

Let's open our Bibles tonight to Judges 6.

We've told you that the book of Judges follows directly, chronologically with the book of Joshua. It covers roughly 340 years or so. It will take you from the death of Joshua, the guy that replaced Moses, to the reign of the first king of Israel, Saul, in about 1040 or 1045 B.C. So the children of Israel are in the land which God had promised them. They have overthrown, under Joshua's leadership, thirty-one very strong kings and cities - kingdoms, if you will. They've all been assigned their lands in the land that God had promised. They're all given the same direction, "Wipe out the remnant of those 'ites.'" Those seven major groups of folks who lived in the land, the heathens, were to be wiped out. No mercy. God had ordered their judgment, and He was using Israel to bring it forth. Fortunately as you know, while the children of Israel followed Joshua, they were faithful. But the minute that Joshua died, another generation arose that didn't know the LORD, didn't know His power, and began to leave these idolaters in the land. They were small to begin with. They grew big fairly quickly. Their influence was stronger and stronger. And it wasn't long before the children of Israel had headed down this road that Judges covers, and, for 340 years, with fifteen different deliverers of varying degrees, God takes His people from rebellion to conviction to repentance to restoration to rest. And this whole cycle kind of goes on and on and on and on. So the book of Judges is really the story of the deliverers who come to bring Israel back to the LORD. Most of them are godly folks; some of them are extremely so. A couple of them we put on the list that we gave you a couple of weeks ago (they should be at the back counter if you want one) are not really technically judges because they are wicked folks, but they were rulers during this time, and so we've left them in the list so that you have kind of an order.

Tonight we begin with judge number five, a guy named Gideon. Gideon was a man who needed a lot of encouragement. And we can learn an awful lot from these judges; they are absolutely good examples to us about influence, about leadership, about setting the tone. Literally every good judge turned the hearts of the people, sometimes for years, back to the LORD - left a good group behind, if you will. But unfortunately, eventually that influence died off, and we're back to that whole syndrome again. So Gideon is an interesting guy. God chooses the weak is what the

Bible tells us. And if you're weak, you're qualified. In fact, if you think you're strong, you're probably not qualified. But if you're weak, God uses the weak. He strengthens our faith. He pours us out, and He'll use us to do great things. And Gideon is one of those kinds of men. We've mentioned to you a couple of times that God gives different kinds of coverage to the judges; some of them like Shamgar, that guy in chapter 3:31 - got one verse. That's all we know about him, and we looked at all that we could discover. Some of them get a lot of coverage - like Gideon is found in three chapters. We're only going to look at the first chapter tonight. We're having communion as well. But this'll be kind of the preparation work for next week. We will find Samson has four chapters dedicated to a really nutty guy, but yet God has a lot for us to learn from them. And it's all by example; sometimes their examples are bad, but you can learn from bad examples - learn what not to do and what God would have you to do. So tonight we're going to start out with Gideon. And the three chapters break down pretty clearly - chapter 6 is all about his development of faith as God chooses him; chapter 7 is all about the testing of our faith, where you have to put feet to what you now believe about God and have victory; and, unfortunately, chapter 8 is all about faith's failure because Gideon doesn't end up very well, not as some of the other judges.

But let's start in verse 1 tonight as we look at this man, Gideon, that God will raise up. "Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years, and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains. So it was, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up; also Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. Then they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts; both they and their camels were without number; and they would enter the land to destroy it. So Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD." Seven times we will read what we read in verse 1. In fact the last time is about chapter 13:1, with Samson. Every time the people of Israel - when they began to taste the fruit of their rebellion - would eventually come back to the LORD; now not always quickly, not always completely and not always unanimously. But God is just looking for a reason to bless, right? His mercy is extended to all so often because of the faithfulness of a few, and that's certainly the case throughout the book of Judges. But following

