

**THE STORY OF GIDEON:**  
*“Then the angel of the LORD came and  
sat beneath the great tree at Ophrah”*

Has anyone ever treated you badly and you just couldn't understand it because you had been so good to them? Maybe you had performed some valuable service for them, or were kind to them when kindness was something that they needed most. But, for whatever reason, they just sort of kicked you to the side. When that happens to us, we generally throw up our hands and just shout at them, ***“I’ve had it with you! I’m through with you, and I am never going to do anything for you again!”*** Well, it’s a good thing that God wasn’t like that with Gideon and the people of Israel. God had blessed them in so many ways by leading their forefathers out of slavery in Egypt and by giving them the opportunity to flourish in the Promised Land. And yet they turned from God. On the Sabbath, the places of worship that had been dedicated to God were largely vacant, while they paraded around in worship of the idols of the pagan land in which they lived. During the week days they lived their lives in the same debauchery as the world around them. For the next few Sundays, we’ll be looking at the history of Israel and Gideon during the 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C. as it is described in Judges Chapters 6-8. It’s a fascinating story because Gideon was anything but a one dimensional person.

At times, Gideon was, indeed, a hero. In fact, in the New Testament, the Book of Hebrews<sup>1</sup> basically lists a “Hall of Fame” of Old Testament heroes, and Gideon’s name is right there among them. And yet, at other times, Gideon was anything but heroic. In Gideon, we see the great potential that each of us has as a servant of God who, with the help of the Holy Spirit, can achieve great things. Or, we can adopt the other side of Gideon—the one that was a doubter, a slacker, and a backslider in matters of faith. And as we walk through these historical pages of the Bible, I want you to note just how much life in the hilly country around the Valley of Jezreel in Gideon’s time looks so much like life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century here in our country. And while we do that, ask yourself: “Which Gideon will I be?”—because the *“Gideon”* that we will examine starting this morning and in the upcoming sermons is a divided person. And you can’t live like that—you have to make a choice to be a *“Gideon of God”* or a *“Gideon of the world.”*

Well, let’s get started with a little background information that is provided in the first 10 verses of Judges 6. This is the historical context within which this story develops: <sup>1</sup> The Israelites did evil in the LORD’s sight. So the LORD handed them over to the Midianites for seven years. <sup>2</sup> The Midianites were so cruel that the Israelites made hiding places for themselves in the mountains, caves, and strongholds. <sup>3</sup> Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, marauders from Midian, Amalek, and the people of the

east would attack Israel, <sup>4</sup> camping in the land and destroying crops as far away as Gaza. They left the Israelites with nothing to eat, taking all the sheep, goats, cattle, and donkeys. <sup>5</sup> These enemy hordes, coming with their livestock and tents, were as thick as locusts; they arrived on droves of camels too numerous to count. And they stayed until the land was stripped bare. <sup>6</sup> So Israel was reduced to starvation by the Midianites. Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help. <sup>7</sup> When they cried out to the LORD because of Midian, <sup>8</sup> the LORD sent a prophet to the Israelites. He said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of slavery in Egypt. <sup>9</sup> I rescued you from the Egyptians and from all who oppressed you. I drove out your enemies and gave you their land. <sup>10</sup> I told you, ‘I am the LORD your God. You must not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you now live.’ But you have not listened to me.” Judges 6:1-10 (NLT2)

So what’s going on here? And, who are these Midianites anyway? Well, they were descended from Abraham by his concubine, Keturah<sup>2</sup>, and they were a wicked and idolatrous people who worshipped the pagan god, Baal. And because of that, God had commanded their destruction.<sup>3</sup> But, during this period of the Early Iron Age, the Israelites’ offensive capabilities from a military perspective were almost nil. And their defensive posture wasn’t much better because they had not yet built or gained control of any fortified cities in this area. And so, these Midianite raiders took advantage of that by swooping in on their camels and pillaged the small Israelite farming settlements by stealing their food, livestock and anything else of value. They’d then turn and swiftly take off on their camels with all their loot before the Israelites could do anything to stop them.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the Israelites had to do whatever they could to hide their agricultural products from the view of these raiders. And as bleak as things appeared from a purely military point of view, things were even bleaker from a spiritual perspective.

