

Gideon - Saviour against overwhelming odds

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Date: 01 July 2018

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[0 : 01] If you're a visitor, you're a little bit disadvantaged because we're going to cover a lot of territory this morning. Our own people have had a chance to read this through during the week. But anyway, we'll see how you go. I want to begin this morning in Hebrews chapter 11.

We talk about Gideon. I want to ask the question, is it a portrait hung in the wrong gallery? So Hebrews 11 is known as God's portrait gallery.

Of the faithful ones. The great ones of the faith. Now the problem is that as I walk around that gallery in Hebrews chapter 11, I see and hear different names.

And I think, yep, yep, clearly they deserve to be there. Clearly they deserve to be there. But then I get to Gideon's portrait. And I find myself wondering, as I say, has this portrait been hung in the wrong place, in the wrong gallery?

Preachers and Sunday school teachers have made Gideon into a hero. A great hero who, with a tiny force, they say, of 300 crack troops, completely destroyed an army.

[1 : 13] An enemy invasion force of 135,000. So Gideon's a hero. My problem is that as I read the story of Gideon, in Judges 6, 7, and 8, the Gideon I have to engage with presents as a very different person.

To be honest, he doesn't immediately inspire me as a great person of faith. He's a very flawed human being.

And at points, I think, you'd have to say, he's a very ugly human being in terms of his character. Has somebody got it wrong and hung the portrait in their own gallery?

Well, clearly not. The problem is not that the portrait's hung in their own gallery. The problem is that we look at the portrait from their own perspective. We tend to think that when somebody's in that gallery, then every single aspect of their life has been one of faith.

Well, I don't think that's true at all. I think Gideon, like everybody else in that gallery, is there because at critical points, they manage to show a good response to the Lord.

[2 : 32] In what was otherwise pretty ordinary lives. Clearly, Gideon is used by the Lord to effect great rescue.

But I think when we're looking at that portrait in the gallery of faith, we don't actually just look at the portrait. We look at the maestro who compiled that portrait.

The maestro behind the portrait. The artist. The Lord who persevered with Gideon. The Lord who crafted Gideon into that critical moment of faith where the rest of his life was, as I say, very ordinary, very ugly at points.

That critical moment where Gideon does, with the Lord's enabling, step out in faith and show the leadership that the Lord commands. But the Lord still goes before him, even at that point.

But at that point, that critical moment, Gideon knows he's going out in the strength of the Lord and he's content to reveal God's character and grace and power in that situation.

[3 : 47] So it's not Gideon who's the hero of this story we're looking at this morning. Of course, it's the Lord who's the hero. And what the Lord's doing in this story is showcasing through Gideon and the external circumstances, the Lord is showcasing his faithfulness.

Not Gideon's. His mercy. His patience to people who clearly don't deserve any of his patience or his mercy or his faithfulness.

Showing himself as a savior to those who would not be able to save themselves through their own resources. So jump into the story with me this morning.

And I want to show you something really sad at the beginning and the end of the story that frames the whole story. So chapter 6, verses 1 to 11 is the first bookend or the first frame of the story.

And that begins with what seems to be an identical cycle of outright rejection. Loss of distinctiveness as God's people. So we've been through this cycle a few times.

[4 : 58] We've got God's people responding to suffering. God sends suffering upon his people for this outright rebellion. But there's a couple of key indicators here that we need to take up as we move forward.

This is only one generation later. And I think the 40 years is probably a stylistic way of talking about a generation rather than literal 40 years. So just one generation later and we're doing it all again. And as we start to think about that then, I think we begin to realize or suspect that what we've called a cycle, that is something that goes round and round endlessly, is actually something a bit worse than a cycle.

It's a downward spiral. That is, it's going round and round, but each time we go around, things are getting worse. God's people are finding new depths of rebellion.

New ways to be offensive to their Lord. This time, the cycle includes suffering at the hands of the Midianites.

