

Gideon: Learning How To Trust

Rev. Brian Bill

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I was really moved by my visit to the Wall that Heals at the Western Illinois campus in Moline last Friday morning as I was reminded that 58,315 men and women gave their lives in Vietnam. This wall is a replica of the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial in Washington, D.C. I struggled to put my thoughts and feelings into words until I read what Beth Cullet posted on Facebook a day later. I have her permission to share what she wrote:

The names on that wall represent living, breathing people who were scared and far from home when their lives were cut short. Vietnam may have been a costly mistake, or it may have been our duty to help an oppressed nation; whichever side you're on doesn't change the fact that these names - these people - deserve to be remembered.

And the ones who came home deserve to be thanked because a cold, hard fact of life is that war is both ugly and inevitable. If we want to spend our days streaming Netflix and going to baseball games and complaining about our government, then someone has to be out there protecting what we have.

My husband [Dan] served in Desert Storm. When he came home, he was greeted with an outpouring of love and support from crowds of people we had never met.

So, to those whose names are on the wall: I remember.

And to those who came home with physical and/or emotional scars the rest of us will never understand: Thank you for your service, and thank you for coming home.

If you served in Vietnam, would you please stand so we can say thank you? If you have a family member or friend who gave his or her life in Vietnam, would you please stand? If you're a vet or currently serving our country, could you also stand?

Memorials help us to reflect and remember so we don't forget. That's one reason Beth and I have been to Hero Street in Silvis twice – over 100 men

and women from this 1 ½ blocks long street have served in the Armed Forces!

We're kicking off a four-part series this weekend to help us focus on some heroes, who in actuality were common men and women who did uncommon things because they trusted in the character of God. During the month of August we'll fix our gaze on Gideon, Ruth, Samson and Esther.

Today we'll look at a guy named Gideon. God loves to use ordinary people like Gideon to accomplish extraordinary things. That means He wants to use people just like you and me.

Gideon's Good News

We're going to work our way through Judges 6-8, as we focus on eight truths that will help us grow in our trust of God. We'll only be able to hit some highlights, or lowlights, so I hope you'll read these three chapters for yourself.

1. God uses adversity to get our attention (Judges 6:1-10). The Book of Judges chronicles a very tough time in the history of Israel, serving as a hinge between the successes of Joshua and the establishment of the monarchy in 1 Samuel. Covering around 400 years, God's people progressively drift away from the Lord.

The last phrase of this book gives us insight into why things were going south for them: "...*everyone did what was right in his own eyes*" (Judges 21:25). And because of that, on seven different occasions we read of God's people cycling through a period of rebellion, which led to retribution from God. After suffering for some time, they would eventually cry out to God and then be restored to a time of rest and peace. But then they'd begin the process all over again.

When we come to Judges 6, the nation of Israel has slipped into sin again. Verse 1 tells us that because they did evil in the eyes of the Lord, God's people were given into the hands of the mighty Midianites. They were extremely powerful and oppressed the Israelites mercilessly. Because things were so bad, the Israelites had left their homes and were living in caves, fearing for their lives. The Midianites were nomadic people, and would

invade Israel every year at harvest time. Verse 5 mentions that they would come in like locusts and ravage the land.

Finally, after seven long years, according to verse 6 the Israelites were **“brought very low because of Midian”** and cried out to the Lord for help. It’s as if they waited until they couldn’t take it any longer. They probably had excuses and explanations. Actually, we do the same thing, don’t we? We know God is trying to get our attention but we hold out, thinking that we can handle it on our own. Even when God allows bad stuff to percolate through the pores of our life, we often refuse to repent and return to Him.

I love verse 7 because it shows that when we cry out to God, He responds. In this case, He sends an unnamed prophet to remind them of their history and heritage.

He loves you just the way you are but He loves you too much to let you keep living the way you are. C.S. Lewis once said, *“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains; it’s His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”* Is God using adversity to get your attention?

2. God always sees more than we do (6:11-12). I love this next scene. Geeky Gideon was threshing some wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. The Hebrew word expresses the idea of hiding. A winepress was made out of stone and was built underground.