this glorious deliverance from the Canaanites through Deborah (last time) and a guy named Barak, they were given forty years of rest, of peace, of joy as the LORD became the center of God's people in their hearts. And things went well until Deborah passes off the scene, and another generation (notice, from chapter 5:31 - the land had rest for forty years) comes in, and notice, they turn away from the LORD once again, and this sin-drome begins again. And so this time - because God loves us, He's not going to leave us there - He sends the Midianites and the Amalekites who, for the next seven years, really come in and impoverish and reduce and dominate and make life hard for God's people. This was horrible. They were in the Land of Promise, and they couldn't even eat from the Land of Promise. You might remember the Midianites. They were the guys that had hired Balaam years earlier just to curse God's people. They were long-time enemies of Israel, and they employed (it sounds like) a scorched-earth kind of policy. "We'll just overrun the land, and we'll come in with lots of people and animals, and we'll diminish your food supplies and your grazing areas. And just by sheer volume, I'll overwhelm the nation by brute force and mass." And so that's what God's people, now, were facing. We read about the children of Israel making their homes no longer in their houses or in their cities, but hiding in caves and places of that nature. We read in verse 5 that they came up with livestock and tents and as numerous as locusts; they and their camels were without number, and they would enter the land to destroy it. And so they just kind of came in. This is the first time, by the way, in the Bible that the "camel" is described as a weapon of war. It's a pretty amazing creature. I don't know if you've ever gotten to ride a camel; you'll only want to do it once, I'm pretty sure. But we always take folks in Israel to go down to Abraham's tent in the wilderness to have an Abraham-type meal served by a guy that looks a lot like Abraham. They're not easy to ride. However they can go thirty to one hundred miles a day through the desert. They can not eat for days, not drink for days; they store everything in that hump on their back - the fat and the energy that's in it. They can carry 400 pounds plus you while they do that. So they're an amazing animal, and they're used a lot in the Bible for war. And they are still in use in lots of places in Israel today.

Well, as a result, verse 6 tells us that Israel was left impoverished. And notice that we read that, because of their being impoverished, they began to cry out to the LORD. If you've read (a little carefully) the other portions up to this point, much of the time you read along with their suffering they repented. They said to the LORD, "We've sinned. We've done the wrong thing. We deserve what we're facing. God, forgive us." You don't read that here. They were upset because life

had gotten hard. It was kind of like their prayer was, "LORD, we're going through it, and we hate it, now deliver us." And so they didn't cry out to the LORD in repentance, or it doesn't sound like it, nor does it seem like it when you look at the response to God's calling in the next couple of chapters. But they didn't like the suffering. If you look at the picture of Israel in verse 2, it doesn't look at all like the Israel that stood around Jericho screaming the name of the LORD, does it? These guys were bold, and God was with them, and now they're hiding in caves and in dens. I don't know - just reading the book - how we can be so stubborn for so long. And I don't get why it's only after our sin brings calamity that we're so willing to turn to the LORD. But these guys hadn't even gotten there yet. They were tired of it but not really tired enough to repent. I always think, when I read it, that it would just be wiser to just stay close to the LORD and forego all of the woodshed kinds of experiences. "Come out with me. We'll have another talk." You know? My dad used to take me outside and have those talks with me, and I always thought to myself, "This is not really any good." But I don't ever remember thinking I was going to change. I just didn't want him to find out anymore. And it kind of seems like that with Israel. The worse they get - all these seven kinds of rollovers into sin - the consequences are more severe, they're longer, and the time it takes for them to repent is extended as well. The question I always ask when I read through the book of Judges is - how long did they expect God to be merciful and to be longsuffering? One more time? "I promise I'll never do it again." Five more times? And you see this wonderful longsuffering heart of God that even when they're not totally repentant yet, He's already coming to redeem His people; this time not as quickly. He doesn't immediately send a judge. He first sends a prophet, then He prepares a judge; takes some time. But the people also needed to get pushed to their knees, and they weren't there yet.

We read, in verse 7, "And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried out to the LORD because of the Midianites, that the LORD sent a prophet to the children of Israel, who said to them, 'Thus says the LORD God of Israel: "I brought you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage; and I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. Also I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; do not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed My voice." ' ' " So, rather than sending, like I said, a deliverer right away (which you will read in the first couple of chapters), this time God sends them a prophet to confront them in their sin. This prophet brings the word of God to say to them, "You know what I've done for you up to this point. You

