

Backyard Beginnings

Beyond the Fleece – Part I

Judges 6:1-35

Introduction

In May of 1855, an eighteen year old approached the deacons of his church in Boston and applied for membership. Some have suggested that it is hard to join our church, but it is nothing compared to a hundred or more years ago. After being interviewed by the deacons, the young man was turned down. The deacons did not believe he had a firm enough understanding of the person of Christ; of the work of Christ in his own life. He was told to receive instruction for a year. If he would submit to the year of instruction, this uneducated young man would have another chance for an interview and perhaps, be allowed to join.

According to the records, this young man barely made it the second time around. In fact, the man who led him to the Lord had this to say about D. L. Moody,

I can truly say that I have seen few persons whose minds were spiritually darker than his when he came into my Sunday school class. I think the committee of the church had seldom met an applicant for membership who seemed less likely to become a Christian of clear and decided views of gospel truth, and even more unlikely to fill any space of public or extended usefulness.

It is thrilling to me to see that God often chooses to use an underdog. Today, as we pick up our study of the book of Judges in Judges chapter 6, we will read a similar story.

As I have read and reflected on the story of Gideon; as I have mulled and meditated on the three chapters that include the longest story of any judge in the book of Judges, it has become very apparent to me that I am reading the biography of a very simple, ordinary Christian.

Gideon was a very ordinary man who would be used in an extraordinary way, yet, like D. L. Moody, had few qualifications and limited understanding. In fact, Gideon, of all the people we will study in this book, seemed to be the slowest to get the picture. In a way, it seemed as if he was almost thick-headed.

You may remember the story of the fleece. We will study the entire story and all of its meaning in our next session together. But, as I was reading, it was clear to me that Gideon represents you and I – simple, ordinary believers. I sometimes find it very difficult to grasp even the simplest truth of the Bible.

Please turn to Judges chapter 6.

The Condition of Israel

We will begin by taking a look at Israel's condition at the time this story of Gideon unfolds. You may remember the cycle of sin that Israel repeatedly fell into. At this time, Deborah had died and Israel had once again, fallen back into sin. A new generation had risen that knew nothing of the works of God through His prophetess Deborah. So they fall into sin and God allows them to be oppressed by the Midianites. Now, Israel has cried out for deliverance.

We will not take the time to discuss the first part of this chapter, but let me summarize it for you. The

Midianites were different from any of the other enemies of Israel in that, instead of inhabiting the land, they would wait until harvest time and then attack. They would take all of the produce; all of the fruit, load it on their camels, and go back over the Jordan River to wait until the next year. Just like income tax, every year, for seven years, the Midianites came. So the Israelites were faced with famine; with nothing to eat.

Let us pick the story up in Judges 6:8-10.

. . . 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. 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.'"

This is the first time God responds this way. Prior to this time, every time the Israelites called out for deliverance, God raised up a judge. On this one occasion, when they cried out for deliverance, God sent a prophet first. The prophet preached a message to them. The conclusion of this sermon is,

. . . you have not obeyed Me.

I think God wants the Israelites to understand why they are in this predicament. So He sends a prophet to preach to them the reason they have landed in slavery to the Midianites. God, rather than allowing them to escape their circumstances, wants them to first interpret their circumstances.

Ladies and gentlemen, He does the same for you and for me. Sometimes we want relief and God wants us to gain insight as to why we are in the predicament we are in.

The Call of Gideon

The Israelites evidently, listened to the prophet because God now sets into motion the wheels of deliverance; that is, the call of Gideon. I have divided, for our study this morning, the call of Gideon, or basically, this chapter of Judges, into three scenes.

1. Scene one is an angelic visitation.

This begins in Judges 6:11.

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.

Let me set this scene for you. The usual old time eastern threshing floor was an exposed place with a wooden floor that was right beside the field where the crop was gathered. The threshing was done by an oxen pulling a large stone slab or wheel, with the farmer standing on top of the slab as it drug across the wheat. Finally, the kernels would be separated from the chaff. This was done out in the open.

These verses tell us that Gideon was threshing where? In the wine press. The wine press had a small recess and was hidden. Gideon had taken his gathered stalks of wheat and was hiding in there. He was beating the stalks with a stick, not a sledge, separating the kernels from the chaff.

Now at this moment, an angel appears – the angel of the Lord. He appears to this middle aged man, by the name of Gideon, in Judges 6:12,

The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior."

Gideon probably looked around a little bit and said, "Are you talking to me?"

Here is a man who is hiding from the Midianites, trying to gather just enough food to feed his family, and the angel of the Lord says, "Gideon,"

. . . "O valiant warrior."

Before we read further, understand that Gideon does not know who this angel is. We do, however. This is *the* angel of the Lord; this is a theophany – a physical manifestation of God. I think we could make an argument that this is probably the pre-incarnate form of Jesus Christ because throughout the Old Testament, Jesus Christ, referred to as the angel of the Lord, appeared and gave direction to men who did not have what you and I have through Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God. We are also told, in Judges 6:14, "The Lord looked at him and said . . .", which lets us know that this is not just some angel, but a theophany.

Gideon responds to this angel of the Lord, in Judges 6:13, with a barrage of questions.

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.'

In other words, "Where is God? Where are all God's miracles? He has abandoned us."

He is sitting right there!

Two phenomenal truths

Now from this conversation, we can learn two phenomenal truths about the way God treats His children.

- **First, God never answers the questions that Gideon just posed in Judges 6:13.**

No answers were given to the question, "Why? Why is life so hard? Why has God seemingly abandoned us?"

God, in effect, just kind of ignores this. Look at Judges 6:14 to find out what He does.

The Lord [not an angel] looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?"

What is "this"? The next phrase tells us, "Have I not sent you?"

Summarized, God simply says to Gideon, "I'm not going to answer all these "why" questions, but I do want you to know that I'm with you."

This, by the way, is the promise that we can take through life. It does not answer all of the details; it does not take care of all of the problems, but it is a promise that wherever we are, as a Gideon, God has said, "I am with you."

This, by the way, is enough.

- **Secondly, God refers to Gideon, not as he is, but as he will become.**

Look at again at Judges 6:12b.

... *"O valiant warrior."*

This is what God had in mind for Gideon.

God did this throughout the Old Testament.

He said to Abram, who was childless, "Abram, I'm going to change your name to Abraham."

"Abraham" means "the father of a multitude".

Abraham, an old gentleman, probably laughed to himself.

God did this through Christ to Peter. His name was Simon, and God changed it to "Petra," or "little rock," meaning, "You are firm; you are unshakable; you are strong, Peter."

Peter certainly sounded that way when he told Jesus, "Lord, I will follow You to the death."

Then, less than twenty-four hours later, a little servant girl says, "Hey, you're one of those disciples, aren't you?"

He says, "Me? No way."

Was that a rock?!

Guess what God calls you and I? Are you ready for this? He calls us saints!

Have you ever thought about the fact that God calls you a saint? Perhaps you did not act like one on your way to church this morning.

Turn to the person next to you and introduce yourself by what you are. Say to them, filling in your own name, "Hello, my name is Saint Stephen."

Go ahead and introduce yourself to the person beside you. It feels kind of weird, doesn't it?!

This feels especially strange when you know you are not really living up to the name of "saint". However, God deals with us like He dealt with Gideon – He sees us for what He is making us, not necessarily for what we are at the moment.

God knows Gideon is no Richard the Lion-hearted, but He says, "Gideon,"

... *"O valiant warrior."*

This is, in effect, a promise. God is saying, "I'm going to make you, Gideon, into a valiant warrior, if you will submit to Me."

Now, in Judges 6:17-19, Gideon asks for a sign and he prepares a meal. Let us pick up this part of the story at Judges 6:20.

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.

Now remember, the Israelites are in famine conditions. Gideon has prepared a goat and soup and bread. He is going to honor this guest, although he still does not know who he is. And the guest says, "Just put it on this rock where I can look at it."

Notice Judges 6:21.

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.

Wow! It is at this point that Gideon realizes the identity of his visitor. He is filled with fear. In fact, the next verse, Judges 6:22, will tell us, he is afraid he is going to die. Why? Because, he says,

... "I have seen . . . the Lord . . ."

Throughout the Old Testament, Abraham, Joshua, and many others have seen the visible manifestation of God, probably through the pre-incarnate Christ, and they have not died. So perhaps this is something else. Let me suggest that Gideon was a very humble man and his response was much like Isaiah's after seeing the glory of God, as he said,

... "Woe is me, for I am ruined! . . ." (Isaiah 6:5)

Let me suggest as well, that a direct encounter with the holiness or the power of God leaves you and me with a sense of our unworthiness, if not our sinfulness.

We talk a lot today about self-esteem. There is a lot going on about feeling good about oneself. Yet I find people in the scriptures who come into an encounter with God's holiness are overwhelmed with their sinfulness and, like the prophet, they – or we – declare,

... nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh . . . (Romans 7:18)

I believe that true self-esteem comes from this passage. First there is a recognition of God's holiness, and because of that, there is a recognition of sinfulness in oneself. Then, taking one step further into God's graciousness, there is a recognition that He has chosen to deal with us and to give us worth and value.

Self-esteem, apart from a relationship with Jesus Christ, is impossible. It will lead to frustration. I think the balance between God's holiness and our sinfulness, with His grace in the middle, will keep us from self-flagellation and introspection and thinking how wormy we are. Yet, it will also keep us from bloating up with spiritual pride.

I believe this is exactly the point at which Gideon was, as he was introduced to his God and who He was.

Now look at what occurs in Judges 6:24a. The same will happen in our lives as well.

Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and named it The Lord is Peace. . . .

In other words, ladies and gentlemen, this encounter with the holiness of God, the recognition of his own sinfulness, and God's gracious statement, "I am with you," leads Gideon to worship. So, as the curtain closes on scene one, the setting is worship.

2. Scene two is the initiation of faith.

This scene opens in Judges 6:25. Let us pick up there because it happens during the same night that God speaks to Gideon and begins the process of making him into more of the leader that he will become.

Now on the same night the Lord said to him, "Take your father's bull and a second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal which belongs to your father, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it;"

I think the seven year old bull represents the seven years of enslavement to the Midianites. Gideon was to pull down the altar of Baal with this older bull. This altar was similar to a totem pole; it was a wooden idol to the goddess of immorality that was supposedly, Baal's cohort. Continue to Judges 6:26.

and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of this stronghold in an orderly manner, and take a second bull and offer a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down.

Gideon is to build an altar on the same spot as the one he pulled down with the older bull. He is to then, make firewood of the Asherah.

I like to refer to this event as "the Alamo of Gideon's faith". Having spent some time in Texas, and everyone who has been there knows a little of Texas history, I, and probably you as well, have heard about the Alamo.

In 1836, the Alamo was actually a little mission church. It became, however, the spot for some very interesting events in the life and history of Texas because Texas had declared itself independent from Mexico. Mexico responded by sending an army of three thousand soldiers to take care of the problem.

Inside the Alamo, or this little church, was a small group of men who were, in a way, the signers of this declaration of independence. Among them were men like Davy Crockett that we have all read about.

Colonel William Travis, at one point, drew a line with his sword in the dirt floor of the Alamo. He

turned to this small band of men who could either run or surrender or fight, and said, “All those who will fight, step across this line.”

All but one, stepped across the line. And all but one, died. However, their courage so ignited that little nation that, “Remember the Alamo,” became the battle cry as Texas won its independence.

I have a feeling that this event in Gideon’s life has the exact same kind of significance – this is his Alamo. The Lord is saying to him, “Will you follow Me? If you do, here’s the line and it is in your back yard – it is your father’s idol. I want you to tear it down. But, if you step over that line and obey Me, there is no turning back.”

So how does Gideon respond? He starts in his own back yard by obeying.

Before we go any further, there is a personal application in this, men and women. None of us can be useful to God in public service before we are useful to Him in private service.

Gideon will start with his own family. Gideon will start in his own yard before he begins doing anything with the nation.

We cannot, and this is perhaps a subtle implication in this, serve the altar of Baal; we cannot have that in our family and in our back yard, while at the same time, have the altar to the true God. We cannot limp between the two.

So the Lord says, “Gideon, if you will follow Me, take care of the idolatry in your home.”

We cannot be like the philosopher Augustine, who, as a young man, prayed, “Oh God, grant me chastity, but not yet.”

We cannot be indecisive. We must choose Baal or God. God cannot tolerate Baal. Baal may tolerate God, but it cannot be the other way around. So, in many ways, God was asking Gideon to fight the most difficult battle first.

Look at Judges 6:27. Gideon obeys, but note what Gideon is afraid of.

Then Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the Lord had spoken to him; and because he was too afraid of his father’s household and the men of the city to do it by day, he did it by night.

Two principles of faith

Let me give two principles of faith from this.

- **First, faith is not demonstrated by fearlessness.**

God did not supernaturally remove all the fears from Gideon when he said, “Yes, I’ll take that step across the line. Oh, I feel great! I can do it!”

