Judges 6-7 *Legendary 2: Gideon: Mighty Warrior?*

***The Old Testament Avengers?***This summer and last we have been doing a series of sermons called Legendary, where we are looking at the stories of some of the so-called “heroes of the faith.” I’ve styled the series after summer blockbusters, kind of like comic-book movies. Some of the stories in the Bible take on the qualities of big-budget action films.

But thus far, I have not done any stories from the book of Judges. And that is kind of odd. Because if any stories in the Bible fit the comic book style, it would be the stories of Judges. The story of Ehud has elements of espionage and a gross-out scene. The story of Deborah has a death-by-tent-peg. Samson is a wise-cracking, womanizing, strongman. It’s not too hard to imagine young Jewish boys repeating the stories of the Judges while sitting around the campfire late into the night. These were the original comic-book heroes. You can almost picture the Judges teaming up together like an Old Testament version of the Avengers.

In fact, when you hear the word “Judges,” don’t think of somebody with a powdered-wig and black robe sitting in a courtroom. Rather, the word “judge” is used in this book much like we would use the word “avenger”: the judges are heroes, saviors, God-appointed rescuers.

Why, then, have we not been telling these stories? The problem is what scholars call the “cycle of Judges” or the “downward spiral.” The pattern of this book is that the people of God fall away from God, God allows enemies to oppress them as a form of discipline, the people cry out to God for help, and then God raises up a Judge to deliver them. And this cycle of disobedience, judgment, crying out, and blessing happens again and again throughout the book; except each time the disobedience gets a little worse and the drift away from God grows that much more deplorable. A downward spiral.

As I indicated a couple of weeks ago when we looked at the story of Ruth, the whole period of Judges is summed up by **its final verse:**

**25**In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit. (Judges 21:25)

And the problem with the Judges is that they reflect their time. For all their superhero qualities, they also reveal themselves to be deeply flawed characters. Several of them are named in Hebrews 11, the Bible’s Hall of Fame of faith, so we know they illustrate faith; but diving into their stories reveals a lot of bad and ugly to go along with the good.

That’s true for the Judge we are going to look at today. Gideon is not as much of a disaster as Samson or Jephthah; but he is still an illustration of God drawing a straight line with a crooked stick. We won’t get into the end of his story, but Judges 8 and 9 reveal that Gideon’s legacy was one of idolatry and corruption. He was definitely a product of his time. And even the part of the story we are going to look at—the part he is most well-known for—is going to reveal that Gideon is a reluctant hero, full of fear and doubt, who is nevertheless used mightily by God.

We have a lot of scripture to cover—Judges 6 and 7—so I’m going to try to give you an overview—like an airplane fly-over—while occasionally touching down to look at a verse or two. Then I’ll have a couple principles for us to take home at the end.

***School-yard Bullies*Chapter 6, verse** 1 sets the stage:

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.

The story starts in the disobedience/judgement part of the cycle. And the people God is using to discipline His people—the bad guys in this story—are the Midianites.

The next few verses tell us that the Midianites are a nomadic, warrior people. They don’t have permanent addresses, and they don’t plant or make anything. Rather, they ride through the countryside and take by force from whoever happens to be producing anything worthwhile. Think of them as schoolyard bullies demanding lunch money from all the weaker kids.

The Israelites, meanwhile, are attempting to build villages and farms, and they have to contend with these swarms of Midianites coming through—the Bible compares them to locusts—and if they want to keep anything they produce they need to hide in shelters and caves. It is intolerable, and by **verse 6** they are crying out to God for help.

In keeping with the pattern of the book, God now raises up a Judge (an avenger). **Verses 11 and 12** are our introduction to Gideon:

**11**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. **12**When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”

This is a pretty strong start. The angel of the Lord (who is probably God Himself, possibly even Jesus in an Old Testament cameo) comes down and calls Gideon a “Mighty Warrior.” More than that, He asserts that God is with Gideon. One plus God equals a majority. Gideon should be well-positioned to help Israel out.