know how I've brought you out. You know how I've delivered you. You know how I've always been there. There hasn't been an oppressor that has been able to stand before you and get away with it. And now you cry out, 'We hurt, You fix it.' But you really don't see yet the hand of God and how your devotion to the LORD should be based on your relationship with Him." And so this prophet reminds them of their history - that God had always been faithful. There's something about us - we have a propensity for forgetfulness. I don't know what it is. We forget. Don't we? It's almost like we go to the LORD and for the last twenty-eight years I've kept a prayer journal. I can show it to you - what we've prayed for, how long we've prayed, did God answer, did He never answer. I'm amazed, looking back, how quickly God came through in so many situations. But by the time He comes through, I was off doing six other things. And had I not written it down and looked, I probably would have just forgot. And here's a nation that just forgets. They forgot how they got there, they forgot what God had done. Oh, yeah, they weren't alive coming out of Egypt, but they knew. Their heritage certainly had told them. And so God sends them a reminder through a prophet, and then He calls them to repent by saying, "I've made these great promises to you, but if you're not going to follow Me or trust Me, then why are you yelling for Me at all? You've forgotten." In the end (in verse 10) the LORD said, "I am your God. You don't have to worry about the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell." Isn't it interesting? This was their land until they just let the enemy set up camp. And now the LORD calls the land, "It's the land of the gods of the Amorites. You've kind of handed over what I've handed to you. And the Land of Promise, because of your disobedience, has now become the land of somebody else. It's no longer yours. Your calamity" (verse 10) "is directly the result of your forsaking My ways. It's been seven years now. The gods you once overcame, they now dominate your life. They have you hiding in caves, they have you being chased down and afraid to move. And the Land of Promise now is theirs because of your disobedience." And from what follows, it does appear that even only a small percentage of the people listened to the prophet and went, "All right. We've got to get our act together." As always, God wants to deliver, and He will deliver in response to a faithful few. That's always my hope for our country. The country seems to have decided to go to hell in a handbasket. But a faithful church praying can make a world of difference, and I think for the sake of God's people, if we'll pray, God can heal our land because He doesn't require a majority. He just requires a faithful few, and He finds it here.

Well, as the LORD is chastising the people for their lack of commitment to Him and really laying out for them His history and what He has done, He then tells us the story of how He prepared a deliverer for the people in the days to come. We read in verse 11, "Now the Angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth tree which was in Ophrah" (not Oprah), "which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon threshed wheat in the winepress, in order to hide it from the Midianites." Gideon was the son of a man who was of the tribe of Benjamin. He lived during this time of verse 1 of chapter 6. His family was hiding what wheat they were able to gather in the hopes that the Midianites wouldn't see it, and he was not doing something courageous; he was trying to kind of thresh wheat, if you will, in the valley or in the lowlands. Usually if you had a winepress, that was at the bottom of the hill because grapes can be carried downward; they're heavy, the runoff can be downward, it's warmer at the base, it's better for the grapes. When you take wheat, you take it to the top of the mountain because you need to beat it against a rock and break off the chaff. That's that stuff that gets caught in your teeth when you eat popcorn. You know, that kind of stuff? They had to break it off, and, as the wind blows, they would just throw the wheat in the air, and the chaff would be carried away. He would just be throwing it up, and it would be falling right back down. There was no wind where he was. He's down in the valley, if you will. And I'm sure he was very frustrated. But life had become hard, and repentance had become little.

And so the Angel of the LORD - a theophany - we will see an Angel of the LORD a lot. In fact, we've seen it a lot if you've been with us. We'll see it a lot more. Sometimes it's called a Christophany. It is a pre-incarnate before-the-birth-of-Christ appearance of Christ in the Old Testament. There are many reasons that we believe that. Number one - these Angel-of-the-LORD appearances stop when Jesus is born in Bethlehem, when He becomes incarnate. Secondly, it is always the second Person of the trinity that is seen by man; not the Father and not the Spirit. He is called the Angel of the LORD, and notice the capitals are placed there by the translators (and with good reason). Down in verse 14, He's already just called the LORD. And "the LORD said," and no longer "the Angel of the LORD" but just "the LORD." Jehovah actually is written there. Way back in Genesis 18, Abraham met the Angel of the LORD and called Him the LORD and bowed down to worship Him, and the Angel of the LORD accepted worship - something an angel would certainly never do. Moses called Him his God when he met with Him (Exodus 3). Joshua took off his sandals, standing on holy ground, when he met the Angel of the LORD going out to fight and lead the people (Joshua 5). So we're going to run into Him a lot

more in the Old Testament, where God shows up in various forms that are recognizable.

But notice that our hero, or our next judge, is not found (like the others) with heroic kinds of accomplishments. He is a little bit like a coward. He is threshing wheat down in the valley. He's trying to hide. And as he is doing whatever he can to get food to his family, it is "the Angel of the LORD" (verse 12) who "appeared to him, and said to him, 'The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!' " Now it hardly seems accurate to call a guy in hiding a "mighty man of valor." "Come out there, I can see you." Yet it is like God always who sees not what we are but what He can make us. Right? The LORD certainly sees in you far greater things than you see in yourself. In fact, I think if you go down to verse 15, you'll hear what Gideon thinks of himself, and I think it's probably the right analysis, if you will. But if God is for us then, according to the Bible (Romans 8:37), we are more than conquerors through Him who loves us. So it first says, "the LORD is with you," and then it says, "Now you're a mighty man of valor." "The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!" And if you want to be a mighty person - woman or man - of valor, you have to have the LORD with you. Right?

The problem is (notice verse 13), "Gideon said to Him," (the Angel of the LORD) " '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 forsaken us and delivered us into the hand of the Midianites.' " You see, the problem for Gideon - maybe more than anything else - was that Gideon was not sure that God was with the people anymore. He had pretty much - whatever their history said - given up on the thought that God would still be with them or that God would still bless them. And Gideon stands out from the others in this time of rebellion and bondage because, if nothing else, he was seeking to know how God could be involved in his generation. He had heard about the past. He just wasn't seeing it in the present tense. And so he knew that God had intervened in times past. But a lot of time had passed, and there hadn't been any deliverance, and, "He's left us here, and these people are bleeding us to death. We're dying for hunger. And where is God?" I don't know if you've ever felt like that when you're praying, but, "Where is the Lord? Why doesn't God work?" And to his credit, this mighty man of valor that God had come to speak to, his heart was wanting to see what God would do. He didn't have any conviction that He would do anything, but he took the history and set it next to his present experience and wanted to bring God into the place

that he was living. And yet he just couldn't seem to make the leap, and he said to the LORD, "Well, if He's with us, then why are we stuck like this?" (not yet willing to admit sinfulness or God's chastisement). But he was comparing the wonders of God from times past with the forsaken feeling that he had in the present tense. A man of valor. Well, he's in hiding, he's afraid, he's unsure of himself, he's certainly unsure of God, he's upset that God hadn't delivered like He had done in the past. And yet God sees this man and sees great potential in him. Pretty cool picture. If you're ever thinking that maybe God can't use you, you should just read Gideon a lot because God used this man greatly, and He can use you greatly.

Notice in verse 14 that "the LORD" (not the Angel of the LORD, just the LORD) "turned to him and said, 'Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?' " "Go in this your might. Have I not sent you?" What might? Gideon, who is weak in faith, reveals in his prayerfulness that he really wants God to work. "I want to see God move in my generation, in my situation, in our dilemma." And the LORD says, "Granted. Go in this your might." What is his might? His might is that he's looking to see God do something that God had promised to do before. He was anticipatory. He wanted God to do something. He was just looking to God. He wasn't looking to himself. He was looking to the LORD. And God calls that his might. "Haven't I sent you? Then I'm going to use you to deliver Israel from the hand of the Midianites. I'm going to use you." Notice what He had said at the end of verse 13. "Why has the LORD forsaken us and delivered us into the hand of the Midianites?" And the LORD says, "Now you just go in this your might, and I'll deliver the Midianites with you." It is interesting to me that when people share their needs, and there're always - we all see them, right? Sometimes we all see different things, but we see needs that need to be met, and we're moved by them. It is interesting to me, however, that when you begin to pray for needs to be met, if the LORD's answer is, "Come here, I'll use you to meet it," then you go, "Wait a minute. I didn't say I want to get involved. I'd just like to deliver it to the right person so they can handle it." And the LORD doesn't do that with Gideon. He goes, "All right, I'll use you. You see the need? You want to be delivered? All right. I'll use you." And then immediately come the arguments and the excuses, and, "It won't work." But the might of Gideon, by definition here, is that he had a hunger to know God's work, he had a great compassion for his people, he didn't want to be overrun by these marauders, he wondered where God had been. "Why doesn't God come through?" And the LORD said, "I'll come through. How 'bout I use you?" And then there was that, "Well, wait a minute. I don't want to be that guy."

We have people sometimes call the church, and they'll want to get ahold of me to tell me what we need to do. "You know, Pastor, I've been praying. You know what the Lord showed me you guys need to do?" And it always bothers me when they say, "The Lord has showed me what you guys need to do." And so I'll say, "Well, what do you want us to do?" And they'll lay a big trip on me, and I'll say, "That is really good. I see that, too. Why don't you handle that?" and then I'll hang up the phone. And they usually get upset. "What do you mean? I want to tell you what to do." "Hey, look, God burdened you with it. I don't care about what you just said." (Laughing) "I care about other stuff. But if it's a concern of yours, I'll help you take care of it. We'll rally alongside you, man. We'll help you to get there. If that's what you believe that God would have us do, then go on with your bad self." (Laughing) You know what I mean? I think it's a good counsel. "You're going to be the solution to your prayers and concerns. I will use you. I am with you. Here is your might and your concern. I am with you. Go! Mighty man of valor."

When Moses was told by the LORD to go to Pharaoh (Exodus 6), he immediately began to speak about him not being able to publicly speak. When Jeremiah is told that the LORD had a message for the nation, he wanted to excuse himself by saying he was way too young, and the people wouldn't respect him or listen to him (Jeremiah 1). And, true to form, Gideon immediately is ready with excuses. "Me? Me. You gotta be kiddin'!" Now a minute ago he was arguing that God had forsaken him. Now God is making a big mistake by choosing him. All right. Pick a side! "Well the LORD has forsaken us." "All right, I'm going to use you." "Oh, not me." And notice in verse 15 that he says, " 'O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh,' " (literally the smallest in Manasseh) " 'and I am the least' " (or, if you will, the youngest) " 'in my father's house.' " "There is no way I'm going to do You any good. If we're going to make some difference, You're going to need a guy with more clout than I have; somebody that is more capable, somebody that has more to offer." But here's the deal - the callings of God, and then faith to take Him at His word are two different things. God calls, but sometimes that faith drags way behind. God calls you, but you're not really ready to go; and that's certainly Gideon's picture. It is wise to admit you're unable, but it is foolish to believe He's unable. And if God wants to use you, then He can enable you. Does that make sense? I mean, this is my depth of logical thinking. I know you can't do it, but He can. And all of the excuses that you read in the Bible from people God has called had to do with their lack of capability. Every one of them, "I can't do it. I don't know how to do it. I don't know what I have to offer." But each one of them, the LORD just said this, "I'll be with you. I'll go before you." And I

would say this to you - if God goes before you, you're in a good place. What does Gideon say? "I'm weak, I'm unable, I'm unqualified." And I'll tell you what - most people, and I said it a while ago, are too strong to be used by the Lord because God is attracted to weakness. He is pulled towards those who have nothing to offer. It's just the heart of God. He is drawn to those who are unable to stand on their own kind of feet. And so God helps the helpless because helpless people lean hard on the Lord. If you ever doubt that, go read 1 Corinthians 1 sometime. It is a chapter that just talks about the life God looks to use; and they're broken and weak and unable to offer much to the Lord. And God says, "I'd like to use you" because not only will you depend upon Him, you won't take much credit when things get done because you know better. So Gideon has excuses.

Look, no one likes arrogance, but there's a fine line between humility and disobedience; and sometimes I think disobedience gets couched in kind of professed humility. For example, with Gideon here, twice now the LORD has said, "I'll be with you," and he says, "Oh, I can't. I can't." Notice verse 16, "And the LORD said to him, 'Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man.' " "You can do this because I'm with you. If I'm with you - Me and you - that's a majority! You can do it. You can do it. Haven't I sent you?" (verse 14); (verse 12) "I'm with you;" (verse 16) "I'm with you." What more does God need to say to him? "I'm with you, I'll send you, I'll be with you, here we go, let's go together, we'll do it together." That's the preparation of faith for this next judge.