Many Israelites had given in to the pressures placed upon them by these Midianites. They gave in to the old **“if you can’t beat’em, join’em”** philosophy that seems so attractive to those who have more faith in the world than they do in God.<sup>5</sup> You see, many of the Israelites joined in worshipping Baal and simply turned their backs on God. But, others still had enough faith to at least cry out to God to deliver them from the oppression of these wicked Midianites. But, it is important to notice how God responded to their pleas. He didn’t send a great and mighty warrior who would rally the Israelites and lead them in running their enemies out of the land. No, it says that God sent an **unnamed prophet**—not one who’d perform miraculous feats to torment and confound these wicked raiders (like Moses did to Pharaoh), but one whose efforts were directed toward the people of Israel, and not offensively against their enemy. This prophet came for the sole purpose of delivering a message to them. He

reminded them of all of God's great faithfulness. He told them to recall the wonderful miracles that God had performed in the past when He led His people out of Egypt. And, He wanted them to know that their current predicament in having to deal with the oppressive Midianite raiders was something that they had brought upon themselves by their own acts of disobedience and rejection of God. The people had prayed for relief from their suffering and thought that such relief could come only if the Midianites were removed from their lives. But, the purpose of this prophet was to remind them that the Midianites weren't the source of their problems and that getting rid of them could never provide them with lasting relief. Rather, they needed to get rid of something else in their lives. They needed to repent and rid themselves of their sins. And this message of repentance was the last thing that they wanted to hear because it confronted them with the fact that their actual "worst enemies" were really themselves.<sup>6</sup> And once the prophet delivered that message, the stage was set for our introduction to this man, Gideon—whose name, by the way, means "**one who cuts to pieces.**"<sup>7</sup> By the time we get to the end of his story, the question becomes: Exactly what is it that he cuts to pieces—God's enemies and the idols of Baal . . . or himself?

In any event, here's what happens next: <sup>11</sup> Then the angel of the LORD came and sat beneath the great tree at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash of the clan of Abiezer. Gideon son of Joash was threshing wheat at the bottom of a winepress to hide the grain from the Midianites. <sup>12</sup> The angel of the LORD appeared to him and said, "Mighty hero, the LORD is with you!" <sup>13</sup> "Sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all the miracles our ancestors told us about? Didn't they say, 'The LORD brought us up out of Egypt'? But now the LORD has abandoned us and handed us over to the Midianites." <sup>14</sup> Then the LORD turned to him and said, "Go with the strength you have, and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I am sending you!" Judges 6:11-14 (NLT2)

First, note that the "**angel of the Lord**" appears to Gideon and doesn't say "**Hello,**" or "**How's it going?**" or "**What's up?**" or even "**Que pasa?**" Rather, He comes right up and looks at Gideon, then addresses him as: "**Mighty hero!**" Now, when some people read that knowing pretty much how the story goes, they tend to think that this is a polite compliment. But, at this point Gideon had done nothing that would qualify him as a "**mighty hero.**" In fact, there he was cowering in the winepress thrashing his wheat looking a lot more like a "**mighty zero**" than any kind of hero. Why? You have to ask yourself, "**What's wrong with this picture?**" You see, you don't normally thrash wheat in a wine press. Rather, a wine press is a place that you crush grapes to produce the juice to make wine. So what's the deal? Well, the floor of a wine press was usually in a low lying area below the grade of the surrounding terrain. So, Gideon had taken his sheaves of wheat down into the wine press to thrash it

because then, at this lower elevation, he would be outside the sight of the Midianites. He wanted to keep his thrashing activities secret, because he was afraid of these raiders. He was scared to death that they'd come flying in on their camels and kill him, then steal all his grain. That's why we find him down below the surface of the ground in a winepress. And so, when the angel of Lord addressed Gideon as a "mighty hero," it wasn't a compliment at all. Rather, it was a jab at Gideon's cowardly behavior. In a world that had rejected God, the Lord didn't like seeing His people hiding in pits. That was true back then, and remains especially true for Christians today.

