

Gideon: Commission

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. It is a joy to be with you as we get stuck into Gideon over these next few Sunday evenings. You may have worked out or you may not have by now. Judges was something of my plotting and scheming over the last little while.

And when I was planning the series and when Graham said it was okay, I put my name down quickly to get preaching on Gideon. Gideon's story and Samson's story get a lot of airtime in the book of Judges.

You've maybe noticed that as you read through. And so we're slowing down a little and we're taking a little more time on these characters rather than some of the shorter Judges who kind of whisk through as you go through the stories.

And where we've been up to in Judges so far, we've had relatively positive Judges. The folk who have been delivering Israel have been relatively good.

And Gideon is the first of the more negative examples that we see. This week we'll see God's grace as he deals with Gideon's call and Gideon's commissioning.

[1 : 19] That's chapter 6 of Judges which we heard read so well. And then next week we'll go on to see God's power manifested through Gideon's weakness as he delivers Israel and as he falls into idolatry at the end of his life.

Then we have a week off for our quarterly church vision meetings. And then we come back and we deal with Abimelech who is something of an oddity in Judges.

He isn't a deliverer but he's the child of Gideon by illegitimacy. And that's a really interesting, really enthralling story showing us a little of the danger of attempting to piggyback on God's purposes for our own gain.

So I hope as we dig in these three Sunday nights we'll see something a little more clearly of God. What God wants us to learn from his word.

And as we open up these stories as we really find out what's going on behind them. Before we get properly into the narrative I suppose I just want to make a couple of more general points.

[2 : 31] These could really be counted for all of the next three. Firstly, please do not assume that we should emulate Gideon. And I don't think I can stress this one enough and I think I repeated a couple of times during the sermon this evening.

Please do not assume that we should emulate Gideon. Do not assume that because Gideon is used by God that we should copy him. As we read I hope that he is a great encouragement to us. I hope that we get so much from his life and from what he does. And I hope that we find some great applications for our lives as we seek to live for God in our world.

But please do not assume that Gideon is good or that Gideon is somebody to copy. And I suppose in the same vein please note that these are very real people.

The Bible is an incredible book and this is definitely not a whitewash. Don't expect the Hollywood heroes who stride onto scene and effortlessly defeat all around them and then drift off into the sunset.

[3 : 45] It just doesn't happen. This is not that sort of story. This is from real life and it has all of the complexities and all of the craziness that you would expect.

So don't be surprised maybe if we find an unsavory thing or two coming across our plate as we dig into Gideon's story. And so just before we dig into our portion tonight can we just pray and ask for God's help.

Just for me I know I'm struggling and perhaps some of you are struggling as you try and listen to another sermon today. So let's pray and ask God to help us to hear his voice.

Father, we know that you are good and as we have heard your word written, read out to us, we pray that that would have really caught our minds.

That it would have touched our hearts already. As we have sung these songs that are so full of truth that you would have encouraged us and built us up. And now as your word is preached and explained, we pray that by your spirit you would come.

[4 : 59] That you would move. That your grace would be seen in all of its incredible nature. And that we would be blown away by you again tonight.

Father, we long for you knowing that everything that we do in our own power is useless. But only what's done in your power counts. So we pray, help us in Jesus name.

Amen. I wonder if you've ever had to deal with someone who was completely bent on folly.

No matter what counsel you would give them. No matter how you would attempt to coax them towards a better opinion. They are set on their way.

Perhaps that's been a child who sadly has not wanted to follow after your way. Perhaps that has been a co-worker or a friend that you have seen go towards dangerous habits.

[6 : 03] Nothing seems to be able to sway them from their self-destructive paths. If you have ever dealt with any of this situation, I'm sure you will know the heartache and the pain and the frustration and the sorrow that comes from such waywardness.

Perhaps as we have been going through judges, it has brought some of that same idea to our minds.

As we've watched Israel, we see them constantly straying left, right and centre. And as we left our last sermon in Judges, we were taken through chapter 5 and chapter 6 by Daniel last week.

And it says that the land rested for 40 years. And you think this is great, this is going well. But sadly, that is always followed in the book of Judges by the people straying yet again.

And they turn back to their sin and to their idolatry. And that's where we start this evening. And this is the beginning of the fourth cycle.

[7 : 30] The fourth time that they've been delivered. The fourth time that they've been saved. Here they are again and they're sinning again. Forsaking the God who loves them.

Who's taken them from nothing and put them into their own land. It's mind-boggling, isn't it? That we are so hard to turn.

That as people, we continually stray. And perhaps we lose some of that when we read the Bible.