I think the words, "Surely I will be with you" are the key to any successful ministry. Right? God's presence with you. Sometimes we get involved with things for the Lord without His involvement or His leading. We're just going to do something for God, and it blows up in our face or it doesn't go anywhere. But if the Lord is with us, if He's involved, blessings follow. Look, Gideon's hunger was for God to do something in his generation that he had heard about in previous generations. While his hunger brought God's presence, his obedience would bring God's blessing, His power. His hunger brought God's presence. "You mighty man of valor." He was hungering to see God work. Now if he would obey, God would do the work. Remember when the disciples fished all night and caught nothing (Luke 5), and Jesus came across kind of like, "How would You know, You're not a fisherman" and said, "Fish on the other side"? Seemed so silly. And yet the boat began to fill up with fish and they realized whose presence they were in. In fact, Peter said, "Get out of my boat. I'm a sinful man." He recognized who the Lord was. And I think the key is to be led by God's Spirit and obedient to His Word. Because only

God can fill nets. In fact, the same actions in the same place without God's presence would have just been another empty net on the other side of the boat. But God had things to do.

So Gideon, to his credit, is hungering for God, but he's not sure. And we'll find him not sure for quite some time. But weak faith is better than no faith at all. I can assure you of that. And God likes honest doubt, and He'll walk us through it. He said (in verse 14), " 'Go in this might of yours,' " this hunger to know the LORD, this hunger to see God work. "And I'm going to use you. You have a passion for your people. I'm going to use you to deliver them." And he makes the excuses, and God says, "No, no, no. I'm going to be with you."

And so Gideon's response - and I guess if you were Gideon, you might do the same thing - he's pretty slow to believe what he's hearing, he wants proof. After all, this guy just showed up and goes, "Hey, I'm going to use you," and you go, "Yeah, whatever. Who are you?" And so, "Then he said to Him," verse 17, " 'If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who talk with me. Do not depart from here, I pray, until I come to You and bring out my offering and set it before You.' And He said, 'I will wait until you come back.' " Sign one - Gideon asked for a sign, he sees a man, he hears a promise, he wants to know this is more than a man. He said, "If you don't go away, I'll go get me a goat and some unleavened bread, and I'll give it to you, a broth for two, You're the LORD." And the LORD said, "I'll wait till you get back."

And, "So Gideon," verse 19, "went in and prepared a young goat, and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot; and he brought them out to Him under the terebinth tree and presented them" to the LORD. By the way, quite an offering in the time of great scarcity of food in Israel, but it's indicative you give the LORD your best. "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 rose out of the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. And the Angel of the LORD departed out of his sight." God accepted Gideon's offering. He consumed it. He gave him a sign, "This is clearly the LORD" in his sight, and he disappeared.

"Now Gideon perceived," verse 22, "that He was the Angel of the LORD. So Gideon said, 'Alas, O Lord GOD! For I have seen the Angel of the LORD face to face.' Then the LORD said to him, 'Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die.' " I guess Gideon is now persuaded. "So Gideon built an altar there to the LORD, and called it The-LORD-Is-Peace" (Jehovah Shalom). "To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites." So God gives him assurance, and then He disappears from his sight. And, notice, Gideon prays, "I think I'm going to die now, I've seen the LORD," and it seems like not without seeing Him, but to his heart the LORD said, "No, you're going to be fine, don't be afraid." And he builds an altar of peace.

Well, having given him a sign, the LORD now wants from Gideon a sign of obedience. So we read, in verse 25, "Now it came to pass the same night that the LORD said to him, 'Take your father's young bull, the second bull of seven years old, and tear down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the wooden image that is beside it; and build an altar to the LORD your God on top of this rock in the proper arrangement, and take the second bull and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the image which you shall cut down.' " In other words, the LORD's going to lord over their gods, if you will. "So Gideon took ten men from among his servants and did as the LORD had said to him. But because he feared his father's household and the men of the city too much to do it by day, he did it by night." So Gideon is now called by the LORD to begin to act on the faith that is beginning to be established, and God sends him to destroy a worship altar to Baal that his father had built in his yard, that had stumbled a lot of people. And it was certainly one of the reasons the enemy had the upper hand in Israel; they were worshipping these false gods. And so the LORD sends him to destroy it and to build an altar unto the LORD on top of it.

