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God Can Overcome Our Limitations: Gideon Judges 6:1-27

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In the Old Testament, following the leadership Moses and Joshua the people of Israel began a period of decline that is described in the Book of Judges. One of the leaders during this period was Gideon who lived about 1300 years before the birth of Christ. The book of Judges is shaped by the repeated pattern of the tragic and violent results of people failing to worship, serve, and obey God alone. Today we hear in Judges 6 that after a period of 40 years of peace and security, “the Israelites did evil in the sight of the Lord,” and this led to seven years of severe oppression at the hands of a nomadic people known as the Midianites. Judges 6:5 is the first mention of camels in the Bible and they were used by the Midianites like long-distance cavalry for rapid strikes throughout the land. The Midianites’ strategy was to swoop in and destroy or take the Israelites crops and livestock, devastating their food supply, impoverishing the Israelites to brink of starvation. Living in fear, the people sought refuge in caves and other strongholds and “cried out to the Lord for help.”

In response to the people’s prayers the Lord first sent a prophet (6:7-10) who reminded them of God’s deliverance of their ancestors, of God’s instruction **not to worship the gods of the peoples around them, and of their failure to listen**. Then the Lord sends an angel to speak to Gideon. This is powerful simply in reminding us that God is so gracious that even the prayers of desperate, disobedient people do go unheard. God hears and responds to the prayers of the people.

So it is in the midst of an atmosphere of fear, poverty, hunger, spiritual disobedience and idolatry, and repeated attacks and oppression by a superior enemy force, that we meet Gideon. Today we’re going to take a look at what happens to Gideon and see what we can learn about our lives from looking at his experience.

“Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the oak at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press, to hide it from the Midianites. The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, **“The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior.”** Gideon answered him, **“But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds** that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian.” Then the LORD turned to him and

said, **“Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.”**

He responded, **“But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”** The LORD said to him, **“But I will be with you, and you shall strike down the Midianites,** every one of them.” Then he said to him, “If now I have found favor with you, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. Do not depart from here until I come to you, and bring out my present, and set it before you.” And he said, “I will stay until you return.”

So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat, and unleavened cakes from an ephah (ee’fah) of flour; the meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the oak and presented them. The angel of God said to him, “Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour out the broth.” And he did so. Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes; and the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. Then Gideon perceived that it was the angel of the LORD; and Gideon said, **“Help me, Lord God! For I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.”** But the LORD said to him, **“Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die.” Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD, and called it, The LORD is peace.** To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites.

That night the LORD said to him, “Take your father’s bull, the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that belongs to your father, and cut down the sacred pole^a that is beside it; and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of the stronghold here, in proper order; then take the second bull, and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the sacred pole^b that you shall cut down.” So Gideon took ten of his servants, and did as the LORD had told him; but because he was too afraid of his family and the townspeople to do it by day, he did it by night.”

In many ways Gideon’s story begins like that of Moses. If you turn with me back to the beginning of Judges 6 you’ll see **the first thing Gideon receives is a new sense of**

a Heb *Asherah*

b Heb *Asherah*

God's presence in his life and a new purpose. The angel says – “The Lord is with you, you mighty warrior.” Gideon, like many people living in difficult times, has not felt like the Lord has been with him or his people and he is the picture of anything but a mighty warrior. He is threshing wheat, which is usually done out in the open close to the wheat field as that is the most convenient thing to do. But Gideon is threshing wheat in a winepress to hide it and himself from the Midianites. While this is perhaps a realistic and wise decision, Gideon does not appear at first glance to be a brave and mighty warrior.

Gideon's response to the angel speaks for all people who want to know where the Lord is when life is bleak and hard (Judges 6:13),
“But sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us...?”

How we cope with the seeming difference and dissonance between God's story of faith and our living reality is what leads individuals to either disbelief and idolatry or to obedient, faithful response.

Gideon is upset with the way life is and he takes the opportunity to vent his feelings. Many of us can relate to Gideon's frustration and anger. If the Lord is with us, why...why is my loved one coping with such a physical problem? Why am I so lonely? Why is my marriage in need of so much help? Why are my kids or my parents making bad decisions and exercising poor judgment? Why is my body betraying me? Why do people abuse others, even children? Why are the innocent killed? Why are there so many poor and hungry people? Why are there diseases like HIV/AIDS and avian flu? Why is there so much hatred and violence in the world? Why? Why? Why? Our questions are numerous and heavy.

If the Lord is with us and loves us, why then...

we each finish that question in our own way depending on our own life situation.

There are situations in life and things that happen that are blatantly wrong or unjust. However, to be fair to the Lord, we should note that Gideon complains the Lord has ceased to deal favorably with Israel, **without admitting that Israel has ceased to live obediently to the Lord.** People are often prone to complaining that the Lord isn't doing what the God of the universe should be doing, without acknowledging that we haven't exactly upheld our side of the bargain either.

Standing in that winepress, nervously looking over his shoulder while threshing wheat, Gideon's complaint ends,
"but now the Lord has cast us off, and given us into the hand of the Midian."

Recognizing the emotional energy behind Gideon's questioning, the Lord basically says, *"I am glad you are worked up about all this oppression and injustice, now go and do something about it."* The Lord says (6:14), *"Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you."*

Gideon's hesitant and reluctant response is much like that of Moses when God commissioned him to deliver the Israelites from Egypt. Gideon is filled with excuses, he comes from a weak family in a mixed race tribe, and he is the youngest and weakest in his family. He says, *"But sir, how can I deliver Israel?"*

"My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family?"

