.

So we have had our first encounter with Gideon — a weak, failing, insignificant, inadequate and fearful man. But God called him out of his weakness to a life of faith in him. I am reminded of the apostle Paul’s wonderful words in 2 Corinthians, “And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God” (2 Cor. 3:4-5) On his own, Gideon was a weak faltering, doubting man. But he had first-hand contact with the Lord Jesus and he was never the same again. May God grant us the grace to find God in our weakness; to allow him to accept us where we are; to know that he is at work to mold us and shape us beyond what we could ever imagine; to be confident in his presence with us; and to experience the God of peace. Amen.

© 1992 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino