
Immediate Context

Gideon and his offspring dominate chapters six through nine of Judges. He is one of the most well-known judges of this book. Countless Sunday School classes have taught about the whittling down of the Gideon's army and the battle that was won with trumpets, jars, and torches. Many searching Christians have followed Gideon's example of "laying out the fleece" when trying to discern God's will. Before the fleece and the battle was a young man hiding from the Midianites and beating out wheat in a winepress. That is where we will meet Gideon and see God begin his transformation into a valiant warrior. The story of Gideon and the Midianites provides a vivid example of James 4:7 – *"Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee."*

Judges 6:1-6 – The Situation

- What evil did Israel commit? We aren't told specifically, but it clearly involved idolatry, as indicated in *Judges 6:10* and *6:25-32*.
- Who are the Midianites? Midian was the fourth son born of Abraham's marriage to Keturah, after the death of Sarah (*Genesis 25:1-6*). Midian had five sons, which became a great people. They eventually settled in the Sinai peninsula, as we see when Moses fled to the Midianites from Egypt as a 40-year old and married the daughter of one of their priests, Jethro/Reuel (*Exodus 2:15-21*). Some of descendants of Jethro were featured in Judges 5, as they had switched sides from Israel to the Canaanites, but one of their women, Jael, was used by God to kill Sisera by driving a tent peg through his temple while he slept. It now appears that the rest of the Midianite tribes had grown in number and in hostility towards Israel.
- What was the nature of Midian's hostility? They afflicted Israel for seven years, not with slavery, nor with widespread conquest, but by repeatedly bullying them and sapping their livelihood. They would show up in overwhelming numbers when Israel's crops were coming in, and take what they wanted for themselves and feed their flocks on the remainder. They would also take their sheep, ox, and donkeys. In response, the Israelites made caves, dens, and strongholds (mini-fortresses) where they could store produce and hide livestock while the Midianites were around. They could only hide so much, and were plundered and oppressed for seven years.
- Who are the Amalekites and the "sons of the east"? Recall that Eglon the large Moabite (from Judges 3) had aligned himself with the Amalekites and the Ammonites to conquer portions of Israel. The Amalekites had again partnered with the Midianites and other unnamed nomadic tribes of the east to collectively torment Israel.
- What was Israel's response to the situation and was it sincere repentance? They cried out to God for deliverance. However, there is significant evidence that it was only a cry of pain, not of penitence. After this cry, God sent them a prophet to declare what they had done wrong and when we come upon Gideon, we find an altar to Baal and an Asherah, and people who are ready to kill Gideon for pulling it down (see *Judges 6:7-10, 25, and 28-30*).

Judges 6:7-10 – The Spokesman

Rather than immediately send a deliverer in response to Israel's cry, the Lord sends an unnamed prophet to proclaim a message to the people. **They just wanted to be delivered, but God wanted to teach them first; isn't this often the way He works?**

- Outline the prophet's message (three points) and identify the point of the message.
 1. Recall God's Goodness
 2. Reiteration of God's Command
 3. Revelation of their Rebellion

The point: The reason for your struggle is that you rebelled against the direct command of a good God! **Difficulty in our life is not always a result of disobedience, but when it is, God will make that clear, whether we want to hear it or not.**

- What seems to be missing from this message? It would be entirely just for God to have included not only a rebuke but a statement of consequence and call for repentance. He left it hanging and immediately began to prepare a man to be a deliverer for Israel. **This is an example of the character of our God, who initiates the work of grace in the hearts of spiritually dead and rebellious people (see Ephesians 2:1-6).**

Judges 6:11-24 – The Savior

- Who is the Angel of the Lord? All of the evidence in this passage is clear that the Angel of the Lord is the Lord Himself.
- Why was Gideon beating the wheat in the wine press? See the two pictures and note the difference between the wine press (on top) and the threshing floor (below). The wine press would be a place to hide both Gideon and the wheat, but it would not be an easy place to thresh the wheat because there is no breeze there to help with the sifting process.
- What do you make of this title, "O valiant warrior" that is given to Gideon? I believe this isn't a recognition of what Gideon was, but of what he would become by God's grace. This is much akin to Jesus calling Simon, Cephas/Peter, which means "rock" (see *John 1:42*). Peter (the rock) was the finished work of Jesus, not the initial material, yet it was the call God put on his life from the beginning. **We don't need faith in ourselves; we need faith in God. Our weakness is no obstacle to Him.**



