

FAITH MOVES MOUNTAINS - DOUBT CREATES THEM!

(FLEECE OR FAITH)

As we continue our study on Faith, another Biblical character's story can be very instructive for us. His name is Gideon.

So how much do you know about him? Ever heard of him? Did you know that the Gideons International – the people who put King James Version Bibles in hotel rooms around the world – is named for him? On the day that society was founded by three men back in 1899, they were praying about an appropriate name. One of them rose from his knees and said, "We shall be called Gideons." He proceeded to make his case by reading the sixth and seventh chapters of Judges to his colleagues. Here is what Gideons International says on its web site about the decision to link the name of that Old Testament character to their group:

"Gideon was a man who was willing to do exactly what God wanted him to do, regardless of his own judgment as to the plans or results. Humility, faith, and obedience were his great elements of character. This is the standard that the Gideon association is trying to establish in all its members, each man to be ready to do God's will at any time, at any place and in any way that the Holy Spirit leads."

That's a pretty good summary of the man – but it leaves out some interesting background. Let me fill in some of it and explain what I see of value in his story for us.

Gideon: Fifth Judge of Israel

When Joshua died, Israel had no similar leader who could stand in the role he and Moses had filled before them. So the nation in its Promised Land went through a period of disintegration. That is, the one nation disintegrated (i.e., fell apart, crumbled) into a loose confederation of tribal units. Incursions and oppressions against the Israelites put different tribes and parts of the land under the Canaanites again. So they would have to fight repeated battles to reclaim pieces of the larger whole that had once been won under Joshua. The

occasional heroic figures who led the people during these times of social chaos are called shophetim in the Hebrew text – a term that hardly corresponds to our English term “judge” and which might better be thought of as military leaders or national deliverers raised up by the mighty hand of God.

The stories of the various judges come in cycles in the Book of Judges. There is a predictable pattern of watching the people turn from God, suffer for their apostasy, cry out for deliverance, receive help through a judge, and (briefly) return to the worship of God. This period of history covers about 300 years of Hebrew history, roughly from the death of Joshua to the time of Samuel.

Gideon is the fifth of these leaders in sequence. The Midianites were systematically raiding the Hebrew territory at harvest time (Judg. 6:1-6). These camel-riding nomads would swoop down, raid the Israelites of grain and animals, and return to their own lands. With their Amalekite allies, they brought such systematic ruin on the people that many of the Israelites fled to caves and remote places in the hill country to escape them.

An interesting philosophy of history emerges in this story and throughout the Book of Judges: the Sovereign Lord uses the twists and turns of human history to accomplish his redemptive purposes. When Israel sinned, the oppression of some enemy nation could be used to bring God’s people to repentance. The Midianites were not consciously serving or Creator, of course, for they did not even believe in Him. They were pursuing their own evil goals of plundering another nation. God certainly didn’t direct them to steal, plunder, and kill. In his great power and might, though, He used their evils deeds and overruled them to holy ends (cf. Romans 8:28).

When the people began to cry out to the Lord during the Midianite oppression, the first response of heaven was to send them a prophet whose name never appears in the text. His message was that, although God had graciously chosen and blessed Israel, the people were suffering because they had not acknowledged Him and listened to His voice (Judges 6:7-10).

Gideon appears to have found a relatively safe place of retreat where he had settled his people, planted crops, and was hoping to be spared the Midianite raids. Though he evidently had hidden well enough to escape detection by the Midianites, he

could not hide from God. So the Lord went to him, and this is what happened:

The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where His son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."

"But sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all His wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."

The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

"But Lord," Gideon asked, "how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me" (Judges 6:11-17).

The "angel of the Lord" here appears to be Yahweh himself in one of those occasional theophanies we witness in the Old Testament (cf. Judg. 6:22-23). And the rapid-fire sequence of events that follows on this call is fascinating.

First, do you hear the pathos, confusion, and doubt in Gideon? "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us?" He identified with his people and their situation of oppression. The turmoil in their economy, social life, and national security had him wondering aloud if God had turned His back on them.

Second, do you see his humility? "How can I save Israel?" he wanted to know. "My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." His humility was surely one of the reasons why he had been chosen and a key to the mighty things God would do through him. Mother Teresa used to say that true humility keeps one from being ruined either by praise

or disgrace – and that the key to that sort of humility is knowing who you really are. Some people, of course, are so aware of their humility that they become proud. But humility is never conscious of itself.

Third, I'm sure you noticed his appeal for a "sign" that God was really calling him to do this great thing. At that juncture in the story, Gideon offers to fix an offering for his guest.

Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you."

