

Judges 6-8

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- [0 : 00] Well, if you'll turn with me back to the passage that we read in Gideon chapter 6, we're going to be looking at this account in the book of Judges of Gideon.
- We read part of it here in chapter 6, but it actually carries on through chapters 7 and 8. I might make the same confession as I made this morning for those of you who are here.
- Again, this was a passage that I chose before I was aware of how chaotic things would be when I came to preach on this passage, but providentially, again, this is perhaps not a bad passage for us to be looking at.
- The book of Judges records a very difficult time in the experience of God's people. It was a period of time that spanned some roughly 350 years, so it was a very long period.
- Here in the first verses of chapter 6, we see something of the desperate situation that the people found themselves in, and this went on for a very long time.
- [1 : 10] So as we enter into what is potentially a very difficult time, a time of great trials, this is perhaps an appropriate passage for us to be looking at.
- When we approach any of the stories in the Bible, one interesting way of approaching them is to ask, what question do I have at the beginning of a story?
- What problem are we presented with? What point of tension do we confront at the end of the story, which gets answered, it gets resolved by the end of the story?
- Now, in this case, as I mentioned, Gideon was living at a time of very great difficulty. Even for their people to find food was a struggle because of the people who were oppressing them, because of the Midianites.
- And Gideon was the person whom God raised up to deliver them. But note verse 16. The Lord answered, I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive.
- [2 : 19] That's a bit of a spoiler, isn't it? Because we might have thought that the question at the beginning of the story is, will the Israelites be delivered from the Midianites?
- Will Gideon manage to deliver them? But right at the very beginning, we're told that he will. And then the story carries on for another three chapters.
- So the question that we're asking ourselves at the beginning of the story is not, will Gideon deliver the Israelites? We know that he will. Rather, there are two different questions, possibly three questions, that we would be asking at the beginning of this account.
- The first question is, what was Gideon's strength? That is, what was it that Gideon was trusting in? So first of all, we would be asking, what is Gideon's strength?
- How is it that he was going to accomplish this? The second question is, what, or perhaps whom, did Gideon worship? Who was Gideon worshipping?
- [3 : 28] These are very helpful questions because they challenge us to ask the same questions of ourselves. What is my strength? What is it that I'm trusting in?

And then secondly, whom do I worship? What is it that I set my affections on? So we might be asking ourselves those two questions.

They lead on, in fact, and the book of Judges itself emphasizes a third question. It's very interesting. I will leave you to look. The very last verse of the book of Judges raises another issue.

It's an issue of leadership. What kind of leader do we need? So I want us to look at those three questions this evening and to see what God teaches us through them.

So first of all, what was Gideon's strength? If you look with me at chapter 6 in verse 12, when the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, the Lord is with you, mighty warrior.

[4 : 39] Now, sometimes I think there are statements. Somebody was asking me this morning if the book of Jonah was a satire. In some ways, it is. I think sometimes there are very humorous parts of the Bible, and this is one of them, because when the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon and said, the Lord is with you, mighty warrior, where was Gideon?

He was hiding in a wine press. If you compare, now, I don't mean to be too hard on Gideon. If I were Gideon, I would have been hiding too. But if you compare him to some of the other judges whom God raised up, they were much more fearsome characters.

At the opening of the book, Gideon is hiding in a wine press, and the angel of the Lord appears to him and says, greetings, mighty warrior. And then, if you notice in verse 14, the Lord turned to him and said, go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand.

Now, remember I told you that as we approach stories in the Bible, it's very helpful to think, what question is this story raising in my mind at the beginning?

Well, one question that we might be asking ourselves as we look at this, and as we look at verse 14, is, what was Gideon's strength? And I want us to keep that question in mind, and I will go through and draw your attention to a number of verses as we go through the account with Gideon, and I would suggest that we see a pattern developing.

[6 : 14] So we begin with this question, what exactly was Gideon's strength? And notice in verse 15, pardon me, my lord, Gideon replied, but how can I save Israel?