Except…pay attention to what Gideon is doing when God shows up: he is threshing wheat in a winepress. That might not mean much to you, but that’s not where you would normally thresh wheat. Threshing is the process of separating the usable kernels of wheat from the useless, dead parts of the plant (the chaff). And the way it would be done was to go to the top of a hill, on a windy day, and repeatedly throw the wheat up into the air so that the heavier, useful kernels fall back to the ground while the wind takes the chaff away. But a winepress is basically a big bowl, and if you are standing in a winepress while trying to thresh wheat, the wind isn’t really going to help you and you are going to end up really, really dusty.

So why is Gideon in such an inefficient spot threshing his wheat? “To keep it from the Midianites.” He’s scared. Just like most of the rest of Israel, he is afraid that if he is up on a hill tossing his wheat in the air it will just be an advertisement for the Midianites to swoop in and take his lunch money.

I don’t want to be too hard on Gideon here—like I said, most everybody in Israel was taking similar precautions—but it is hardly the posture of a “Mighty Warrior.” In fact, Gideon hiding in a hole makes the Lord’s use of that phrase seem more than a little ironic.

This becomes even more evident in the conversation that follows. **Gideon responds** by blaming God for Israel’s predicament. Never mind that God is doing exactly what He said He would do in response to Israel’s sin; Gideon believes that God has abandoned them.

When the **Lord replies** that He hasn’t abandoned anyone, but in fact Gideon is His chosen instrument for dealing with the Midianites, Gideon replies by insisting God has the wrong man. **Verse 15:**

**15**“Pardon me, my lord,” Gideon replied, “but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”

The point is: Gideon does not see himself as a Mighty Warrior, and he doesn’t particularly want the job.

***Cleaning House***God insists, however, so Gideon devises a test. This is going to be a pattern for him. **Verse 17:**

**17**Gideon replied, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me.”

Gideon goes out and prepares a young goat as a sacrifice. Basically, he makes dinner for his guest. But before he can cook anything, the LORD touches the food with His staff and the whole thing goes up in a ball of flame. This is a pretty convincing sign. **Verse 22:**

**22**When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the Lord, he exclaimed, “Alas, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!”

Thus fortified, Gideon is ready for his first assignment which—surprisingly enough—has nothing to do with the Midianites. The first thing God wants Gideon to do is tear down the idols in his father’s backyard.

This **is a sign of how bad** things had gotten in Israel: his own father has a shrine to the false god Baal right outside of his house. And, apparently, the people of the village consider this shrine of some importance. And now, God wants Gideon to tear it down and use the wood to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. And, to Gideon’s credit, he does it. But notice the way the narrator explains Gideon’s actions. **Verse 27**:

**27**So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the townspeople, he did it at night rather than in the daytime.

“Because he was afraid.” The “mighty warrior” sneaks out to do the LORD’s will under the cover of night.

And when the villagers get up in the morning, they are angry about what happened. Word gets around that it was Gideon’s doing and people start calling for his head. It’s a tense situation. But Gideon’s dad steps in and declares that if Baal is a real god, he can defend himself. Somehow, that calms everyone down and **they change Gideon’s name** to Jerub-Baal, which means “let Baal contend” and it wins Gideon enough acclaim that he can now rally an army around himself.

***Of Fleece and Barley Bread***That’s the next thing that happens. Now it is time to do something about the Midianites. Gideon puts out a call and men from all over Israel answer. Something like 32,000 men muster around him ready to stand up to the bullies. It’s pretty heady stuff. People really seem to believe that Gideon has what it takes to lead them to victory.

Except, Gideon himself is not so sure. Again we see that the dominant characteristic of this so-called “mighty warrior” is not courage, but caution. **Verse 36:**

**36**Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—

“If.” If Lord. If you will really do has you have promised.

Gideon can’t quite bring himself to rest in God’s promise. He can’t quite put his full weight down on God, so he asks for another sign.

Here is where we get Gideon’s famous fleece test. First, Gideon leaves a woolen fleece out over night and asks God to make it wet while leaving the ground dry. Which, when you think about, is exactly what’s going to happen. If you take a piece of fleece—say that fluffy seat cover from your old Monte Carlo—and leave it out overnight it is going to soak up a lot more dew and stay damp longer than the ground around it. Gideon appears to catch his mistake, so the next night he asks God to reverse the situation—keep the fleece dry while making the ground wet—which is a much niftier trick.

