

God's Promise to Gideon, God's Promise to Us

Judges 6:1-16

Faith Evangelical Free Church (Manhattan, KS)

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The Book of Judges is a collection of stories about life, leadership, and the struggling faith of God's people during the 350-year period between Joshua's death and the rise of King David.

It's easy to read a book like Judges with rose-colored glasses and get swept up in tales of the mighty men and women who fought the enemies of Israel, overcame insurmountable odds, and are even celebrated in the New Testament as the conquerors of kingdoms and enforcers of justice (Hebrews 11:33). Judges feels like something written by JRR Tolkien or Anne McCaffery, and yet it is even better than those stories because, of course, everything in Judges is true: Deborah really was a brilliant leader and tactician, Samson really was a man of supernatural strength, and Gideon -- whose story we will learn a little bit more about today -- really was able to defeat invading forces far larger than his own.

Yes, Judges certainly tells some pretty amazing stories. But a closer look reveals that the stories of deliverance and victory are far outnumbered by the stories of Israel's disobedience and the breaking of their covenant with God. Judges, you see, is a book filled with the details of spiritual decline. This period of Israel's history was characterized not by greatness, but by failure.

The author of Judges summarizes the problem of God's people in 21:25 -- "Everyone did what was right in his or her own eyes" -- chasing after wealth, pleasure, and comfort. (It's not too hard to imagine what that's like, is it?) This book recalls a time of moral ambiguity, ethical confusion, and religious disappointment. It is not, therefore, all that unlike the world we live in today. We too live and work in an era of gods and idols that seek to confuse our faith in Christ and destroy our relationship with God.

And yet...Judges also reminds us that God's mercy and grace are first and foremost extended to imperfect sinners like you and me. Over and over again Judges tells the story of how the men and women of Israel fell away from their faith, and how God continued to keep His covenant with them despite their resistance and rebellion. God alone is faithful and, despite the undeniable fact that we do not deserve it, He always comes to rescue the struggling, broken, frustrated people he dearly loves.

The Book of Judges forces us to take a good, hard look at our lives and our faith and ask the question: *When things get tough, do we really believe God is with us? If we really grasp this promise, this great and glorious gift of God's presence...what challenges and hardships might we be able to face?*

With this question in mind, let's take a look at our text for this morning. So if you brought your Bible, have an app on your phone, or would like to follow along using one of the Bibles underneath the chair in front of you, turn with me to The Book of Judges, Chapter 6, Verse 1. Judges is the 7th book in the Old Testament, right after Joshua and just before Ruth.

By the time we reach the story of Gideon in Judges 6, the people of Israel have already stumbled their way through the tragic cycle of sinful disobedience, righteous judgement, and gracious deliverance several times before. This chapter, like many before it, begins with a phrase that is unfortunately repeated 7 times in Judges: "The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord..." and therefore God allowed them to be overcome by their enemies.

This doesn't mean that God wasn't patient, loving, or kind. He had, in fact, been all these things and more as over the past several decades. He had raised up and sent Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, Deborah, and Barak to save the people and lead them back to God. But the people struggled to resist the religions, wealth, and power of their Canaanite neighbors, and once had wandered away, abandoned God, and plunged themselves into trouble:

[1] The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. [2] And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. [3] For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. [4] They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. [5] For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in. [6] And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to the LORD. -- Judges 6:1-6 (ESV)

Let Go. Look Up. Cry Out To God (vv. 1-6)

In response to their idolatry and disobedience, God allows Israel to be invaded and overrun by a coalition of forces that included the Midianites, Amalekites, and “people from the East” (which were likely nomadic Bedouin tribes). For seven years the invaders destroyed crops, conducted raids, and brought all of Israel to the brink of economic ruin. They were driven from their homes and sought shelter in the caves of the nearby mountains.

Israel, oppressed and out of options, finally cried out for help to the LORD in v6. I don't know about you, but when I read this story a few weeks ago I felt a bit of guilty comradery with the Israelites when thinking about how long they waited to turn to God for help.

For seven years they suffered while surrounded and attacked by their enemies. They tried running, hiding, and doing whatever they could on their own, under their own power, and with their own strength.

Have you ever been guilty of something like this? Trying to fix all your problems on your own, doing anything and everything other than going before God and asking for help? If you have, trust me, I'm right there with you.

I've tried to use my own strength, manipulate my situation, or lean into my own resources to solve my problems long before/without reaching out to God. I think I do this -- we do this because it feels good to be your own hero (to be in control), right? It builds up a sense of accomplishment, of pride, and of self-sufficiency.

But it doesn't take long to learn that we cannot really save ourselves. We fool ourselves with a false sense of control and superiority...and then along comes a problem that's bigger than what we can handle on our own, and we end up running for the hills.