My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I'm the least in my family. Gideon viewed himself as being nothing. As we carry on through the chapter, God tells Gideon, we'll come to this later, but as it turns out, Gideon's father had a Baal shrine, a pagan shrine in their back garden, and God told Gideon to go and destroy it.

And in verse 27, Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord told him, but because he was afraid of his family and the townspeople, he did it at night rather than in the daytime.

There we see a Gideon who is obedient, he does what God tells him to do, but he does it at night because he was scared. He was scared of his own family. In verses 36 to 40, Gideon said to God, if you will save Israel by my hand, as you have promised, look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor.

If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said. Now, we sometimes, Christians, sometimes talk about putting out a fleece.

[7 : 39] I hope you won't say that because Gideon shouldn't have put out a fleece. What was he doing? God had already told him, and he had given him a sign, he had already told him that he was going to do this, and Gideon said, well, give me another sign.

Well, God graciously answered, and then in verse 38, we see that the sign was answered in verse 39, then Gideon said to God, don't be angry with me, let me make just one more request, allow me one more test.

Now, you know there's a verse in the Bible, in Deuteronomy, that says, you will not test the Lord your God. And here we see Gideon testing God, and then he gets up the next day, and he says, well, don't be angry, but that thing I'm not supposed to do, let me do that another time, just to be sure.

Twice Gideon tests God. You would not describe him as being someone of great faith. In chapter 7, in verses 10 and 11, Gideon has now gone out to do battle with the people who were oppressing them, the people from whom he is supposed to deliver Israel.

He's going out against the Midianites, and he's in his camp at night, and in verse 10 of chapter 7, God says to him, if you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah, and listen to what they are saying.

[9 : 09] Afterwards, you will be encouraged to attack the camp. So he and Purah, his servant, went down. Now, do you notice what's happening there? God says, if you're still afraid to go, to go out to do battle with them, well, go down tonight and listen to them.

And then the next verse, we read that Gideon gets up and goes down to listen to them, which means that he was still afraid, wasn't he? And this leads us to what was a transformational moment in Gideon's life.

In chapter 13, sorry, in chapter 7, verse 13, Gideon arrived, so he's arrived at the Midianite camp, at the camp of these pagans, and in verse 13, Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream.

I had a dream, he was saying. A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed. His friend responded, this can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon, the son of Joash, the Israelite.

God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands. Notice how Gideon responds. How many times, before I read this, how many times has God told Gideon what's going to happen?

[10 : 31] Over and over and over again, and Gideon never quite believed him. And now he's heard their enemies speaking, he's heard their enemies who've had this dream and they've interpreted it, and when Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down and worshipped, he turned to the camp of Israel and called out, get up, the Lord has given the Midianite camp into our hands.

I think there's a degree of irony that God's word wasn't quite good enough, and Gideon is only really energized to act when he hears their enemies speaking.

We carry on in the account, and for example, in verse 18, when I and all who are with me blow our trumpets, then from all round the camp blow yours and shout for the Lord and for Gideon.

Where did Gideon come from that he inserted his own name alongside of God? If we come on to chapter 8, do you remember earlier in chapter 6, Gideon had been skulking around in the dark because he was afraid of his own family?

In chapter 8, he had finally done as God had commanded. He had gone out and led their people against the Midianites. They had been victorious. In chapter 8, and now the Ephraimites asked Gideon, why have you treated us like this?

[12 : 00] Gideon hadn't initially called them out. He hadn't included them. And they said, why did you treat us like this? And they challenged him vigorously. But he answered them, what have I accomplished compared to you?

Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer? God gave Oreb and Zeb, the Midianite leaders, into your hands. What was I able to do compared to you?

At this, their resentment against him subsided. He's quite a different character at this point, isn't he? He's a very smooth operator. This is no trouble at all for him to deal with these people and their complaints.

Before, he was skulking around in the dark. Now, no problem to deal with them. As we go further into chapter 8, in verse 7, so, at this point, Gideon had continued to pursue the Midianites.