When someone would thresh wheat they’d normally do it out in the open so that the wind could blow away the chaff. But Gideon is afraid of the Midianites and so he’s whacking the wheat with a stick. I picture him pulling some branches over the winepress so no one could see him. He’s defeated and discouraged, filled with doubts and fears.

Verse 12 tells us that *the* angel of the Lord (this is likely a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ) said to Gideon, **“The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.”** Gideon immediately looks behind him for the mighty warrior.

This reminds me of an “Adventures in Odyssey” episode that is a favorite in our family. The setting is a snowball fight that breaks out over some chocolate chip cookies. Alex, the commander of this ragtag army asks a

question to his younger and smaller squad, “*Are we warriors or are we wimps?*” To which they reply in a very high voice, “*We are wimps, sir!*” That’s precisely how Gideon could be described. He was more wimp than warrior.

God always sees more than we see. When He looks at you, He sees a hero in hiding. When God looks at Gideon, He sees a strong soldier. In one sense, God is speaking prophetically because He knows what Gideon is about to accomplish. But on the other hand, He’s speaking a positional truth - because the Lord is with him, he *is* a mighty warrior.

Just as Gideon did not see himself as a mighty man of valor, many of us don’t fully understand who we are in Christ. Some of us have an image of ourselves that is not only unhealthy; it’s not biblical. We need to reframe our understanding by allowing the truth of God’s Word to impact our identity. If you are a born again believer, these 10 things are true about you...

- You are God’s child (John 1:12)
- You have been justified (Romans 5:1)
- You are free forever from condemnation (Romans 8:1)
- You will never be separated from the love of God (Romans 8:35)
- You are a saint (Ephesians 1:1)
- You have been adopted as God’s child (Ephesians 1:5)
- You are God’s workmanship (Ephesians 2:10)
- You are a citizen of heaven (Philippians 3:20)
- You have been redeemed and forgiven (Colossians 1:14)
- You are complete in Christ (Colossians 2:10)

I like how one pastor puts it: “*You are a blood-bought, spirit-filled, heaven-bound, fully-equipped warrior with special armor designed to tear down strongholds of the enemy.*”

God knows who you are even if you don’t.

3. God confirms His priorities with His presence (6:13-24). Instead of reporting for duty, Gideon questions God, wondering why a bunch of bad things have happened to his people. We often do the same, don’t we? When the bottom falls out, our faith becomes fractured.

It's interesting that God doesn't answer his "why" questions. In verse 14 God says, "***Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?***" Gideon responds that his resume isn't very impressive. He's from Manasseh, the lowest and weakest tribe and he's the youngest in his family. He's a small man from a little clan.

God confirms His priorities with His presence in verse 16, "***But I will be with you.***" This is even more personal than what God said in verse 14: "***The Lord is with you...***" Gideon is given a commission but is also promised the personal companionship of the Lord Himself. One person plus God is always a majority! *It's not a matter of who you are but who is with you.* Missionary Hudson Taylor once remarked, "*All of God's great men have been weak men who did great things for God because they reckoned on His being with them.*"

Gideon isn't sure so he asks the angel to wait for a few minutes while he runs off and bakes some bread and throws a goat on the grill. The meal is placed on a rock and then is vaporized by fire from heaven. When Gideon realizes that He is in the presence of the Almighty, he cries out in verse 22: "***Alas, O Lord GOD!***" Gideon then built an altar to the Lord and named it Jehovah Shalom, which means, "*The Lord is Peace.*"

Gideon needed to understand who he was, but more importantly, He needed a personal encounter with God. Napoleon's soldiers used to say, "*When Napoleon takes our hands and looks at us, we feel like conquerors.*" When the Lord turned and looked at him, Gideon must have had an overwhelming sense of the peace that can only come from being in the presence of God.

Likewise, the most important thing we can do is to get to know God as we look "full into His marvelous face." Once we do, we'll sense His presence, we'll understand His priorities, and in the process, we'll be fired up to live out our purpose.

4. Private faithfulness is a prerequisite to public fruitfulness (6:25-32). Before Gideon can be used publicly, he must first take care of some things in his personal life. The Lord then gave him the assignment to take his dad's bull and tear down the family altar to Baal and incinerate the Asherah pole, which was an image to the goddess of fertility and sexual immorality. Baal worship also involved child sacrifice and sexuality.