- How does Gideon respond to the Angel of the Lord's greeting? As he labors in the wine press over what would be a much easier task in the threshing floor, his honest response to the greeting is discouragement and disillusionment with the Lord. It sounds like he has heard the message of the prophet (note the reference to Egypt), but he doesn't really understand why they are in this situation (conviction hasn't hit yet) and where God is in all of this. He has no hope and feels that God has abandoned them as a people and left them to their enemies. **Note that a man who is honest with God is not turned away and rebuffed, but is loved, humbled, and transformed.**
- Gideon's commission echoes Moses'. Gideon argues that he is the youngest in his family, and that his family is the least in Manasseh (just as Moses argued that he couldn't speak and wouldn't be believed). God's response to Gideon is much the same as it was to Moses. How would Gideon succeed? (see *verses 12, 14, and 15*) Dale Davis, in his commentary on Judges said it so eloquently, **"'But I will be with you.' Basically, God has nothing else or more to offer you. You can go through a lot with that promise. It does not answer your questions about details. It only provides the essential. Nothing about when or how or where or why. Only the way, or better, the Who. 'But I will be with you.' And that is enough."**¹
- What does it mean when God says, "... you shall defeat Midian as one man."? He is saying that it will be like he is just fighting one man with the presence of God, not an innumerable company. In other words, God is saying, "I am going to make this easy for you." **This is not always the way God works; but it is the way He chose to work here.**
- Does Gideon know who he is talking to in verses 17-18? The fact that Gideon wanted to prepare an offering as a test indicates that he knew this was the Lord, or at least the Lord's messenger. As we will see in a few verses, I don't think he really understood WHO he was talking to though.
- Why does Gideon propose this test? Like us, Gideon wanted certainty. The task the Lord laid before him was to take out a confederation of three people groups that were substantially stronger and innumerable. God was calling Gideon to lay his life on the line and jeopardize his family and nation. **He wanted to establish that this wasn't just a dream, but a Divine call.**

Gideon's offering is not insignificant, especially given the fact that the food they had was so hard to come by. He specially picked the goat, used 22 liters of flour to make unleavened bread, and brought a pot of broth. The fire from the Lord was a sign that He accepted this offering.

- What we would consider a good thing (the appearance of the Lord and the acceptance of the offering) was considered a horrifying thing to Gideon. Why is he so terrified (see Job 42:1-6)? With the appearance of the fire and the disappearance of the Angel of the Lord, Gideon not only realizes that this was truly the Lord who was before him, but that this God was holy. He was unlike anyone or anything and being in His presence was more than he could bear. Like Job, he had spoken out against the Lord and he now saw his sin and repented and feared for his life.
- How does this change your answer to the question, "does Gideon know who he is talking to in verses 17-18"? Gideon knew about the Lord before, but now he sees with his own eyes and his

¹ Davis, Dale Ralph. Judges, Such a Great Salvation. Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications Ltd. 2000. Page 95

knowledge of who the Lord really is has grown tremendously. The Lord is one to be feared and revered. He has not departed Israel.

- What is significant about the Lord's words of comfort to Gideon? In the midst of Gideon's brokenness over his behavior and fear of death, God spoke peace to him and assured him that he would not die. This was no small thing to Gideon! I again want to quote Dale Davis, **"This sort of talk... is strange to us, because we have no real sense of the terror and awesomeness of God, for we think intimacy with God is an inalienable right rather than an indescribable gift. There is nothing amazing about grace as long as there is nothing fearful about holiness."**²

Gideon responded by building an altar there to commemorate that occasion and worship the Lord. The altar was fittingly named, Jehovah-Shalom, "The Lord is Peace."

Judges 6:25-32 – The First Mission

Before Gideon could battle the Midianites, he was given an immediate and urgent assignment from the Lord. We aren't told whether the Lord appeared to him again, or whether the revelation was given by other means. We do know the message was clear and Gideon knew what needed to be done.

- Why was this Gideon's first mission? An altar for the Lord could not share real estate with an altar to Baal. **The enemy within must be overcome before the enemy without!**
- What type of offering was this? It is significant that this was not just any bull, but a seven-year-old (mature) bull he belonged to his father. It was a prize bull... probably the best one he had. Again, this was a time of very scarce resources. They must have went to great lengths to keep this bull from the Midianites. Such an act would be a major statement to these people.

The fact that he had to use bull to pull down the altar of Baal (typically stone) and the Asherah pole (made of wood), and that it produced enough wood to sustain a fire large enough upon which to completely consume a bull gives us a sense of its permanence and substance. The altar of the Lord would not be constructed using materials from the idols, but from uncut stones, piled together.