They had crossed over the Jordan. Gideon had crossed over in pursuit of them, and he wanted one of the Israelite villages there to supply them with provisions. But the officials of Sukkot said, do you already have the hands of Zeba and Zalmun in your possession?

[13 : 13] Why should we give bread to your troops? They were quite vulnerable, and no doubt they were worried that Gideon would lose, and if they had helped Gideon, then there would be reprisals for them.

So they said, no, we're not helping you. Then Gideon replied, just for that, when the Lord has given Zeba and Zalmun into my hand, I will tear your flesh with desert thorns and briars.

Not so smooth anymore, is he? Literally. He carries on and he comes to another town, to Peniel, and he made the same request of them, but they answered as the men of Sukkotet.

So he turned to the men of Peniel. Now, notice before he had said, when I return in victory, when the Lord has given me victory, notice what he says now. When I return in triumph, I will tear down this tower.

Where's the Lord? He no longer mentions God, it's simply Gideon. As we see in verses 15 and on, Gideon was true to his word.

[14 : 22] In verse 15, then Gideon came and said to the men of Sukkot, here is Zeba and Zalmun about whom you taunted me by saying, do you already have the hands of Zeba and Zalmun in your possession?

You should have given bread? Why should we give bread to your exhausted men? He took the elders of the town and taught the men of Sukkot to lessen by punishing them with desert thorns and briars.

And then notice the next verse, he pulled down the tower of Peniel and killed the men of the town. Okay, so at this point he's gone from fighting against the Midianites, from fighting against the enemies of God's people to fighting his own people and killing them.

And then finally in verses 19 and 21, he has captured these Midianite leaders. It turns out that previously in warfare they had killed his own brothers.

And in verse 19 Gideon said to them, those were my brothers, the sons of my own mother. As surely as the Lord lives, if you had spared their lives, I wouldn't kill you.

[15 : 30] Turning to Jether, his eldest son, he said, kill them. But Jether didn't draw his sword because he was only a boy and was afraid. Ziba and Zalmuna, these are the kings now that he's captured, yes, they said, come, do it yourself.

As is the man, so is his strength. So Gideon stepped forward and killed them and took the ornaments off their camels' necks. See, by the time we get to the end of chapter 8, we're back where we started.

We started with this question, what is Gideon's strength? Go in this your strength and save Israel. By the end of chapter 8, what is Gideon's strength?

As is the man, so is his strength. His enemies were taunting him. Are you man enough to kill us, they were saying. And Gideon demonstrated that he was.

And he is explicitly clear that what happened to them wasn't in any way in his opinion, at least, God's judgment upon them. It was a personal act of reprisal. It was his own grudge because of what they had done to his family.

[16 : 42] Gideon's strength by the end is himself. And I would suggest that although in some ways Gideon's character changes a lot over the course of the account, doesn't it?

He's a very different person by the end than he was at the beginning. And yet, there is one constant. Gideon appears to have been trusting, not exclusively, he does seem to have had genuine faith in the Lord, but to a large extent he was trusting in himself.

And at the beginning, back in chapter 6, he was trusting in himself and he was scared. By the end, he was trusting in himself and he had become a tyrant who was oppressing his own people.

Well, what should have been Gideon's strength? If we look back at chapter 6, in verse 12, the Lord is with you.

In verse 14, go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midianite's hand. Am I not sending you? Gideon's true strength, what he should have been relying in, was God.

[18 : 02] But the temptation that Gideon was giving into was to trust in his own strength. And at points, that made him panic and made him fearful because he recognized that he wasn't up to it.

Sometimes he convinced himself that he was up to it and he became a brutal tyrant. But through all of that, he was trusting in himself. But that raises the question for us.

We face very difficult circumstances. We face situations that frighten us. And what is it that we trust in?

Do we trust in money? Money can be lost. Do we trust in our health?

You may be very young and very fit. Health passes away. Are we trusting in our government? I don't want to seem unduly critical of our government.

[19 : 03] Compared to many nations, we have a very stable, accountable government. We can give thanks to God for that. But are we trusting in our government as though they are the ones who will save us?