I have been watching the winter Olympics. Every time an American steps on the scene, I sit on the edge of my seat saying, “Go get those Germans.” – or whoever. I do not know that American from Adam, but with the onslaught of television, they are all being highlighted. Have you noticed that? There are big stories about these people’s lives and they are being interviewed. In fact, these people are being interviewed up until the very moment of their competition.

Some guy is getting ready to compete in a skiing competition – with his skies already strapped on – and a reporter sticks a microphone in his face, “How do you feel?”

It is interesting that all of the people that I have watched respond with, “I feel great! I can do it!”

I thought to myself, “What would happen if a reporter caught Gideon at the moment he is about to destroy the altar of Baal; at the moment he is beginning to do this historic event? What if a reporter asked, “Gideon, how do you feel? I understand you’re God’s man for the job.”

“Well I’m kind of scared actually. In fact, tomorrow I’m going to set some fleece out, I’m not sure God called the right man.”

“Oh, well, you’re humble. Tell us what the battle strategy is, as you take on this altar of Baal. What’s your plan?”

“Well, I’m going to slip out during the night so no one can see me and I hope to finish up before anyone wakes up.”

I can hear, about that time, “Cut! I thought I was interviewing a hero, but someone sent me this chicken.”

Ladies and gentlemen, this is just like Paul said, in I Corinthians 2:3, in his ministry to that church,

I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,

- **Secondly, faith is demonstrated by obedience.**

You do not have to come to the point where you can say, “Okay, I have great faith, God. Now quick, before it goes away, use me.”

Faith is demonstrated by simple obedience, no matter what your attitude or your emotions may be. God is not calling fearless people, He is calling faithful people.

Understand, when you look at this passage, that God is asking Gideon to do a *very* difficult thing. Before I studied the life of this man, I thought facing the Midianites with three hundred men was difficult. Now, however, I do not think that was nearly as difficult as Gideon going to the backyard, where his father, who was the shrine keeper of the altar of Baal, kept the altar, and cutting it down. Gideon was going to expose the idolatry in his family; he was going to cause an indictment to fall on the nation for having followed Baal.

I do not blame Gideon for going out in the middle of the night. In fact, to understand the significance, it would be kind of like a Christian in Salt Lake City, Utah, bulldozing the Mormon tabernacle and erecting in its place, a huge cross.

Results of Gideon’s obedience

Three things now happen because of Gideon’s obedience. Let me give these results.

- **First, the entire city is ignited with anger.**

Look at Judges 6:28-30.

When the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was torn down, and the Asherah which was beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar which had been built. They said to one another, “Who did this thing?” And when they searched about and inquired, they said, “Gideon the son of Joash did this thing.” Then the men of the city said to Joash, “Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has torn down the altar of Baal . . .”

Note, ladies and gentlemen, who is speaking – is it the Midianites or the Jews? It is the Jews! The Jews are saying, “Who took down the altar of Baal? Let’s find this man and kill him.”

We can sort of feel what Gideon was up against. The entire city wanted to take his life. This gives a small indication of the depth of their apostasy.

- **The second thing to happen is that the father of Gideon is moved to courage.**

Look at Judges 6:31,

But Joash said to all who stood against him, “Will you contend for Baal, or will you deliver him [Baal]? Whoever will plead for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because someone has torn down his altar.”

It is interesting that Joash, at that moment, stopped being the shrine keeper and moved by courage, says, “Wait a second! If Baal is really a god, let him take care of my son. If he is not, then we have another problem on our hands – we’ve been following a wooden stump.”

I think Joash, at this point, was convicted and challenged, and perhaps even shamed by the courage of his son. He was a man who had allowed idolatry to invade his home. In fact, he was the keeper of the shrine where all the men of the city worshiped. Joash was shamed by his son.

Those of you who have had or now have children know what it is like to be shamed by their words. This past Friday night was our Friday night out or our family night. My wife and I took our six year old twin boys and our little four year old daughter out. We got back quite late and it was way past their bedtime. My wife and I were tired, but kids were not! We finally got through the process of brushing their teeth and putting their pajamas on. Typically, in the evenings, I read a Bible story to them and then, we pray. However, it was late and we were tired, so I said, “Okay, kids, let’s hit the bed.”

My little four year old daughter said, “Daddy, aren’t we going to have commotion?”

Her title for our devotions is really an accurate title because there is a lot of commotion going on during our devotions! I said, “No, no, it’s late. I’ll pray with you. Come on up, let’s hit the bed.”