[6 : 08] And that is a coalition again of semi-nomadic tribes from the east. And what marks these guys out is that they pioneered camels, yes, camels, as strategic military weapons.

So this armed force that we find out later on of 135,000 came on camels. Now that meant that for the first time, they had a long-range, fast-moving, mobile strike force.

And we're told in here that they struck absolute terror into the hearts of the Israelites. They invaded every year at harvest time, and like locusts, they just came and they stripped the whole land bare. And God's people were so terrified that they were forced to hide in caves in the hills, trying to save enough food to get themselves through the wintertime.

God's people were starving, literally, and terrified. And in desperation, and again, as a last resort, after enduring seven years of this invasion, God's people appealed to the Lord for help.

[7 : 24] And once again, the Lord responds. But look at verse 7 of chapter 6, because the response of the Lord this time is quite different. This time, he sends us a prophet for some unknown time before he actually sends Gideon, the saviour.

Now, why would the Lord send a prophet this time around? Why is the cycle different? Well, we're not actually told, but I think this might be a reasonable solution. I think it's this, that God's people had been around this cycle enough times now and knew of it from their history that it had just become a formula for them.

They had just learned, well, okay, when suffering happens, if we cry out to the Lord, then he will deliver us. So it was almost like as if their crying out to the Lord was just a key to unlock God's blessings.

And each cycle goes around. There's less and less heartfelt ownership of sin behind the plea. No, they just want the formula to work. If we do this, then God will do that.

And that sounds so familiar to us, doesn't it? Because that's just what we're like, too. And so God, instead of sending them to deliver straight up, sends them a prophet. Now, what's the prophet to do?

[8 : 43] Well, the prophet explains to them and helps them understand why they're in the predicament they're in. And the predicament they're in is a direct response of their dealing with God's character.

He presents himself in these verses here as the covenant God. Their covenant God. Your covenant God. And he said, I brought you to myself so that you might be my people and you might reflect my character.

I covenanted myself to you. And what have you done? You've thrown my generosity, my graciousness, my kindness back in my face.

All I wanted you guys to do was, verse in there, was fear me. But rather than fear me, rather than respect me, rather than desire me, and that's what the word means, rather than show honor to me, you've actually given all of that to the gods of the Canaanites.

So if you want to know why you're in this mess, there it is. I'm your covenant-keeping God and you've rejected me for the local gods.

[10 : 09] Now turn to chapter 8, verse 33, and I'll read these verses to you to see the other end of the story and the other part of the frame. And man, this is just sad.

This is just worse than sad. It's awful. So we're going to the far end of the story now and it says this, chapter 8, verse 33, As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored, that's prostituted, prostituted after the Baals, that's the false gods again, and made Baal Berith their God. And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God who delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side. And they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jeroboam. The cycle of Judges is a vicious downward spiral. This wonderful story of deliverance and rescue by the Lord ends as it began with the complete rejection of the covenant God.

But it's worse than that. It's the complete rejection of God by those who received the most incredible blessings from Him. And it happened when?

[11 : 39] As soon as Gideon died. It really is easier to trust the Lord in adversity than it is to be faithful to the Lord in prosperity, isn't it?

And that's just abominable when you consider that's how the story's framed. But there's even worse in that story.

If you look at verse 33, it says, they whored after Baals and made Baal Berith their God. Now that word Baal Berith, that's the name of a God.

And that word Berith is the Hebrew word for covenant. So it's actually even more outrageous because God presents at the start of the story and says, look, I am your covenant God.

I'm the one who's committed to you, promised to be faithful to you, promised to make you the people you are, promised to bring you blessing, promised to give you the good life. And what do God's people do after they've experienced all of that deliverance from God's hand?

[12 : 44] They commit to the covenant with a false God, Baal Berith. They make a covenant with this false God to seek from him the very thing that they've actually experienced from the Lord.

That doesn't get much more arrogant than that, does it? That's a petulant child coming up close to a father's face and saying, stuff you.