There is something else here that should not escape our attention. Notice that if Gideon were doing all this thrashing within the confines of a wine press, the dust must have been awful. I don't know how many of you have ever gotten up bales of hay in an open field during a hot summer day, but whenever the hay-bailer comes close to you it heaves what feels like a ton of hay dust up into the air and it seems like it will smother you. That's in the open air of a field. I can only imagine how bad it would be down in the pit of a wine press thrashing wheat. The dirt, grime and dust must have been almost unbearable. And yet, into that grimy scene came the "angel of the Lord." But, it wasn't only dirty in the physical sense. It was nasty in spiritual terms as well. Remember, in the very first verse we read this morning, it told us that the ***"Israelites had done evil in the LORD's sight"*** because they had abandoned God. Yet, despite all of this, the angel of the Lord had voluntarily come and was willingly exposed to all this physical and spiritual filth.

So who is this ***"angel of the Lord"***? Although biblical scholars have debated this issue, the consensus seems to be that this isn't a mere ***"angel"*** in the sense of a created being sent by God. No, this phrase—***"angel of the Lord"***—as used in the Old Testament, is referring to someone far greater than a mere angel. This is a reference to the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ<sup>8</sup> who made several appearances throughout the Old Testament. Now, think about that. Here, the Israelites had been thumbing their noses at God by bowing down to the idols of Baal and generally rejecting God. And yet God sends His Son down from the unimaginable beauty of Heaven—the purest, most fresh and spotless of all places—down into this dirty, dusty winepress where Gideon is thrashing his wheat.

It reminds me of a story told by the Christian writer, Leith Anderson, when he was visiting in the Philippines. And while he was there, he went to a garbage dump located on the outskirts of the City of Manila. And to his amazement, he found that tens of thousands of people were actually making their homes there in that massive dump. They built these little shacks out of discarded construction debris where they raised their families. Each day, the parents would send their children out to scavenge for food from the garbage of other people just so that they could eat and have enough to survive. Now,

what he found to be the most incredible thing was that they were free to venture out into the City of Manila where they could actually improve their living conditions, but they didn't. Rather, they chose to live in that dump. But, you know what? There were other people who voluntarily chose to live in that dump as well. They were American missionaries—missionaries who chose to leave their homes here in the States in a land of great prosperity and material abundance to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with those people living in that dump who had never heard about God's great love for them. Now that, indeed, does sound amazing. That sounds like a great sacrifice by those missionaries. And it is a great sacrifice on their part. But, it is nothing compared to the sacrifice that Jesus made when He voluntarily left His home on high to enter into a dirty, dusty, filth-filled world and die on a Cross for the likes of you and me.<sup>9</sup>

And that is the way it was regarding the people of Gideon's day. Jesus came even though Gideon's own father was one of those who had set up an idol of Baal right there on the town square where Gideon's family members lived. Isn't it a crazy, up-side-down world that worships wooden idols, like Baal, instead of the true God and Creator of the Universe? Could there be any more mixed up world as that? Well, yeah, there could be—and we live in it. The people of our day in this country are even worse than those during Gideon's time when it comes to embracing things of evil and thinking that they are good. For example, **130 people die every day** in the U.S.A. by opioid-related deaths.<sup>10</sup> So what's the solution to this crucial problem? Well, the people in 11 states have made sure to elect leaders who would address the important problems in their lives. And what could be more important than smoking pot—right? Led by the laid-back tokers of Colorado, these 11 states have now legalized marijuana for recreational use. If you want to stem the tide of drug addiction and opioid deaths in this country, they are convinced that legalizing more “*starter*” drugs—like marijuana—is the way to go. Maybe if they just keep on toking—they will come up with more brilliant ideas to address our moral decline!

And that seems to be the case with some of the lawmakers in New York who must have been high when they came up with their own brilliant solution to the problem of the sexual exploitation of women. This past Monday, legislators in New York introduced bills to decriminalize prostitution. They have decided to do that by calling prostitution a “**good**” thing, rather than the “evil” thing that it really is. One news source described their efforts “**as the most comprehensive decriminalization effort ever initiated in the United States.**”<sup>11</sup> This proposed legislation defines prostitutes as “**sex workers**” who are simply trying to ply a legitimate trade between consenting adults, thus decriminalizing the world's oldest profession and elevating its practice as just being another commercial transaction.