We read, in verse 28, "And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, there was the altar of Baal, torn down; and the wooden image that was beside it was cut down, and the second bull was being offered on the altar which had been built. So they said to one another, 'Who has done this thing?' And when they had inquired and asked, they said, 'Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing.' Then the men of the city said to Joash, 'Bring out your son, that he may die, because he has torn down the altar of Baal, and because he has cut down the wooden image that was beside it.' But Joash said to all who stood against him, 'Would you plead for Baal? Would you save him? Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning! If he is a god, let him plead for himself, because his altar has been torn down!' Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal," (changed his

name, Gideon, if you will) "saying, 'Let Baal plead against him, because he has torn down his altar.' " Someone once wrote, and I forget who it was, that worshippers of Baal always get up in the morning. And notice (in verse 28) that the men of the city came out to do their religious work early on. It is an interesting thing that people who don't know grace work really hard at their religion while people who are given grace are very lax in their devotion. I don't know if it's because we think, "Well, I can't do anything anyway, so I'll do nothing" as if, somehow, God's not impressed. We should give it our all, shouldn't we? And yet the religious folks so often are much more diligent in their religious foolishness than the children of God are in their devotion.

Well, in the morning, the investigation quickly pointed to Gideon as this chief suspect. And something happened to his father. Because he realized, as these men began to cry for his son's blood that, in reality, if Baal was a god, he would and could fight for himself. He'd already had another altar built on top of his. And the heart of his dad is turned, if you will, to the LORD, and he turns these men of the city away; these men who would come to defend a lifeless god but who hadn't shown up in their battle against the Midianites. For years, they'd gone in hiding. But they'll kill one of their own because it kind of rubs them the wrong way. And it moved Joash to see that, and he said, "What kind of god needs protection from man? If he needs protection from man, that's not really a very good god." And so Gideon's obedience to the LORD, even though it was at night and he was a little worried about the reaction, turned his dad's heart back to the LORD and away from the idols. It was a start, certainly.

We read, in verse 33, "Then all the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel." The enemy begins to join forces. "But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh," (that was his tribe) "who also gathered behind him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and they came up to meet them." And so the battle is about to be engaged, if you will. The Spirit of the LORD comes upon Gideon; a phrase that we're going to read a lot in the Bible with increasing frequency because throughout the book of Judges, the kings and the prophets and all, there is always that emphasis on God's work in our lives, upon our lives. It isn't the man that gets the credit; it's the vessel God uses. And so God will work, and notice Gideon calls for the army. He blows the trumpet. He summons the families. He calls for his own family. He calls

from the tribe of Manasseh, and then all of the surrounding tribes come - Asher, Zebulun, Naphtali. But they come in very pitiful numbers. In fact, in chapter 7:3, it will say that there were thirty-two thousand people in all that showed up; only thirty-two thousand.

Now, God can work by many or by few. You know that. And I think if you've been in church for any length of time, you know that even if the church has thousands of people in it, oftentimes it's fifty or a hundred or two that do all of the work on a regular basis. It's just the way it is. It shouldn't discourage you other than to say, "Well, there's work to be done. We've got to be convinced that we all have a part." You might ask yourself about your personal involvement in church. How many prayer meetings have you showed up at? Or how many missions trips, even on a weekend, have you participated in? Or how many church outreaches did you show up early to serve? Or how many baptisms have you identified yourself with? What are you doing besides sitting? And you find that that is true throughout the Scriptures. You'll find it here as well. There's a real poor turnout. In the valley there were so many people that Gideon counted heads and went, "Yeah, this is maybe a bad idea." And whatever hope he had in the LORD, he almost stumbles again. He needs more reasons. He's got second thoughts. He was confident; he doesn't want to be over-confident. He doesn't want to jeopardize the lives of his people and his tribe and the family. And now he begins to call, and he literally says to the LORD, "I'm gonna need another sign. I thought we were good, but look who showed up." And now his faith needs to be strengthened once more.