At that moment, one of my sons looked at me and said, “Daddy, that doesn’t please the Lord.”

One preacher in the house is enough! Was I ever ashamed.

Gideon is doing what his dad should have done a long time ago. At this moment, however, his dad steps forward and defends his son. It is good to see Gideon and Joash walking arm-in-arm following God.

- **The third thing that happened as a result of Gideon’s obedience is that the reputation of Gideon is now established as a leader.**

His father, Joash, gives Gideon a nickname which will serve as a sort of battle cry. Look at Judges 6:32.

Therefore on that day he [Gideon’s father Joash] named him Jerubbaal, that is to say, “Let Baal contend against him,” because he had torn down his altar.

The nickname could be literally translated, “Baal fighter; Baal conqueror”.

Just a day or so earlier, Gideon is hiding in fear in the wine press hitting weeds with a stick. He is disillusioned and thinking, “Where’s God?” Now, because of what God has done – not because of what Gideon has done, although Gideon has been submissive – he is no longer called Gideon, but has a new name of the great “Baal fighter”!

3. Scene three is the consecration of Gideon.

Look at Judges 6:34-35.

So the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon; and he blew a trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called together to follow him. He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, and they also were called together to follow him; and he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they came up to meet them.

There is a movement going on in this nation now, to take on the Midianites. The text informs us that at this point, the Holy Spirit came upon Gideon. This could literally be translated, “So the Spirit of God clothed Himself with Gideon . . .”.

You need to understand the difference between the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament and the work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. This will help you understand many things that happen as you read the Old Testament.

Old Testament – The Holy Spirit:	New Testament – The Holy Spirit:
did not indwell all believers	indwells every believer
indwelled for a specific purpose	indwells comprehensively for ordinary life
indwelled or anointed for a limited time	indwells permanently

In the Old Testament, for example, the Holy Spirit could come upon Saul and could leave Saul; He could come upon Samson and could leave Samson. In the New Testament, according to John 14, all believers have the Holy Spirit forever.

We are told in Judges 6:34, “. . . the Spirit . . . came upon Gideon . . .”; that is, the Spirit clothed Himself with Gideon. This is a beautiful phrase. In other words, the Spirit of God treated Gideon as if he were a suit of clothes.

If there is a similarity, it is that the Spirit of God wants to use us as His vehicle to walk through life – we are the clothing and the Spirit of God does the living. The key to understanding the indwelling Spirit of God is, in a way, to understand clothing. The submission of the clothing to the wearer is all that is necessary.

When I got up this morning to get ready for church, I took a blue suit out of my closet to wear. I also pulled out a white shirt – you cannot go wrong with a white shirt and a blue suit – and the shirt did not holler, “No, not this Sunday!”

I put the shirt on. Tonight, I am going to take it off and send it to the dry cleaners, fortunately. It is not going to say, “Oh please, no hot water. I can’t take it! I’d rather be wrinkled.”

We are, in a sense, the clothing of the Spirit of God. The key to the indwelling of the Spirit in the New Testament, like this with Gideon, is that the Spirit of God lives within us and we do His bidding – as if we are His suit of clothes. If the Spirit goes this way, we do not say, “Oh no, no, no, that way.” If the Spirit of God says, “Speak,” we do not say, “No, be quiet.”

Dr. Howard Hendricks would often tell us, his students at Dallas Theological Seminary, that he would pray every morning, “God, I just want to be Your suit of clothing for You to walk through and do what You want to do today.”

Perhaps he got his prayer from this text.

Application – Three Scenes...Three Responses

Let me summarize this story of Gideon, by way of application. There are three scenes; three key events that prepared Gideon for the next phase. He responded in three ways.

1. Number one, Gideon was confronted with the presence of God and he worshiped.

2. Number two, Gideon was challenged with the idolatry of his people and he obeyed.
3. Number three, Gideon was overwhelmed by the Spirit of God and he submitted.

For all of us who are, like Gideon, just ordinary Christians, God can do something unusual – He can give us power to take Him through the daily events of life. If we will recognize His holiness and our sinfulness, that will draw us to worship. God can

work His will through us, if, when He challenges us to speak, we will speak; when He challenges us to be silent, we will be silent; when His Spirit bids us to move, we will, like the suit of clothing, say, “You just tell me which way and I’ll be glad to go.”

So God can give our story to others – a biography of ordinary believers who, like Gideon, have experienced these things and have allowed God to have His say and to work His will in us.

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