In the Bible we learn God often uses the very young, and the very old. Abraham and Sarah are examples of the latter –Joseph in Genesis has eleven older brothers, Gideon, David, Jeremiah are all young when God calls them to action. Like Jacob, Gideon is in a sense wrestling with God over what he is being asked to do. Gideon doesn't feel up to the challenge before him. He is not qualified for the job. That is not necessarily a bad thing.

Sometimes when we say to God, *"I can't do that, I'm not qualified, I'm not strong enough, smart enough, powerful enough, or creative enough,"* God says to us, *"Just remember that and you'll be successful."* Because when we trust only in ourselves and leave God out we will often be undone by our own weaknesses, sin, or lack of ability. The truth is God can use and work through our weaknesses and limitations.

Let me share with you the lives of two children. The parents of the first child were somewhat mismatched. The father was unemployed for most of his life. The boy's mother was a teacher. He was born in Port Huron, Michigan and was evaluated by his teachers as having an IQ of 81. He was taken out of school after three months, being considered too backward to teach. He didn't re-enroll in school until two years later because he picked up scarlet fever and a respiratory infection and he was going deaf as a result of his illness. His emotional health was poor. He was stubborn, neurotic, and aloof. He did like mechanics but he also enjoyed playing with fire and wound up burning down the family house. The only good thing that could be said of him was that he liked to tinker and to fool around with trains.

The second child also seemed to be quite limited. She was a child of an alcoholic father who was quite abusive. She was sickly and often bedridden. She spent more time in the hospital than out of it. She was considered to be erratic, neurotic, and withdrawn. She would constantly bite her nails. She had a back brace because of a spinal defect. She was kind of homely. She constantly sought attention and was a daydreamer.

You might think these two people were quite limited by their circumstances and unlikely to hear any particular call – but they did and they responded. The little boy, as you may have guessed, grew up to be Thomas Edison, one of the greatest inventors in the history of the world. The little girl grew up to be Eleanor Roosevelt, who spent a great deal of her adult life caring for and helping the impoverished, underprivileged, and deprived of this world. They both heard a call to be something more than what their lives appeared to dictate, a call to go beyond the limitations of who and what they were. In 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, Paul writes about his own pleading with God to remove a source of pain, irritation, and weaknesses that he felt was limiting him. The answer he received was “But he said to me, *‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’* So I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.”

God says to Gideon, “Don’t tell me who you are, let *me* tell you who you are.” God’s perception of who we are and what we are capable of doing may be vastly different than our own. When we are looking to God for strength, wisdom, power, and insight, then the Lord can say to us the same thing that is said to Gideon, “*But I will be with you.*” **Gideon gets a new self image through God’s presence and promise to be with him.**

In response to the new sense **of** God’s presence in his life, the new calling **in** God’s presence to be a mighty warrior, and a new self image **through** God’s presence, Gideon **offers a new sacrifice to** God. He says, “*Do not depart from here... until I bring out my present.*” Gideon desires to give God an offering. When we sense God’s presence in our life, our natural inclination is to want to give to God in return. When he gives his gift, the angel of the Lord touches it with the tip of his staff and it is all consumed by fire and the angel of the Lord vanished momentarily from sight. The angel said to him, “*Peace be to you; do not fear, you shall not die.*” Gideon knows he has had a life changing experience. He builds an altar to the Lord and called it, “*The Lord is peace.*”

The building of the altar (6:24) indicates Gideon's preparedness to live obediently to God. We don't have time to go into much detail about the rest of Gideon's story (which is found in Judges 6:34-8:21). Gideon takes up his new assignment. His first act is a religious revolt—an attack on the cult that worshipped Baal-Asherah (6:25-32), which was said to be at the root of Israel's suffering (6:1, 7-10). He kills his father's bull and tears down the altar his father built to the local idols.

After the initial success, Gideon began preparation for his battle against the Midianites. He gathered together men from the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali (6:36-40). In order to emphasize God's might (and not the people's), Gideon's army was pared down from thirty-three thousand (7:3) to ultimately only three hundred—the most courageous and able warriors (7:2-8). The fame of Gideon's victories over the Midianites is attested by its reference in several Biblical passages (Isaiah 9:3; 10:26; Ps. 83:10-12; cf. 1 Sam. 12:11; Heb. 11:12). **Unfortunately, after victory was won, Gideon who began fairly well in responding to God's call ends poorly and leading the people astray.** Gideon, who began like Moses feeling overcome by his limitations and not up to the task of delivering God's people, ends up like Aaron, leading the people back into idolatry. On the surface, Gideon appears to be obedient in saying to the people in Judges 8:23, *"I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you."*

Deeds however are always more powerful than words. Gideon asked everyone to give him a golden earring they had taken from the Ishmaelites they had defeated. Gideon took the gold from the Lord's victory and had a golden ephod, an elaborate garment, made and he put it in his town and Judges 8:27 says, *"And all Israel prostituted themselves to it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family."* And Gideon who said, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you," named his son Abimelech which means, "my father[is] king!" And his son's legacy would be disastrous.

So the word of warning in Gideon's story is that while God can help us overcome our limitations, we also are to remember when victory, success, or achievement come to give the praise, glory, and credit to God and not to assert that we have done it ourselves. We are to remember the importance of not just beginning well as Gideon did, but finishing well and leaving a legacy of worshiping, serving, and obeying God alone.

We are to remember to honor God. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “**Relying on God has to begin all over again every day as if nothing yet had been done.**”

Prayer: "Lord, we pray not for tranquility, nor that our tribulations may cease; we pray for your spirit and your love, that you grant us strength and grace to overcome adversity through Jesus Christ". Amen.

Blessing: “When you have no helpers, see your helpers in God. When you have many helpers, see God in all your helpers. When you have nothing but God, see all in God. When you have everything, see God in everything. Under all conditions, stay thy heart only on the Lord.” *Charles Spurgeon*