- Why was Gideon so afraid of doing this in the day? He was aware of the spiritual condition of the people; they loved and trusted their idol more than the own family and each other. The people were pinning their hopes for regaining prosperity on these false gods. Pulling them down would be a major assault against their sensibilities and their hope for the future.
- Did it matter that Gideon did this at night rather during the day? The Lord did not give Gideon specific instruction to do this during the day. Doing this at night was a result of his fear, but it did not stifle his obedience. **"Evidently, obedience was necessary and heroism optional."**³ Although, Gideon was fearful, his immediate obedience also shows us how much he now revered the Lord. **We all face fear, but to be frozen by fear dishonors God. Gideon was afraid, but he was still obedient.**

² Davis, Dale Ralph. Judges, Such a Great Salvation. Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications Ltd. 2000. Page 97

³ Ibid, Page 98.

The insight we receive into Gideon's actions and attitude raise some interesting questions about the Christian's duty to suffer or to flee? John Bunyan, the 17th century Baptist preacher and author of The Pilgrim's Progress, addressed these issues. He was imprisoned for years for preaching the gospel, separating him from his poor family. He could have been released if he would agree to stop preaching, but he would not. This is what he wrote regarding whether to stay or flee in times of persecution.

"May we not fly in a time of persecution? Your pressing upon us, that persecution is ordered and managed by God, makes us afraid to fly.

First, having regard to what was said afore about a call to suffer; thou mayest do in this even as it is in thy heart. If it is in thy heart to fly, fly: if it be in thy heart to stand, stand. Anything but a denial of the truth. He that flies, has warrant to do so; he that stands, has warrant to do so.

Yea, the same man may both fly and stand, as the call and working of God with his heart may be. Moses fled (Exo 2:15), Moses stood (Heb 11:27). David fled (1 Sam 19:12), David stood (24:8). Jeremiah fled (Jer 37:11, 12), Jeremiah stood (38:17). Christ withdrew himself (Luke 9:10), Christ stood (John 18:1-8). Paul fled (2 Cor 11:33), Paul stood (Acts 20:22, 23).

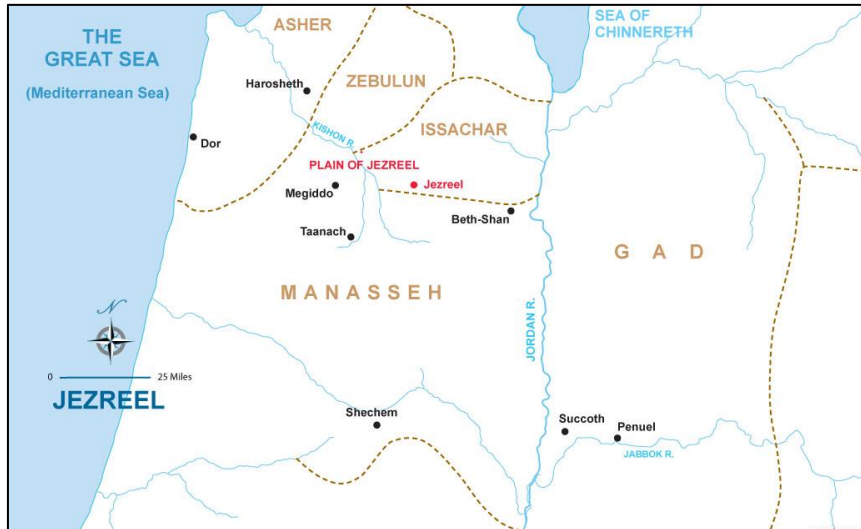
There are therefore few rules in this case. The man himself is best able to judge concerning his present strength, and what weight this or that argument has upon his heart to stand or fly.

- Read *Judges 6:28-30* and *Deuteronomy 13:6-11*. What is ironic about the fate the men of the city prescribed for Gideon? They were calling Joash to release Gideon and join them in killing him for destroying their idol... a fate that should have fallen upon all of them for their idolatry. **When Satan is in command, folly is exalted as truth, and truth as folly.**
- Consider the words of Joash in defense of Gideon's life. Are they true? If so, what are some other examples of this principle in the Old and New Testament? Elijah at Mt. Carmel is an Old Testament example. Baal could not respond to the cries of the false prophets, but the true and Living God responded to Elijah. In the New Testament, the people of Ephesus caused a stir because of the loss of the Dianna idol-makers due to the increase in Christianity, but Dianna herself could do nothing. Yet, in the book of Acts, God demonstrated His power and the requirement of purity for His worship by killing Ananias and Sapphira when they lied to the church, and empowered the early church with miraculous gifts to demonstrate His presence. **Our God does not need to be defended; He needs to be worshipped.**

At this point, Gideon (Jerubbaal) is committed. He has thrown his hat in with the Lord and has drawn the rest of his father's household into it. His first and arguably most important mission is to defeat the enemy within. Now he is ready to face the enemy without... or is he?