Not too surprisingly, Gideon would rather do this demo job at night because he knew how his dad would react. Not much of a hero, is he? Actually, heroism is optional but obedience is essential.

Our newest ministry at Edgewood is called, *Mainspring*. Their first gathering for college-age and twenty-somethings was a night of worship at the Establishment in downtown Rock Island Thursday night. It was very moving to see about 100 young people praising God. Pastor Kyle challenged them to worship in spirit and truth and then called them to personal repentance. He laid it out so clearly – God wants to use the millennial generation to spread revival in our land but each member of that generation must first be personally committed to wholehearted worship and personal purity.

Friend, if you want to learn how to trust God then you must first get your own heart and home in order. Before God can use you mightily, He must be magnified by how you live. Is there a sexual sin you're clinging to? Any idol you've been bowing to? Confess it and knock down any altars you find.

5. God is patient with our faith process (6:33-40). When we come to verse 33, we read that the Midianites and a bunch of other “ites” (stalagmites, stalactites, etc.) are getting ready to make their annual raid. Verse 34: ***“But the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him.”*** Gideon had taken a huge step of faith in his private faithfulness and now God’s Spirit is empowering Him publicly. People are rallying behind him and his faith is growing as he marvels when 32,000 men show up.

Listen. Even though he had an encounter with the Almighty, even though he was obedient to purify his family, and even though the Holy Spirit was empowering him, he still had some doubts. Sounds like us, doesn't it? God had told him what to do but Gideon wanted to make sure. Look at verse 36: ***“If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said...”*** I love how loving, tender, and patient God is with us. He knows that God has promised to save Israel through him and yet he wants to set up a test.

This test is what Gideon is most famous for. First, he places a wool fleece on the threshing floor and says, ***“If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it***

is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said.” Even here he’s admitting again that God had already said He would do this. When he got up the next morning, the fleece was full of moisture and the ground was dry.

Apparently this wasn’t good enough for Gideon. He knew that wool tended to absorb water so this was really no big deal. He doesn’t want God to vaporize him in verse 39 when he says, ***“Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew.”*** This would be a miracle because if the ground was wet, then the wool would be wet as well. The next morning, the ground was soaked and the fleece was dry. God was gracious with Gideon’s growing faith.

Let me just say that the practice of laying out a fleece can be dangerous. Gideon was already told three times what to do. The results of our so-called “tests” can be difficult to interpret and easy to manipulate.

Aren’t you glad God is patient with us?

6. Success is determined by God’s power, not ours (7:1-8). Gideon’s now ready to rumble but God has other plans. In Judges 7:2, the Lord said to Gideon, ***“The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”*** Gideon must have wondered what was going on. He already knew they were outnumbered but his guys were pumped. God then does some sifting and tells anyone who is ***“fearful and trembling”*** to go home. Amazingly, 22,000 men boogied and only 10,000 remained.

As Gideon is getting ready to go into battle, God says in verse 4 that there are still too many men. He tells Gideon to take them down to the water and let them drink. 300 men made cups out of their hands and drank while 9,700 kneeled and thrust their faces in the water to drink. Commentators have suggested that those who made cups with their hands were more prepared for battle because they could still look around and reach their weapon if they needed to. Those who put their face into the water were vulnerable and unprepared.

After ferreting out the fearful and the foolish, God then tells Gideon that he will save Israel with 300 men. We know from chapter 8 that the enemy

army had 135,000 human fighting machines. Gideon probably did some math in the sand and quickly realized that for every one Israelite, there were 450 Midianites. His army is less than 1% of its original size. Talk about being outnumbered!