Yahweh, for these people, may well have been a God for a time of crisis, but at every other point of life, the other gods were far more desirable.

It's starting to have a very familiar ring to us, isn't it? Simon's already helped us think about that in his introduction.

So, once we come into the detail of the story with that framework, we have to say yet, because it's absolutely amazing as far as I can see that the Lord acts to deliver his people using Gideon, who himself is part of the problem, a very ordinary leader.

[14 : 13] So, given the framing of this story, we have to say, yet, in spite of all that, the Lord acts to deliver his people.

From his first appearance in the story, Gideon is anything but the heroic figure or mighty man of valor, as his name suggests. Now, I've pondered this a fair bit this week, and I'm still not sure whether the Lord was actually having a lend of Gideon.

I'm very open to the idea of sarcasm in the Bible. And I think this might be one of those, oh, you mighty man of valor. Something like that.

I don't know. I don't know what it is. But he certainly doesn't really immediately impress you as a heroic figure because when he's first come across by this angel, he's actually thrashing out a few heads of wheat in a wine press.

Now, a wine press is actually a depression in the rock. Normally, you would thrash out in the open when you get the breeze on it. And normally, you would thrash with a machine. But Gideon is hiding from the marauding hordes, stamping out with his feet, beating out with a stick or whatever, a few heads of wheat, enough possibly to protect his family and keep them from starving over the wintertime.

[15 : 36] So it's not a heroic picture. And the angel's just sitting there having a look at Gideon. G'day, mighty man of fowler. I think it's sarcasm.

But whatever. Verse 12, what really matters is that the Lord is with you. That's what the angel who turns out to be the Lord himself in the form of a person, as you see the story develop, the Lord is with you.

That's the key to understanding everything else that happens in the story of Gideon. And the first thing the Lord does with Gideon is to make him see that he is part of the problem.

And he does that in this series of exchanges between verse 11 through to verse 24. So there's a tussle going on. So the angel of the Lord which is the Lord himself says certain things to Gideon.

And Gideon responds with anger and arrogance. And remember this is all on top of this prophet who's come to help God's people understand the whole problem.

[16:53] So Gideon still hasn't learned very much at all. Verse 12 and 13 the angel said the Lord is with you. And Gideon responds angrily well that's all very fine saying that but I want to tell you that we feel totally abandoned by the Lord.

Verse 14 and 15 even more directly the Lord says I am sending you to deliver my people. As if that's going to work.

I'm a nobody. Yeah right. Good. verses 16, 17 and 18 the Lord says once more I will be with you and I will defeat that army for you as if there was only just one man in front of you.

Gideon says don't give me words prove it. And it goes in in verse 19 through 24 there's a story there read it more carefully if you haven't already read it.

The Lord really does give Gideon a proof that crashes through his anger and faithless unbelief and makes him realize two very important things.

[18:03] So Gideon brings out this meal and remember this is a meal prepared for this stranger and it was quite a large amount of food from a family that was already starving potentially.

And what does he do? He puts it in a rock and zaps it fries it. And suddenly Gideon realizes that he's in a bit of a pickle here.

Alex isn't here I shouldn't have said that but I've wasted it on Alex. That's an end joke for us here. So Gideon realizes there's something going on here that's well beyond him.

And he's brought to realize two things. He describes it here verse 24 Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and called it the Lord is peace.

Jehovah Shalom. Gideon has been at war with God.

[19:04] He's angry. He's unbelieving. He's distant. It's Gideon that's been at war with God and he suddenly realizes that God wants to come to him in peace.

Gideon realizes that he's the problem not the Lord. And the second thing that flows from that overflows from the heart of Gideon suddenly is that the proper response to God is not doubt anger unbelief arrogance demandingness or fear.

The proper response to the Lord is worship. Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and called it the Lord is peace.

Gideon's recognized his part in the problem that is facing his whole nation and he's brought to a point of genuine humility and worship of the Lord.

God had to break Gideon before Gideon could break the Midianites. then the Lord makes him clean up his own backyard verses 25 through 33.