And the LORD said, "I will wait until you return."

Gideon went in, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak.

The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And Gideon did so. With the tip of the staff that was in his hand, the angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared. When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!"

But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."

So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD is Peace (Judges 6:18-24a).

Fourth, Gideon immediately set about to be obedient to God without reservation. The first and best proof of humility and faith will always be obedience! He was told to break down the Baal alter and Asherah pole beside it that his own father had built – and to which he may have been making concessions. "So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the LORD told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the men of the town, he did it at night rather than in the daytime" (Judges 6:27). The next morning, what he had done caused such

outrage that the people were about to kill him. They came to his father, Joash, and demanded that he tell them where to find Gideon. The response he made certainly reveals his love for his son and may even indicate that his boy's courage had rekindled his own faith.

But Joash replied to the hostile crowd around him, "Are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning! If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar." So that day they called Gideon "Jerub-Baal," saying, "Let Baal contend with him," because he broke down Baal's altar (Judges 6:31-32).

Fifth, a wonderful thing happened that had never been witnessed by Gideon or his peers:

Now all the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him. He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, calling them to arms, and also into Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, so that they too went up to meet them (Judges 6:33-35).

Gideon became a God-possessed, God-intoxicated man. I don't know what he sensed or felt at that moment. I have no idea whether the people around him saw or heard something from him that let them know he was now a Spirit-filled man. The text simply says that it happened. **Gideon turned from being a confused, frustrated, and compromised man to a confident, forward-looking, and God-following man! I think the proof that the Holy Spirit came upon him was not tongues or fire or dancing but transformation.**

Sixth, Gideon wasn't fixed or made flawless by the Spirit coming upon him. Before he would lead Israel against the Midianites, Amalekites, and their partners camped in Jezreel, he wanted another sign. This is the episode of Gideon's fleece – perhaps the one thing some of you knew about him before this message. But the fleece episode is hardly complimentary to him! In my reading of this text, it is a moment of faltering faith to which God responded with great gentleness.

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." And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew — a bowlful of water (Judges 6:36-38).

If you will do what you have promised! **If** you will do for Israel what you said you were about to do. **If?** This is doubt and testing, not faith! This is weakness rearing its ugly head in the setting of a beautiful act of grace! But we're not through. He still wanted another sign – just in case he had read the first one wrong!

Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew." That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew (Judges 6:39-40).

Seventh, the gracious God who called him and reassured him in his moments of weakness gave the people a mighty deliverance at Gideon's hand. Chapter seven tells how God then tested Gideon's newfound faith by having him whittle down the size of his army and rout the Midianites by a most unmilitary maneuver. When they started out the next day, God successively reduced the number of troops with Gideon from 32,000 to a mere 300 – to prove that God's power rather than Israel's might had won the victory (Judges 7:1-8). With clay jars, torches, and the shout "For the Lord and for Gideon!" the handful of God's chosen people put to flight the Midianites! (Judges 7:9-25).

Do You Need a Sign?

I hear people reference the Gideon story now and again, but I'm not sure they do so with the full awareness of all that is going on in it. That is why I have spent so much time developing the story with some degree of detail. I most often hear people tell of "putting a fleece before the Lord" in ways that smack of flakiness rather than faith, I'm afraid! "Lord, if you want us to buy that house we just saw, make the phone ring in the next ten minutes." "God, if you want me to ask that

girl for a date, make her look up and see me while I'm staring at her." "Lord, if this is the car you want me to buy, let the next thing the salesman says to me be about the automobile's sound system."

In the real world, I understand insecurity. I know about wishing that I knew exactly what to do or say, just whose advice to heed, and what guaranteed approach will lead someone I love to accept Christ or return to him. I don't think the story of Gideon is meant to encourage me to seek for signs or to put God's patience to the test.

Gideon already knew what he was supposed to do. God had spoken – and spoken very clearly – on that point. Gideon's fleece showed his fear and lack of trust. Come to think of it, Gideon's fleece was more appropriate to someone who believed in Baal than someone who had heard from God. And I wouldn't be surprised at all if this superstitious test derived from the polluted and weakened faith of his family rather than from the Holy Spirit who had come upon Gideon. **So why did God "cooperate" with an unspiritual demand? He was more interested in rescuing his Chosen People than in arguing with and teaching Gideon in this crisis moment!**

So what, if anything, can we learn from Gideon? Let's go back to the process of his evolving relationship with God and see.

First, we should never be shocked at the spiritual chaos in our world. It isn't God's fault that the world is fallen and under a curse. He neither willed nor created war, tyrants, crime, divorce, lies, slander, or death. He is not the source of our human pain, but he does often use our anguish to turn our hearts to seek Him.