God loves to show Himself strong when we feel weak. He delights in the difficult, but He specializes in the impossible. In Luke 18:27, Jesus said, ***“What is impossible with man is possible with God.”*** Someone has said that we should *“attempt something so big for God that unless He is in it, it will fail.”*

God doesn't need us to accomplish His purposes. Have you ever noticed how much He can do through just a few people? God works through a dedicated core, not through a divided crowd because He seeks followers, not fans. When our numbers are reduced, then we know its God who is doing the work. *God took an overwhelming situation and made it impossible. 2 Corinthians 12:9: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

7. God gives us assurance when we do things His way (7:9-25). After whittling down the troops, God knows that Gideon may be a bit nervous so he has him go down to where the Midianites are camped so that he can over hear someone tell about a dream that he had. When Gideon realizes that the dream was about the Midianites' defeat at the hand of the Israelites, verse 15 tells us that he worshiped God.

I love how God goes out of His way to give us assurance when we do things His way. I can think of at least five things we can be totally certain about if we have put our faith in Jesus Christ:

- Assurance of salvation (1 John 5:11-12)
- Assurance of answered prayer (John 16:24)
- Assurance of victory (1 Corinthians 10:13)
- Assurance of forgiveness (1 John 1:9)
- Assurance of guidance (Proverbs 3:5-6)

After Gideon receives assurance, he divides the three hundred men into three companies and gives each of them trumpets and clay pots with torches inside

them – no shields, spears or swords. They don't even have slingshots! He gives them the battle plan, telling them to follow his lead.

Normally, only a few soldiers carried trumpets for signaling because hands were needed for weapons and shields. Likewise, only a small number held torches to illuminate the battlefield. When the Midianites heard the blast of 300 trumpets, the sound of clay pots crashing and saw the myriad of torches, they naturally assumed there was a massive army ready to pounce on them. They got spooked and started running around like crazy, killing one another.

This makes me think of 2 Corinthians 4:6: ***“For God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”*** We have the light of Christ inside our lives but we must be broken, like clay pots, in order to shine as brightly as we can. Listen to verse 7: ***“But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”***

8. Be careful to give God the credit (8:22-23). After defeating the Mighty Midianites, the Gideonater is basking in the glory of a victory parade and the “high-fives” of the people. In verse 22, the Israelites say to him, ***“Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.”*** They're basically saying, “You go, Gideon! You da' man!” Gideon knew it was all about God, not about him and so he directed their focus back to the Lord in 8:23: ***“I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you.”***

There's a lot of good news about Gideon in these three chapters but his story doesn't end on a very good note. As we'll see with Samson, who started out with so much potential, a fatal flaw tripped him up in the end. While he refused to be made king, he did ask for the golden earrings of the massacred Midianites. His desire for gold tarnished the luster of his bright name. It was like kryptonite for our spiritual superhero.

He used this gold to make an ephod, which was like ornamented body armor, reserved for the high priest. According to Mosaic Law there was to be only one ephod in Israel. Unfortunately, this object became a stumbling block for the nation, much like the golden calf constructed by Aaron. Look at Judges 8:27: ***“All Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.”***

Sadly, when Gideon eventually dies, the Israelites once again prostituted themselves to Baal. They were right back to where they started. Gideon's compromise led to their downfall. One of his sons took the role of king and killed 70 of his brothers in the process.

This serves as a warning to us. We can never coast spiritually. Don't ever think that you've arrived, because you haven't.

Which of these truths do you most need to hold on to today?

1. **God uses adversity to get our attention**
2. **God always sees more than we do**
3. **God confirms His priorities with His presence**
4. **Private faithfulness is a prerequisite to public fruitfulness**
5. **God is patient with our faith process**
6. **Success is determined by God's power, not ours**
7. **God gives us assurance when we do things His way**
8. **Be careful to give God the credit**

One of the purposes behind the Vietnam War Memorial and the Wall that Heals is stated with this phrase: "we must never forget."

We need memorials to jog our memories and to jar us out of just meandering through life, focused only on ourselves. At its heart, communion is a memorial, designed to help us never forget what Christ did on our behalf.

Listen to 1 Corinthians 11:24-26: *"For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. **Do this in remembrance of me.**" ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, **in remembrance of me.**" ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."*

In order to maintain a spirit of respect and honor there were some signs at the "Wall that Heals" telling us to not talk loudly and to keep our cell phones off. In a similar way, we must make sure we don't approach communion flippantly or irreverently as seen in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29. This is intended

to be a solemn supper: *“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.”*

Communion