God fulfills both requests, and apparently Gideon is convinced.

Now, let me pause here a moment and say that I am not sure what to make of this. Sometimes, when we have hard decisions to make, we will use this story and suggest that we should put a fleece out and see what the LORD wants us to do. Usually, that doesn’t mean putting an actual pile of wool on the ground, but looking for some sort of sign.

I am hesitant to suggest that this is a good example for us to follow. For one thing, Gideon wasn’t trying to decide what the right thing to do was—that was obvious. He wasn’t trying to decide between two equally good options, he was being asked to trust God. That’s it. He needed to trust God, and the fact that he needed signs in order to increase his trust indicates a lack of faith. More than that, the request for signs is a pattern in this story that seem to illustrate Gideon’s weakness, not his strength.

And yet, God answers Gideon’s requests. God is gracious to Gideon and gives him the reassurance he needs.

Which makes the next part of the story rather funny, and indicates that God does have a playful side. Because now that Gideon finally has the confidence he needs to lead his army out onto the battlefield, God makes his army smaller. **Chapter 7 verse 2** is a key verse:

**2**The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, ‘My own strength has saved me.’

God looks at Gideon’s army and says: “It’s too big.” God knows human nature; He knows how self-centered people can be. If these men go out with this large army and God delivers the Midianites into their hands, they’re going to forget all about God and take all the credit for themselves.

Now, let’s talk numbers. The Bible is about to tell us that Gideon started with 32,000 men. That seems like a lot. But at the end of the battle, in chapter 8, we’re going find out that the Midianites had 135,000. So, at the start, Gideon is looking at going into this thing at a 4 to 1 disadvantage. And yet, God says: that’s too many. If Israel wins, despite 4 to 1 odds, they’ll take all the credit for themselves.

So God instructs Gideon to make his army smaller. First, **God tells him to send** home anybody who is having second thoughts. Just like that, no questions asked, if you are scared, go home. 22,000 men leave.

Now the numbers are 135,000 to 10,000. 13 to 1. But God says: “Still too many.” **He gives Gideon another test**: everybody goes down to the river and is told to take a drink. Everybody who gets on his knees and laps like a dog is sent home. Only those who scoop the water to their mouths will remain. I’ve heard it suggested that maybe this was a sign of vigilance—the ones who kept their heads up would be the best soldiers—and maybe this is true; but still, Gideon ends up with only 300 men.

That, God says, will be enough.

But first, Gideon needs one more sign. This time, it is God’s idea. Instead of waiting for Gideon to express his doubts, God tells him this: **verses 10 and 11:**

**10**If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant Purah **11**and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp.”

Gideon does as he is told, and as he sneaks up on the enemy **he overhears one soldier tell another soldier** about a dream he had of a barley loaf rolling through camp smashing tent after tent. His friend immediately concludes the barley loaf is Gideon (?) and that this is a sign that Israel is going to defeat them. Don’t ask me how this soldier came to that conclusion, but the obvious fear that Gideon overhears is enough to fill him with confidence.

Here, then, is how God used 300 men to defeat 135,000.

**Each man was equipped with a torch**, a clay pot, and a trumpet.

They crept out to surround the enemy camp at the darkest hour of the night

**And then, on Gideon’s signal,** they smashed their pots, revealed their blazing torches, and blew their trumpets and shouted “A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!”

Awakened from deep sleep and confusedly believing each trumpet and torch represented several thousand Israelites, the Midianites began to panic and fight against anyone close to them. Blindly swinging their swords they ended up killing each other before panicking and fleeing. At that point, Gideon called in the reserves and it became a mop up operation. God had delivered the Midianites into their hands and Gideon was a hero.

***Take Home Principles***That’s the story. That’s how we prefer to remember Gideon. As I said, his legacy isn’t all that great. After leading Israel for 40 years of relative peace, he ends up establishing another idolatrous shrine and leaves behind an illegitimate son who tries to become king by force. That’s all part of the downward spiral of judges. But for this brief, shining moment Gideon comes off as a hero of the faith.