The world loves to call evil things good, or to call good things evil. But, that tendency has consequences—those consequences typically involve great sorrow. The Prophet Isaiah came along about 500 years after the people of Gideon’s time, and 2,300 years before the warped legislators generated by our society. Yet his words address both them and us when he said: <sup>20</sup> “What sorrow for those who say that evil is good and good is evil, that dark is light and light is dark, that bitter is sweet and sweet is bitter.” <sup>21</sup> What sorrow for those who are wise in their own eyes and think themselves so clever. . . <sup>24</sup> For they have rejected the law of the LORD of Heaven’s Armies; they have despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.” Isaiah 5:20-21, 24 (NLT2)

Back in 2012, Billy Graham commented on this. This is how he put it: ***“Modern social righteousness often differs from the righteousness of the Bible. Someone has said: ‘A wrong deed is right if the majority of people declare it not to be wrong.’ By this principle we can see our standards shifting from year to year according to the popular vote! Divorce was once frowned upon by society, and laws against fornication and adultery were strictly enforced. But now divorce is accepted by society, and fornication is glorified in our literature and films.”***<sup>12</sup> Of course, in the seven years since Billy Graham wrote those words, things have only gotten worse. The newest ***evils*** that the world calls ***“good”*** are gay-marriage and the promotion of conspicuous recreational drug use. Soon, it may be prostitution. Who knows what vile and evil practices will be condoned and promoted after that. On the other hand, the greatest good that the world now makes out to be evil is the Word of God.

And with those thoughts, we’ll leave Gideon there in that winepress for the time being. But, we have to ask ourselves if we too are hiding in our own comfortable winepresses. Already, in just these few opening verses of Judges 6, God challenges us to stop our cowering as Christians. He wants us to rise up and start acting and living like His people in a world that delights in equating evil with good, and good with evil. The same message that He has for us is a universal one—it is the one that that unnamed prophet proclaimed. It is the message to repent and come back to God. It is a call to wake up and realize that just because the media, or a Congressman or a Congresswoman, a Supreme Court Justice, a movie or rock star, or any other member of the social elites, try to redefine something as ***“good”*** when God’s Word says that it is ***evil***—well, we must stand with God and be prepared to take the consequences. How do we muster the strength and courage to do that? What Jesus said to Gideon, He says to you now: “Go with the strength you have, and rescue [America] from those [modern-day] Midianites. I am sending you! And if Christ is the One who sends you, then you have nothing to worry about—for He will surely go with you into whatever winepress or garbage dump you are called to enter. Trust God, for He is sending you not to cower down, but to stand tall in a world that can no longer

distinguish evil from good—a world that hasn't changed very much since the time of Gideon, or even from the time of Adam.

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church  
Darvin Satterwhite, Pastor  
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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 11:32 (NLT2) It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 25:1-2 (NLT2) <sup>1</sup> Abraham married another wife, whose name was Keturah. <sup>2</sup> She gave birth to Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, **Midian**, Ishbak, and Shuah.

<sup>3</sup> Rob Fleenor and Mark S. Ziese, *The College Press NIV Commentary – Judges and Ruth*, ed. Terry Briley and Paul Kissling, (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 107.

<sup>4</sup> Darlene R. Gautsch, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. "GIDEON," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

<sup>5</sup> Rob Fleenor and Mark S. Ziese, *The College Press NIV Commentary – Judges and Ruth*, ed. Terry Briley and Paul Kissling, (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 108.

<sup>6</sup> Rob Fleenor and Mark S. Ziese, *The College Press NIV Commentary – Judges and Ruth*, ed. Terry Briley and Paul Kissling, (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 109.

<sup>7</sup> Darlene R. Gautsch, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), s.v. "GIDEON," WORDsearch CROSS e-book.

<sup>8</sup> Rob Fleenor and Mark S. Ziese, *The College Press NIV Commentary – Judges and Ruth*, ed. Terry Briley and Paul Kissling, (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing, 2008), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 112.

<sup>9</sup> Leith Anderson, "A God's-Eye View of Christmas," Preaching Today Audio, no. 208, 1001 Illustrations that Connect, by Craig Brian Larson & Phyllis Ten Elshof, Zondervan: U.S. (2008).

<sup>10</sup> Nation Institute on Drug Abuse, <https://www.drugabuse.gov>, revised January, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Jesse McKinley, "Bills to Decriminalize Prostitution Are Introduced. Is New York Ready?," The New York Times, <https://www.msn.com>, June 12, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Billy Graham, "Billy Graham on Confusing Evil With Good, Billy Graham Evangelical Association, <https://billygraham.org>, February 12, 2012.