[20:32] So before the enemies around them could be destroyed the enemy within had to be destroyed and Gideon's first battle was in his own backyard to destroy the pagan shrine built there by his father Joash.

And the Lord gives Gideon very careful instructions and so Gideon actually steps out in faith having been brought to heel as it were he steps now out in faith carefully following God's instructions and thereby destroys all these religious icons but it's not just destroying them the way in which he destroys them actually makes a mockery of them.

The bull was the sign of strength of Baal. The Lord says actually those two bulls you know the religious thing you rip down the altars first of all then butcher the bulls then burn them.

It's making them whole mockery of the thing. And use by the way use the Asherah pole the very cultic symbol of religion and fertility and preciousness just use that for the fire while you're burning those bulls.

It's just slapstick comedy. And then we see something of the hearts of the people and Gideon saw also something of the hearts of the people because he knew jolly well that they were so committed to Baal there were going to be problems and he wasn't disappointed.

[22:12] The next morning the workout that Gideon did overnight and so they demand his death. Get that. God's own special people while they were busy treating God with absolute contempt now want to drag Gideon out and kill him because he dishonored their God their Baal.

But Gideon's father Joash comes to his rescue. And it's interesting there's a lot going on here. I just don't have time to stop. There's a sermon just in the imagery here by itself. So the name of Baal is in Hebrew El.

And that's in contrast with the name of Jehovah Elohim. There's a clash going on here. Joash means Yahweh delivers or the Lord delivers.

That's what his name means. So the Lord delivers comes to Gideon's defense and the incident ends awkwardly with Gideon being renamed Jerabbaal.

Meaning may Baal deliver. It's a contest to see who is real. And we're not given the answer.

[23 : 39] It just ends awkwardly. Perhaps because we're supposed to know the answer already. And how awful is it my friends.

How awful that God's people would rise as one to protect the honor of this trashy false god Baal. When all his shrines lie in ruins. While at the very same moment rejecting and treating with utter contempt the only true God who'd proved his love for them over and over and over again and who'd shown his power to them.

So Gideon cleans up his own backyard and then the Lord is ready to turbocharge him for his role as saviour. 633 through to chapter 7 verse 25.

So verse 33 of chapter 6 this is the stuff we haven't read so I'm not going to be able to read it all. I'll just touch down on a couple of things. Verse 33 Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east came together and they crossed the Jordan and camped in the valley of Jezreel.

[24 : 51] It's on again for the eighth year in a row. The big invasion's on. 135,000 mobile troops coming to just strip the land again.

And at that point the Lord the next verse gave Gideon a special enabling. The spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon.

Actually in the Hebrew it's the other way around. It's the spirit clothed himself with Gideon. There's a different emphasis there. Because the focus is on the spirit.

But either way Gideon gets a special enabling. And with that Gideon steps out in faith again. And rallies God's people to destroy their enemies so they might enjoy God's place, the promised land once again.

But remember who Gideon has to work with. This is only at best a militia that he's going to rally. These are only farmers. farmers. They're not trained troops.

[26 : 05] But they're facing a massive, heavily armed, organized army. And so perhaps it's not surprising that poor old Gideon is still saying if, if you look at verse 36 onwards, if you will save Israel.

And with that then he launches into this very familiar passage of the fleece, putting out the fleeces before the Lord. And it's his sinking into fear and distrust once again that leads Gideon to put outrageous demands on the Lord.

He's already had assurance after assurance after assurance and proof after proof after proof. And what do we find Gideon doing again? Well, show me Lord, prove it to me.

Gideon's fleece is actually evidence of faithlessness. He already had God's word. He already had multiple practical assurances.

But Gideon can't trust the Lord. He can't take his word at face value. He still wants more proof. And the amazing thing is that God just doesn't zap him.

[27 : 18] But God actually obliges and patiently nurtures and nudges Gideon through his unbelief. And to again to chapter 7, the well-known detail of how the Lord reduced Gideon's forces to 300.