Let me give you three, quick take home principles we can learn about God from this story:

**First, God meets us where we are.**

One of the things that stands out in this story is God’s patience, and grace, towards Gideon’s doubt. Again and again God accommodates Himself to Gideon’s requests for a sign. God’s call should have been enough for Gideon, but God still graciously barbeques a goat. When that should have been enough, God still answers Gideon’s test with the fleece. When one such request should have been enough, God actually does it twice. And finally, on the eve of the battle, God allows Gideon to hear the panic that is running through the enemy camp.

The story is clearly told in a way that emphasizes Gideon’s doubts and fears. He doesn’t come off as the “mighty warrior” the angel first addresses him as. And yet, these doubts and fears do not drive God away. When you or I would have been tempted to say: “Look Gideon, how much proof do you need?!” God is willing to work with him.

Again, I’m not sure this means we should be demanding signs from God. Jesus made it pretty clear in the middle his temptations that we shouldn’t put God to the test. (Matthew 4:7) We don’t get to tell God what to do in order to prove Himself to us. He’s not a trick pony.

But I think we can take away from this that God is willing to meet us where we are. He understands that we are going to have doubts. He gets that we are going to struggle with fear. He’s not surprised to find us there, that’s just not where He wants us to stay.

One of my favorite stories is the one in Mark about the father who brings his son to Jesus to be healed. Jesus tells him it is possible, then asks him if he believes. The father’s answer is raw and honest and the kind of prayer I think God loves to answer. **He says**: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24) That’s the kind of doubt and fear God delights to work with: the doubt and fear we bring to Him!

**Second, God’s definition of us should drive our self-perception.**

We need to see ourselves the way God sees us.

I’ve said that when the angel calls Gideon a “mighty warrior” at the beginning of the story, it’s ironic. Clearly, the narrator wants us to see that wasn’t how Gideon thought of himself. And it’s not how he acted.

But I don’t think the angel was being ironic. I don’t think God was mocking Gideon. God really did see a “Mighty Warrior,” because God knew what He was going to do in and through Gideon.

The lesson here is that we need to let God’s view of us drive our self-definitions. One of the things the New Testament wants to make clear to us is that if we are in Christ Jesus, we have taken on new identities. We are no longer enslaved to sin. We have become a royal priesthood and joint-heirs of Jesus. We are adopted sons and daughters of God the Father. **2 Corinthians 5:17** puts it like this:

**17**Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old is gone, the new has come!

This is the premise behind Lauren Daigle’s song: “You Say”:

You say I am loved when I can't feel a thing
You say I am strong when I think I am weak
And You say I am held when I am falling short
And when I don't belong, oh, You say I am Yours

As Christians, we need to hear what God is saying about us. If He calls you a “Mighty Warrior”, then you are a “Mighty Warrior.” No matter what you might feel or think.

**Third, God loves to use jars of clay.**

You might think this is a reference to the way Gideon and the 300 lit their torches, but it’s not. Instead, I am thinking of what it says in **2 Corinthians 4:7**:

**7**But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

The principle Paul is getting at here is that God loves to work with flawed, weak, unimpressive, people. The jars of clay he is talking about are you and me: people without fancy worldly resumes or lengthy spiritual pedigrees. God loves to work with people causal observers wouldn’t expect.

Why? To show that the power at work is from Him, and not from us.

That’s almost exactly the same thing He told Gideon when He told him to cut His roll call. He doesn’t want us to fall into the trap of thinking we can save ourselves. He doesn’t want us to make the error of thinking it is our strength that makes the difference. We are prone to pride. And it is easy for us to think we have deserved or earned the blessings in our lives.

But God wants us to remember that it is His strength that saves. He wants us to know that He is the only salvation we need. He want us to put our trust fully in Him, and know without a doubt that the battle always belongs to the LORD.

Ultimately, that’s what the whole book of Judges is about. As sad and tragic as the downward spiral into sin is, it is directing us to look beyond ourselves for God’s grace to send the ultimate Avenger—His King—who will save His people. Our hope lies in Jesus, not in us.