Now, many of the things that we worry about, they're things that we genuinely need. We need to eat. We need houses to live in. We need to provide for our families.

Normally, to do that, we need to work. These are practical matters that are hugely important to us. But when we're faced by the situation that we're in, what is it that we're trusting in?

This passage and the experience of Gideon is challenging us to recognize that we need to be trusting in God and not in ourselves. So, first of all, this first question, what is it that Gideon was trusting in?

What is it that he should have been trusting in? He should have been trusting in God. The second question, whom did Gideon worship? Again, if we can go back to the beginning of this account in chapter 6, what do you think of Gideon's question in verse 13?

[20 : 20] God has appeared to him. He's made this statement which Gideon finds rather strange and we might find rather strange. The Lord is with you, mighty warrior. And Gideon's response is to say, pardon me, my Lord, but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?

Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt? That seems like a fair question. They are in a terribly difficult situation and Gideon's response to God is to say, well, if you're with us, why is all of this happening to us?

In some ways, it seems like a fair question but in other ways, we recognize that actually Gideon should have known the answer to this question. If we look earlier in this passage, so in chapter 6 at verse 7, well, verse 6, Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help.

When the Israelites cried out to the Lord because of Midian, he sent them a prophet. Notice if we go back, if we go back to the previous account, so Deborah and Barak in chapter 4, there we read in verse 3, because he had 900 chariots fitted with iron and had cruelly oppressed the Israelites for 20 years, they cried to the Lord for help.

God's people cried out to him for help and in verse 4 we read, now Deborah, a prophet, the wife of Lapidoth, was leading Israel at that time. And then in verse 6, she sent for Barak, son of Abinuum, from Kadesh in Naphtali and said to him, the Lord, the God of Israel commands you, go and take 10,000 men.

[22 : 19] They cried out to the Lord for help and he raised up Deborah and Barak to deliver him. If you look in chapter 3 and verse 15, again the Israelites cried out to the Lord and he gave them a deliverer.

In verse 9, this is the account with Othniel, but when they cried out to the Lord, he raised up for them a deliverer. In chapter 6, the people cried out to the Lord and what did they want?

They wanted a deliverer. And what does God give them? He gave them a prophet. They didn't want a prophet.

They wanted someone to save them. But look at what the prophet says. I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians and I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors.

I drove them out before you and gave you their land. I said to you, I am the Lord your God, do not worship the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live, but you have not listened to me.

[23 : 32] Gideon should have known when Gideon said to God, why is this happening to us? He should have known because they'd been told this was happening to them because they had turned away from God.

Indeed, Gideon of all people should have known because as we read later on in the passage, his own father had built a shrine to Baal in their back garden. He doesn't need to ask this question because he should have known.

Now, perhaps at this point it's worth highlighting the fact that sometimes, particularly in the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Judges, sometimes difficulties came upon people because of their rebellion against God.

God's sake but we know very often that that is not the case, even within the Bible, even within the Old Testament. Job. Job had not done some wicked thing that caused all of those hardships to come upon him.

We see the same thing in the New Testament. When we go through times of difficulty and times of trial or we see someone else going through a time of trial, we can't simply assume that something bad is happening to them because of the bad thing that they had done.

[24 : 44] It doesn't always work like that and we need to be clear about it but in this case, that was what was happening. They had rejected God, they had worshipped the gods of the Amorites and now God had given them into the hands of their enemies.

This issue of worship is central to the account with Gideon. Who were they worshipping? Now, to begin with, things went better, didn't they?

In chapter 6, verse 24, Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it the Lord his peace. Later on, he tore down his father's altar to Baal, to this false god, and he built an altar again to the true god.

At first, things were going well. But notice, by the time we get to the end of the book, sorry, to the end of the account, God, in chapter 8, there in verse 7, Gideon was collecting all of the gold that he had captured.

Gideon made the gold into an ephod. It's not entirely clear what he was doing. Normally, in Old Testament Israel, an ephod was something that a priest wore.