And so we read in verse 36, "So Gideon said to God, 'If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said' " (me and these few people that have shown up) " ' - look, I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said.' And it was so. When he rose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water." And the ground was dry. And so Gideon said, "Well that could have just been a weird coincidence, so if I could just ask You to reverse the process, then I would surely know what You're doing." And so, verse 39, "Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew.' And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground." And so He reversed. And notice, I want you to notice, God is more than willing to oblige weak faith to help them forward. One,

two, three proofs in all. And you'd think, well, by now he's got it. No, he doesn't have it. There's more to come.

There have been people, over the years (in fact, just in our generation), that really believe, somehow, living by fleeces is a proper way to determine God's will. And may I say to you that that's an Old Testament practice that you don't find at all in the New Testament. Until the Holy Spirit is given to man, there are plenty of ways that God made Himself known: the casting of lots, the rolling of the dice, the laying out of the fleeces. But once the Holy Spirit comes to live within you and to guide you into all truth, you don't see those practices at all in the church. And I don't believe that they're for today at all. We'll hear people sometimes say, "Well, I'm praying about whether to take this job, and if they call me before 10:00, I'll know it's the Lord." And you'll go, "Well, you're setting conditions for God to meet. That's not wise." It was wise in this case; that was the way God communicated. It's not wise for you and me. Discovering God's will can be extremely difficult. I would say that you should pray and ask and seek and knock; that His Word is a lamp unto your feet and to your path (Psalm 119:105); that the Holy Spirit is promising to guide you into all truth (John 16:13). And then there's that promise in Psalm 37:4, where the LORD says that if you will "Delight yourself in the LORD, He will give you the desires of your heart." In other words, if you make the LORD your delight, the desires that your heart begins to find itself interested in may very well be coming from His hand. And if you're honest before the LORD, "LORD, I just want to do what You want, I want to delight myself in You," the desires are not, then, fleshly or worldly or selfish, but they become desires that line up really well with God's Word. And I have found, over the years, that you don't need to strive - that God opens doors and shuts others. The whole building thing that we've been going through for the last couple of years is a pretty good reminder of that. But God gives you desire as long as you're delighting in Him. Somebody that says, "Should I go to work or should I go to college? And what do I do right now?" And I don't know. When people say, "What does the LORD want from me?" I refer them to the LORD. "Make an appointment with Him, man. I don't know." But I will say this to you - God has a way of turning your heart. What is it that you desire as you walk with Him? "I really would like to go to school." Maybe that's the direction you should be pursuing. Right? Barring anything else that would stand in the way, go and see how the LORD would open the doors.

So, look, Gideon is faltering, but he's moving forward. Right? He's seen the LORD consume an offering, he's gone and destroyed his dad's worship thing, he's risked

his own neck, he's seen his father turn (in his heart) away from these idols. He now calls the troops, and nobody shows up, really nobody shows up. I mean, by the time the LORD is done, most of these guys are going home. And so he's a little hesitant. "LORD, can I have one more proof? Can I have one more sign? Can I have one more encouragement?" And the LORD, at each step, is willing and more than willing to give it to him. So he's faltering, but he's moving forward. He's slow to believe, but he's believing. He's in a process, and he will find himself where God wants him to be. There's lots more for him to learn. But, look, growth and opportunity are set before us. Who does God use? Who does God use? God uses those that are aware of their weaknesses but are willing to place their trust in His Word. That's who He uses. Who will stand upon His promises, will rely on His presence, those whose eyes are on the LORD and not afraid to go out and serve Him despite the odds; who believe that if God is for them, who can be against them? That's who God uses. And those who have a sense of urgency of the times in which they live. That drove Gideon. Remember what we just read. "Where is the LORD?"

One of the problems for our church today is that we live in desperate times, and somehow the church isn't very desperate about reaching the lost. We are losing ground. But if I know that God is with me before I go out, I'll go out. If I keep my eyes on Him and His promises, and not my lack of ability, He can use me. I know God's patient, He wants me to grow, He'll handle my doubts. All of that is available to you and me if we ask.

So we'll leave Gideon with that dry fleece and the wet ground, and thirty-two thousand guys till next week. But if you read chapters 7 and 8 (we might just do 7), then you'll just be ahead.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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