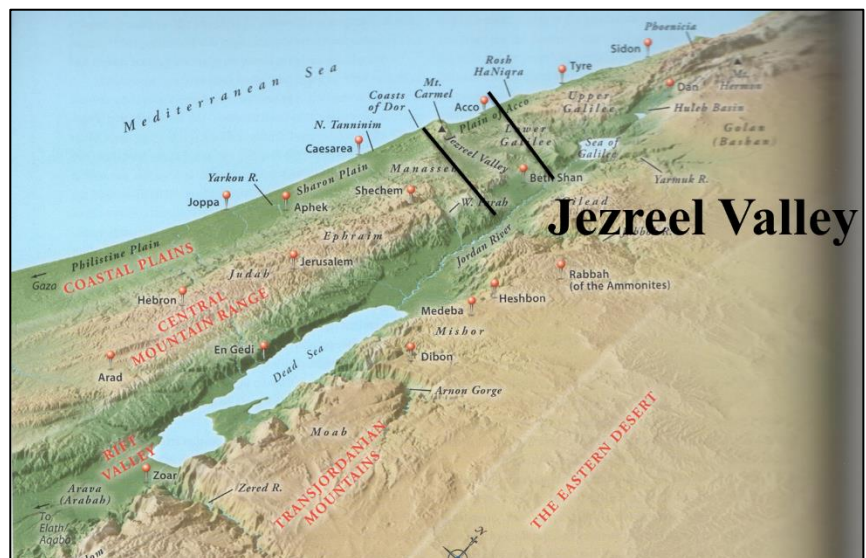
Judges 6:33-40 – Gideon and the Fleece

We now return to what appears to be the primary issue at hand... the Midianites. Yet as we go forward, keep in your mind that in a way, the hardest battle has already been fought. As the Lord told Gideon when He met him at the winepress, you will defeat Midian as one man (meaning it would not be a difficult feat).



The Midianites and the Amalekites have come back in their annual raid and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. That may sound familiar. It is the same place that Barak and the northern tribes fought Sisera in Judges 4 and 5. Mount Tabor bordered this area and it was in the midst of the territory of Issachar, Zebulun, Asher, and Manasseh (Gideon's tribe). Naphtali is also nearby, just north of Issachar and Zebulun.

- How was Gideon, the man who was almost killed for removing the cult worship site of Baal a few verses ago, able to successfully gather his own local community (the Abiezrites), the rest of the tribe of Manasseh, and the tribes of Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali? The text is very clear... the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. This was the work of God on both Gideon and on the hearts of those who responded to the call. The tribes that responded were those most directly affected by the Midianites. It is in the power of the Spirit that all things can be accomplished. **How much more empowerment would we experience to fight the enemy without if we would first fight the enemy within?**



It is notable that the empowerment of the Spirit of the Lord on Gideon did not eliminate his doubts and fears. The next section of our text deals with his doubts directly.

- Read through *Judges 6:36-37* carefully. Is Gideon seeking to know God's will at this point, or is something else going on? Gideon appears to clearly know God's will at this point. He also has experienced the miraculous gathering of the northern tribes through the empowerment of the Spirit. This is not about knowing God's will, but rather finding out whether God is really up to the task.
- How should we properly categorize or understand Gideon's actions with the fleece? Read *Numbers 14:22*, *Deuteronomy 6:16*, *Psalms 95:9*, and *Matthew 4:5-7*. What is this called? Gideon is testing God, something that is forbidden in Scripture.
- What does Gideon promise if God responds to the first test positively? Does Gideon keep his promise? Gideon tells God that if he fills the fleece with dew, yet the ground is dry, "then I will know that You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken." After God responds to this first test, Gideon requires yet another test. He even approaches this apologetically, asking God's anger to be withheld.
- How do we reconcile Gideon's actions with the commandments to not test God? This is a DESCRIPTIVE passage, NOT a PRESCRIPTIVE passage. We already know Gideon is a flawed man and this reinforces it. Although Gideon is ultimately a man of faith, he is not a perfect man of faith. Jesus is the only One we can look to in Scripture as a perfect example in both word and deed. **Remember, Gideon is not the hero of this story; God is.** God didn't respond to this test because Gideon was just in requesting it. He responded because He loved Israel and He had called Gideon to be His vessel for deliverance. **Our Hero's patience, love and commitment to Israel are on display yet again.**