[26 : 03] Whatever exactly Gideon was doing, they made this thing. we're told that he placed it in Ophrah, his town, and all Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it.

The thing became a snare to Gideon and his family. They were supposed to be worshipping the Lord. By the end, they're worshipping this thing that Gideon had made.

And this also is a challenge to us. One of the questions that arises naturally as we read this account is, whom did Gideon worship? And that challenges us to ask, whom do we worship?

Now, all of those things that I mentioned before, our health, finances, our job, relationships, sometimes we worry about those things because we need those things.

We need to eat. We need some place to live. We need to look after our loved ones. Relationships are very important to us. Sometimes we worry about those things because they are important issues.

[27 : 10] But sometimes, and this is perhaps a fine distinction, but sometimes we're so concerned about those things because we've turned them into our gods. And those are the things that we worship.

We worship money or the things that it can provide us with. We worship relationships or we worship people. We worship our job because of the status that it gives us.

Sometimes we turn these things into idols and just like with the Israelites, they become snares to us and they lead us away from worshipping the true God.

And yet God created us. He's our maker and he deserves all of our worship. So there are these two challenges to us in this book.

What is our strength and whom do we worship? At the beginning, I mentioned there's a third issue. And you notice how the book of Judges ends.

[28 : 21] In those days, Israel had no king. Everyone did as they saw fit. What was Israel's biggest problem? Their biggest problem wasn't that they were relying on their own strength.

It wasn't that they were worshipping other gods. Those were real issues. But ultimately, they needed a king. They needed a true leader. Now, it's really fascinating to come back to Gideon and to ask if he was king.

If you look with me in chapter 8, in verse 22, the Israelites said to Gideon, rule over us, you, your son, and your grandson, because you saved us from the hand of Midian.

What were they asking Gideon to become? They didn't use the words, did they? But if he's going to rule over them, and then his son rules over them, and then his grandson rules over them, they were asking Gideon to be their king.

And notice his reply. Gideon told them, I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you. Now, that's the right answer, isn't it?

[29 : 38] that's what Gideon ought to have said. But if we look more closely at this passage, I would suggest that Gideon's heart doesn't actually match up to his words.

In verse 18, remember these two pagan kings that he has captured, whom he subsequently executes, what's their assessment of what Gideon is like and how he's behaving?

He asks Ziba and Zalmunna, what kind of men did you kill at Tabor? Men like you, they answered, each one with the bearing of a prince. Literally, it's each one with the bearing of the son of a king.

Well, if the people they killed were like that, and they said the people they killed were like Gideon, they're saying that Gideon, in their eyes, is acting like a king. In their eyes, he was behaving in a kingly fashion, according to their standards of kingship.

Notice in verse 21, Gideon stepped forward and killed them and took the ornaments off their camels' necks. And then in verse 26, the weight of the gold rings he asked for came to 1700 shekels, not counting the ornaments, the pendants, and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian or the chains that were on their camels' necks.

[30 : 59] Gideon was collecting all of their royal paraphernalia and appropriating it for himself. And notice back in verse 24, even when he says that he's not going to rule over them, he says, well, I just have one request from you.

What is it that he asks for? I do have one request that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder. He's taking tribute from them.

And who collects tribute from those under him apart from a king? And notice in verse 30, how many wives did Gideon have?

He had 70 sons of his own, for he had many wives. Gideon had a harem. Okay, who has a harem but a king? And then finally, in verse 1 of chapter 9, Gideon had lots of sons.

Do you notice the name of his son in chapter 9? Abimelech. Now, you may know that often in the Bible, names have a meaning.

[32 : 15] Do you know what Abimelech means? It means, my father is king. Not too subtle on Gideon's part. The man who said, oh, no, no, no, no, I won't be your king.

God will be your king. And then he names his son, my dad's the king. Well, Gideon wanted to be king. He couldn't quite bring himself to say it, could he? But Gideon wanted to be king.