Now, it's always been said when preachers preach in this, it's a 300-strong force of crack troops. Well, I think that's rubbish. The point is here that 300 is laughable going up against an organized army.

Now, when you do the statistics on this organized army, 135,000, it would have taken about 100 football fields to camp them. If there was 50 soldiers to every campfire, then there would have been something like 270 campfires.

Now, this was a sizable force over about 200 hectares, not to mention all the camels and all the support people that would have been around about them. So the point here is that a force of 300 is just absolutely, humanly speaking, laughable, ridiculous.

wouldn't matter how cracked the troops were. You know, it's just a joke in military terms. It's not Gideon's strategy or brilliant leadership which won the battle, but the Lord.

[28 : 42] Look at verse 2. 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 to save me.

There's what the Lord's about. He's not filtering them out just to get the best troops. He's filtering them out so it's a ridiculously small group that has to be a victory from the Lord.

And here's the point, you see. As their covenant keeping God, the one who's promised to care for them, then he will be their deliverer.

those two things go hand in hand. And God's people need to learn that. So he's turbocharged for the task.

The task is accomplished but the final stage in Gideon's life, Gideon becomes part of the problem again. Chapter 8, verses 1 through to 32.

[29 : 47] Now this is a really, really sort of depressing chapter. The story of Gideon ends tragically because Gideon goes rogue.

Once again, Gideon's enemy within rises up to cause the same sort of utter destruction in Gideon as he is just with God's hand inflicted on the Midianites.

And again, we get this wonderful contrast, strong contrast. So there's two or three episodes in chapter 8, and I'll have to leave you to read the details for yourself, but two or three episodes in chapter 8 that show how far Gideon falls again as he gives way to his own unbelief and faithlessness.

First up, he goes well beyond God's mission of delivering God's people. So 18 to 21, Gideon first appears really heroic in that not only does he pursue the Midianites to the borders of the promised land, he pursues them for days east along the caravan routes.

And he finally falls upon the last sort of sizable detachment of forces, about 15,000, another surprise attack, and he completely destroys them, takes their remaining commanders, their remaining kings captive and kills them.

[31 : 12] And then we discover something that hits us like a ton of bricks left field. what we discover is that Gideon's motives in doing that were very, very mixed.

He had gone well beyond God's brief and it turns out that he is pursuing these kings because at some other point in time they had taken captive his sons and killed them.

Gideon was on a revenge trip and we're not told how, where his motives were, but at least his motives were mixed.

He was using his position and his commission to exact revenge on those who had killed his sons.

along the way, there's two cities, two villages who refused to give Gideon help.

His troops had sort of taken off, they hadn't been properly supplied, they needed some food. And they asked these two villages to help, feed my troops.

[32 : 24] And they refused. Now the interesting point is that they refused because they were fearful, fearful of reprisals from the Midianites, fearful that Gideon wouldn't be able to catch these kings and finally dispatch them and that there might be a counterattack.

But the point is here they were fearful. But Gideon, who had received such gracious and gentle treatment from the Lord through his fears, wasn't able to extend grace to those who were fearful.

And he had them killed, every one of them, tortured them and killed them. And so we see something really wrong about this man, the man who had received such grace, been able to, unable to extend grace in an identical situation.

And the third episode, verses 22 to 33, let me try out again, 22 to 32, Gideon really goes rogue.

This is worst of all, because Gideon appears, started to believe that he was somebody special.

Initially the people come and say, look, we want you to be our king, you're such a great deliverer.

And Gideon says, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, that's not right.

[33 : 52] God is your king. But from that point on, Gideon starts to live like an oriental king. he's got a massive harem. That's lots of girls, for those who don't know what the word is.

And he rejects the Lord once again. And he leads his people into idolatry. what a position to be in.

To say, and this particularly resonated with me, to be a leader of God's people and actually lead them into idolatry, lead them away from the Lord. And that's what Gideon did.