You see, we can't be the heroes of our own story. Our sins, the wrong things we do in the eyes of our God, cause us to fall short of glory and salvation and drive us further and further away from the God who

loves us. Thankfully, however, God is aware of our problem and tirelessly working to save us from ourselves. The Book of Judges helps us remember that you and I are not the heroes of our own stories -- that job belongs to God alone.

You're not meant to save yourself. You're not meant to take on this world alone. If you're here this morning and you're carrying that kind of a burden -- the belief that you've got to figure out all your problems, or your families problems, or the world's problems all on your own -- I want you try something that is admittedly very, very hard. This probably won't be something you can do in an instant or all at once. But it is something worth trying, even if just one difficult step at a time:

Let Go. Look Up. Cry Out To God

Let go -- let go of the idea that you're in control and that everything depends on you.
Look up -- raise your eyes, raise your heart, raise your hopes and fix them on God.
Cry out -- let God know you need him. Admit to yourself that you need God.

These are all really hard things to do because they require giving up control, admitting defeat, and even admitting wrongdoing or failure. But they also help us abandon the idea that we can save ourselves and lead us into a better relationship with the God who is ready and willing to rescue us.

Let Go. Look Up. Cry Out To God

That's what we see Israel do in this passage. With their lands invaded, their economy destroyed, and their homes overrun, they cry out to God, and like so many times before, God listens and responds.

However...THIS TIME he does something he's never done in the Book of Judges. In all the previous stories, after the people cry out to God he sends them a deliverer, someone defeat their enemies. In the next few verses, however, we find that God first wants to be sure Israel understands (or at least hears) why the Midianite invasion is happening...and who is to blame.

Looking back at the text, in v7,

[7] When the people of Israel cried out to the LORD on account of the Midianites, [8] the LORD sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery. [9] And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. [10] And I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed my voice." -- Judges 6:7-10

Our Need for Conviction, God's Gracious Salvation (vv. 7-13)

Israel cries out for a savior, but God surprises them by sending a prophet. The prophet reminds them of foundational story of Israel -- God leading the people out of slavery and oppression and giving them a land they could call their own -- and reminds them of the **big** rule he asked they not break: Do not fear, or worship, the (false) gods of the Amorites (Canaanites).

Which...of course, is exactly what the people of Israel ended up doing. Throughout the Book of Judges we find the people of Israel worshiping Baal and other false gods...which brought forth the one true God's condemnation in v10: "you have not obeyed my voice."

The prophet's message is designed to bring about conviction, to help the Israelite people understand what they've done wrong. This is an important part of letting go, looking up, and crying out to God. We worship a loving God who is always ready, willing, and eager to save us from ourselves...but part of that process is being real and honest about the things we've done wrong. It's not easy, but it is necessary, and it's part of how we grow.

At my high school every student was required to write a big research paper for their English classes during sophomore year. One teacher, Mr. Allen, had an infamous reputation for being ruthless in his expectations and grading of the paper...and, of course, Mr. Allen ended up being my teacher. We worked on the paper all year, and he would periodically require us to turn in our progress so he could cover it in red pen and call us up to his desk for a torturous grading session in which all our grammatical and analytical sins were exposed before our young, terrified eyes.

I dreaded those grading sessions...but I also know that they helped me grow as a writer and a student. As uncomfortable as it might make us, we can't change, mature, or grow unless we're helped to understand what we're doing wrong.

God knows this, and rather than leave us hopelessly lost in our sins, He lovingly helps us understand what we've done wrong and offers us grace, forgiveness, and a chance to try again...and again...and again.

He is patient. He is kind. And, as we'll see in just a moment, he is with us every step of the way.

So the people of Israel cry out, and God sends them a prophet to help them understand where they went wrong...but that still leaves them in need of rescue. Continuing in Chapter 6, we get introduced to God's latest plan to save His people from themselves: by recruiting a timid, snarky, and bitter man named Gideon fight back against Israel's enemies.

[11] Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. [12] And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor." [13] And Gideon said to him, "Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian." - Judges 6:11-13

Hard Hearts in Hard Moments (vv. 11-13)

The scene changes, and we're introduced to two new characters in the story. First, the "angel of the LORD", a somewhat mysterious and difficult to define agent of God who shows up from time to time throughout the Old Testament, often when God is needed most. Second, there's Gideon -- who is "beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites" (v11).

Let me help you picture this. In ancient Israel a winepress was series of big holes in the ground. You'd fill one hole up with grapes, and then hop in and jump around in order to squeeze out the juice, which would run off into another hole dug off to the side and a bit lower than the one that held the grapes.

Gideon, however, is not making wine. Instead, he's jumped down into the hole to hide from the Midianites as he separated his wheat grain from the chaff. Normally his was done by beating and raking the wheat on an open floor, then throwing it into the to let the heavier grains fall while the wind blew the extra, unwanted stuff away. But because that would surely have attracted the attention of the Midianites, Gideon is trying to use the winepress to hide his harvest, smacking the wheat stalks against the walls of the winepress and probably tossing the chaff down into the deeper hole.