But he was the wrong kind of king. He was a king who trusted in his own power and used his position for his own aggrandizement, and he became a brutal tyrant who oppressed his own people.

He was supposed to save them from their oppressors, and to a certain extent, he himself became an oppressor. It is true, maybe you think I'm being too hard on Gideon. At the end, God does acknowledge the good things that God had done for Israel, but the overall trajectory of Gideon's life was not a good one.

And he represents the wrong kind of king, a king who trusted in himself. He represents a king, who corrupted the worship of Israel, who corrupted the worship of their God.

[33 : 31] This is so important because the book of Judges isn't given to us merely as a list of examples. It's not merely given to you so that you can be like Gideon, or rather so that you can be a better Gideon.

The book of Judges isn't merely written to challenge you to do better. It does challenge us, but most of all, the book of Judges is pointing us forward to a greater leader.

In those days, every man did what was right in his own eyes because there was no king. The book of Judges, and in a sense, the whole of the Old Testament, is looking forward to God's greater king.

It's looking forward to Jesus. And as we look at how he's described, we see that he is exactly the opposite kind of king to Gideon. In Philippians chapter 2, in verse 5, Paul says, in your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage.

Rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, and being a found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.

[35 : 00] That is astonishing. Jesus was king. He is king. Jesus is the eternal son of God.

If anyone deserved to be served, it was Jesus. And yet, Jesus came into this world, and he didn't use his position for his own benefit.

He did exactly the opposite. He became a servant. He died. He died on a cross, and he didn't do that for his own sake. Jesus did that for your sake.

He did that to save you. Jesus is the opposite kind of king to Gideon. He trusted entirely in his father.

He didn't use his position for his own benefit, and he gave himself. And then secondly, whereas Gideon sadly corrupted the worship of Israel, Jesus instituted a true worship.

[36 : 07] You know, I think one of the most remarkable verses in the Bible is in Ephesians chapter three. In Ephesians chapter three, there's a verse, it's verse 12, Paul there again is speaking about Jesus, and he says, in him, in Jesus, and through faith in him, we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

That's such an astonishing thought. I suspect that many of us, even if we know the gospel, even if we're trusting in Jesus, we are perhaps still scared of approaching God.

Because he is so highly exalted, and he is so holy, and we recognize that we are, even as his people, even as those who try to follow him, we are so sinful. And we think, how could we approach this God?

And Paul tells us that through Jesus, we can approach him not fearfully, not with trepidation. There is obviously a sense in which we should have a reverence and an awe for God, we should tremble in his presence, but at the same time, Paul can say that we approach him boldly and with confidence.

That's an astonishing thing, and that is what is offered to us through our king, through Jesus. So, as we come to this account in Judges this evening, as we consider the experience of Gideon, it challenges us.

[37 : 45] It challenges you, even in a time of difficulty, to ask yourself, what is my strength? Faced with whatever may be coming upon us, what is it that we're trusting in?

And then secondly, it challenges us to ask, what do I worship? What is it that I set my heart on? What is it that I really love?

What is it that I get up in the morning and I think about? What is most precious to me? But then also, it challenges you to ask, do you know Jesus as your king?

Do you know him as the one who laid down his life for you? And do you know him as the king through whom, by faith in whom, you can approach the Father with boldness confidence?

May God bless his word. We'll bow our heads as we pray. Our Father in heaven, we rejoice in your word, and we ask that you would bless it to us, make your word precious to us.

[38 : 58] We thank you for the encouragement that we find, even in the way that you worked in the lives of your people through fallible servants like Gideon. And we pray that in light of all of our stubbornness and our foibles and the sin that we struggle with, we rejoice that we can know that you work through us.

We pray, Father, that you would bless us through your word. We ask, Father, that you would teach us increasingly to trust in you. We pray, Father, that you would overwhelm us with a sense of wonder as we consider what you have done for us, and that we would set our hearts entirely upon you, and that you would be the one whom we worship.

And most of all, we pray that you would make Jesus to be precious to us, Jesus our King. May we delight in him. Watch over us as we go from here.

We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.