It's a very pathetic story. in lots of ways. Gideon showed glimpses of great faith, but generally speaking, he finished his life as he started it.

Convinced that security, that satisfaction in the good life was to be found in his own efforts and apart from the Lord. So, why are we shown this very ordinary leader?

[35 : 08] Because it highlights a very extraordinary God. God's grace. I've just about run out of time, so I'm going to abbreviate what I've got left here. The constant in this story is God's grace.

That's the constant throughout this story. God's patience, his generosity, his faithfulness, his mercy, and most of all, his deliverance to people who didn't deserve it.

God's God's love. Because that is what the covenant-keeping God does. He delivers his covenant people, even when they don't deserve it, and especially when they don't deserve it.

He delivers us in spite of ourselves, not because of ourselves. God rescues nobodies.

That is, his undeserving, needy people. See, when we look at this story, as we see every time we look at a story in the Old Testament, it appears that what God's people need rescuing from is this external enemy.

[36 : 24] But ultimately, what God's people need rescuing from is symbolized and personified in Gideon. We need rescuing from their internal enemy.

It's that internal enemy, that sinful, rebellious heart. It's that which robs us of the blessings of relationship with God.

And it's that very thing that the Lord actually longs for us to enjoy. So, we've got this picture of God moving towards us, Jehovah Shalom. He's moving towards us, wanting us to have peace and rest and blessing in the good life, and we're busy running away from him or coming back at war with him.

God uses suffering simply as the means of exposing the enemy within, their unruly hearts. And so, what God's people really need was a king who would rule over them and subdue them so that they live for God's glory and honor rather than for self.

And the story of Gideon models God's salvation. God honors those who dishonor him so terribly.

God's people constantly go to war with God, but God keeps moving towards them.

[37 : 55] He moves towards them through his prophet in this story and through his word to help them understand their hopelessness, and then he establishes peace as Jehovah Shalom.

My friends, the ultimate display of that model is the Lord Jesus Christ, because he is God's best prophet, we're told, in Hebrews.

He has spoken most clearly to us through Jesus. It's through the words of Jesus that we understand our hopelessness and our helplessness, and we were helped to take ownership of our sins and call out for mercy.

And Jesus is also God's perfect king, who comes to us and by his spirit subdues our unruly hearts and rules us with such strength and gentleness that our hearts overflow with new desires for the Lord, new attitudes of worship, new determination to tear down the internal idols.

And God rescues with those who are nothing in the eyes of the world. Gideon was from an obscure clan, the smallest tribe.

[39 : 21] And at first glance he appeared hopelessly inadequate as a savior. Yet the Lord used him to deliver his people against overwhelming odds.

He delivered his people from an enemy so powerful that it kept God's people in fear at best, and at worst actually led to their destruction.

And again, you see, we've got a wonderful picture of Jesus, who, according to Isaiah, had nothing to attract people to. And yet, takes on an enemy far, far more awful and superior than anything Gideon faced.

The power of Satan himself, and the fear of death that we're held in, and the ultimate destruction of death that we're headed to. And Jesus defeats that enemy against, delivers us against overwhelming odds.

Why? For the very same reason he's delivered his people in. So that we might honor him as our God and King. That we might fear him.

[40 : 43] That we might desire him. That we might honor him. That we might obey him. That we might delight to live under his rule. That we might overflow in thankfulness to him. That we might just say, you are my God.

And I'm so thankful that you are Jehovah Shalom. Let me pray. Lord, we see ourselves so easily in the story of Gideon at so many points.

And we thank you, Lord, that you've not just left us to ourselves. In fact, you've never left us to ourselves, but you constantly move towards us because you want to be to us.

Jehovah Shalom. Even though, Lord, we are constantly breaking out in war against you. Lord, forgive us, we pray.

And make the desire of our hearts simply to live for you with great delight and determination. In Jesus' name I pray.

[41 : 52] Amen. I do apologise for being long winded again. Thank you.