It likely would have looked a bit silly, pathetic, and embarrassing (like when someone catches you trying to open a bottle with your teeth)...and it is while doing this that a messenger from God shows up and says, "The LORD is with you, O Mighty man of valor!" (v12)

This probably sounds to us like a cruel, sarcastic jab since Gideon obviously did not look mighty, valorous, or like someone particularly blessed by God. However, I doubt the angel was being rude (in general, I don't think angels are often allowed to be rude). Instead, this angel is declaring some good news to Gideon -- "God is with you, and he's going to use you to turn things around!"

Gideon, however, misses the meaning and fires back in a way that reveals his frustration and misunderstanding. He argues that if God were really with his people then bad things shouldn't be happening. Furthermore, God really ought to have done something mighty and miraculous to rescue everyone like he did before. Gideon -- angry, scared, and annoyed -- concludes that God has abandoned them (v13).

I don't think it's too much of a stretch to guess that many of us, if not all of us, have felt like Gideon at some point in our lives. When things get hard it becomes difficult to believe God might still be at work in our lives. It's even more difficult to believe he might want to use us to turn things around. But that is so often exactly how God works.

In life's toughest moments, it might be helpful to remember that Jesus promised us no matter the trouble the world brings, it cannot defeat us, for he has overcome the world (John 16:33). We worship a God who can make all things work together for our good (Rom 8:28). Finally, when we're feeling overwhelmed we have a tendency to say, "God, remove this problem." But sometimes God is lovingly guiding and challenging us to instead turn to him, "God, I trust you to make me the sort of person who can persevere and help with this problem."

Please don't misunderstand me: just because that's something God asks of us does not make it easy. In fact, following him in this way is often difficult, requiring us to be totally dependent on him. The Good News is God knows that...and, just as Gideon learned, God is eager to help us as we help others.

Which is exactly what the angel tells Gideon.

[14] And the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?" [15] And he said to him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." [16] And the

LORD said to him, “But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.” - Judges 6:14-16

“I will be with you. You’re going to be okay.” (vv. 14-16)

Again, Gideon is told that he is indeed the one God has picked to save Israel: **“Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?”**

Gideon, unconvinced, states what is to him is terribly obvious: he can’t possibly save anyone. He’s hiding in a hole, surrounded by scraps of a meager wheat harvest, with nothing by fear, anger, and dread in his heart. He calls himself the weakest. He calls himself the least. He tells the angel God’s picked the wrong man.

And how does God respond? Don’t miss this, because this is the the point of it all, this is the echo of the Gospel a thousand years before Jesus Christ will walk the earth.

Gideon says, “How can I go? I am the weakest. I am the least.”

God replies: “Yes, **but I will be with you.** It’s going to be okay.”

And that promise gave Gideon everything he would ever need. If you go on to read more of his story, you’ll discover that Gideon struggled to understand just how true and trustworthy that promise really was. Gideon is not really a role model of great faith. He has his good days and he had is really, REALLY bad ones. Nevertheless, God loved him, blessed him, and walked with him every step of the way. God never asked Gideon to do anything on his own.

“I will be with you. You’re going to be okay.”

Jesus gave those who follow him the same promise. In the Gospel of Matthew his last words to the disciples, after calling them to share the Gospel throughout all the world, were “I am with you, always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:20). Choosing follow Christ, to confess our need for forgiveness and live our lives joyous recognition of all Jesus has done for us, means that we are never alone. Never alone in our joy or our pain, in our celebrations or our hardships, in our loss, grief, or brokenness.

We worship a God who chose the name “Immanuel” -- God with us. Not against us, over us, apart from us, distant from us...God loving, passionately, dearly with us every day for the rest of eternity. If you are follower of Christ you will never be alone. God is always with you. No matter what life throws at you, you’re going to be okay.

The question we’re left to answer: do we really believe this promise? Do you really believe that if you stand before God and say “I am the weakest; I am the least”, that He will respond, “I know, but I am with you, so you’re going to be okay”?

There’s no universal way to make this happen. I can’t give you 3 Easy Steps to Trusting God is With You. It’s a deeply personal thing that applies directly to your own challenges. Maybe you’ve experienced a job loss. Maybe you’re thinking about starting a family this year and that both excites and terrifies you. Maybe you’ve lost a loved one and are still struggling with grief. Maybe waking up every day to the news of global crises, political corruption, and a sin-stained world is becoming too much to bear on your own.

Whatever your hardship or challenge, remember this: You and I worship a God who we can go before, honestly say “This is too much. I am the weakest. I am the least. What can I possibly do today to go on?”

And He will always, ALWAYS respond: “I know you’re tired. I know you’re weak. But I am with you and will never leave you. So you’re going to be okay. Let’s go.”