Second, humility before the Lord is certainly the only posture truly appropriate to any of us. Like Gideon, when we hear God speak into our confusion and distress, it is more appropriate to think "What are mortals that you would pay attention to our cries!" than "What took you so long?"

Third, we must be careful not to drag our feet in obeying God or to insist on this or that "sign" before we follow Christ. During His personal ministry, Jesus called those who demanded miraculous signs "a wicked and adulterous generation."

Furthermore, he told them that His resurrection from the dead would be the only sign given to them (Matthew 12:39-40). At some point, your demand that God give you a sign beyond Christ's death and resurrection for you is an unholy "putting God to the test" – something Scripture forbids (Deuteronomy 6:16) and Jesus refused to do (Luke 4:12). Jesus said his sheep would hear his voice and follow Him (John 10:27).

Fourth, the first positive step any human being takes toward God is repentance. We break down the heart-idols that have been keeping us from Him. That we have valued above Him. That have taken us down the path of disbelief and sin. "The kingdom of God is near," said John the Baptist. **"Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:15).** Before the kingdom rule of God can become a reality in your life, before you can express God from within, you will have to repent and tear down the idols of money, sex, and power that have been your preoccupation. If you'd prefer to hear it from an apostle of Jesus rather than his forerunner, Peter put it this way: **"Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19).** Divine refreshment and the peace that surpasses understanding cannot come to a heart that is stony and impenitent.

Fifth, God's desire is to bless and empower His people by allowing us to walk in the strength of His Holy Spirit. With the same power and energy He projects. On the first Pentecost after Christ's resurrection, Peter preached the gospel and commanded those who had heard Him, **"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).** I believe baptism is not only important but necessary. Do you know of any command of God that is unnecessary? But baptism is not the heart of the gospel. In fact, baptism is not part of the gospel at all by Paul's definition of the Good News (cf. I Corinthians 15:1-4). Baptism is part of the total life response to the gospel you and I are expected to make. It is important to us as an affirmation of the gospel – our trust in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ as our only hope (Romans 6:1-4). It is important to us as an event of identification with Christ and as an initiation rite into His spiritual body, the church (Galatians 3:27).

The critical element in Christian baptism is not water, however, but the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that the birth “from above” that allowed one to participate in the kingdom rule of God was a single birth event that involves two elements – water and the Spirit. Water is the easy part. Water is the part we fight over. Water is the part that can drench your body and leave your spirit untouched. The quickening and renewing power in Christian baptism is God the Holy Spirit. Every saved person possesses the Holy Spirit, but the real challenge of a life of faith is to be possessed by the Holy Spirit. To be controlled by the Spirit (Romans 8:9). To be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18b). God doesn’t want churches that are insane asylums or cemeteries; he wants churches alive by the power of the Holy Spirit to welcome the undesirable, hurting, and bruised people with whom satan has filled this world – and which most churches won’t touch!

Sixth, being a Spirit-filled believer in a Spirit-filled church no more means that you are above temptation or exempt from weakness than Gideon was in his new life after God called him. He still felt insecure at times; so will you. He wanted a fleece-sign before he would be willing to do what God had already told him to do; so might you. He was called and Spirit-filled but still messed up; so can you be.

Seventh, the life of faith means that you trust God to give victories and achieve His holy purposes through you. With your flawed, insecure faith. Through unlikely means. When you are in the minority. The great power of faith never was in Gideon but was in the God who had called him and in whom he had put his trust. **The power of faith in your life is not in your ability to live above discouragement and never fall short of the ideal but is in the God who loves you, delivered you, walks with you, and promises to complete the good work in you that He has begun!**

Conclusion

The call of God to your life is that you should walk by faith, not by sight (II Corinthians 5:7). To walk by sight is to do what you can figure out is right to do; to go the places you can make safe enough to go; to do the things you can do to applause and with immediately happy outcomes; never to look foolish. To walk by faith is to do what God tells you is right to do; to go to the risky places He sends you; to do things the people of this world will

laugh at and that typically are not appreciated; to look absolutely foolish to people who are judging things by the criteria of this world.

Gideon got dangerously close to trying to force God to turn faith into sight for him! He got a call from God and a sign. Then he needed another. Then – if you won't get angry – just one more! God won't often be put to that sort of test and tolerate it. You and I have already had one and another and then more signs of God's grace! To wait any longer to follow Him just might cross the line with Him and harden our hearts beyond the point of being able ever to repent and be delivered. We don't really know where the line is, but let's not find ourselves crossing it. Act on His Word – NOW!