Perhaps we sometimes read these stories and we forget that we are just like the Israelites.

That consistently, the thing that we can be relied on to do is go the wrong way. And Israel is turned away from the worship of the one true God again.

And in verse 1 there you see, They did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And so God takes action.

[8 : 43] And perhaps by this stage we're familiar enough with the structure of Judges that we know what's going to come next. God takes action. He fulfills on the promises that he made to the Israelites in the covenant.

And he raises up these people. The Midianites. The Amalekites. And the sons of the east. This grand coalition. And these people come like a plague of locusts.

They sweep through the country. From east to west. And they pillage. And they oppress. And they leave the land empty of its produce.

And then they leave. Only to come again the following year. And for seven years this happens.

For seven years the people of Israel suffer. They are destitute. They are without food. They resort to hiding in the hills.

[9 : 49] Trying to squirrel away just enough to last them. And it says that Israel was brought very low. I don't think that's just talking about in number.

Or in their wealth. I think that's something to do with their outlook on life. They're brought very low. And finally.

Finally Israel cry out to Yahweh. Back to their God. For seven years their backs had been turned to God. And now finally at their very lowest.

In utter desperation. They cry out to the God. That they have abandoned. Down there in verse 6.

They cry out for help to the Lord.

And we have to see how God is already graciously working in them for this to happen. God is restraining his straying people.

[10:56] He's checking if you like their spiritual adultery. He's challenging their moral failure. And bringing them to the only place.

In which they would consider that they've made a mistake. Now we must be careful. Not all problems. Not all poverty is because of sin.

We are sure of that. Not all suffering is because of our failure. But what happens here. Is that God uses sufferings to bring the children of Israel back to their senses.

And it's so true, isn't it? That some of us only pick up our Bible when trials come. Some of us only pray when worry sets in.

And C.S. Lewis got it right. When he said this. God whispers to us in our pleasures. He speaks in our conscience.

[12:01] But he shouts to us in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. And so at the lowest of the low.

The children of Israel cry out to God. And he does the most loving thing that he could. He sends a prophet. Perhaps for some of us so used with this story.

That sounds normal. But remember that these people are in the middle of occupation. They're foodless. They're hopeless. They're desperate.

And I'm fairly sure that this prophet was about as welcome as the Midianites were. But listen to the words that he speaks.

He reminds these sinful people. That God. That this God that they are crying to. He isn't some witless grandfather. This God cannot be tricked or cajoled into helping.

[13:09] Israel isn't going to manipulate Yahweh to do their will. No. No. God speaks through this prophet. And he reminds them again.

Of the mercy and the grace that they've already been shown. That God brought them out of Israel. That God set them in this land. And he indicts them of their sin.

God said you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But you have not obeyed my voice.

God says. This is probably the most devastating rebuke that can be leveled to anyone. They have not listened to their God.

To the one who created them. And the one who redeemed them. And at the end of this speech. If we read this perhaps for the first time.

[14:15] We are left on tender hooks. What will God do with his erring people? Is this it? Is this prophet the last spokesman that they will ever hear?

And then the lights will go out? Is this it? Has their idolatry finally cut them off from the love of their gods? But before we go further.

Let's pause and see God's grace again. Do you notice that God cares enough for his people? That he does not leave them to their own ideas about right and wrong?

He does not abandon them to come up with their own moral system. They have chosen to follow false gods. Who will seek the harm of their followers.

But God will not allow them to unwittingly continue in the service of demons. Rather he sends a prophet to warn them against their idiocy.

[15:21] And so left wondering what God will do. Left on something of a cliffhanger. We're taken to a divine encounter in Ophra. Perhaps these images aren't terribly clear.

You can see on the left hand there a map of Israel. And the green areas are where the Israelites successfully conquered.

And on the right hand you see the different areas in which the different judges worked. And if you look at the area that's being pointed to by the red arrow.

That's Ophra. That's where Gideon worked from on the right hand picture. But on the left if you notice. It isn't a green area.

This isn't an area where the conquest has gone swimmingly well. And so we perhaps need to keep that in the back of our mind.

[16:26] Here is Gideon. And he's in the pagan heartland. He's not in Bible Belt.

He's not in the middle of the temple when he gets spoken to. No, he's out in the sticks. Where the pagans are strong. And what do we find him doing?

He's struggling to process what little grain they'd successfully harvested. Despite the Midianites. And he's desperately trying to hide it.

As he gets rid of the waste product. And along comes this unexpected visitor. And the visitor says, Yahweh is with you, O valiant warrior.

Doesn't look like much of a warrior to me. Cowering in a wine press. For the fear of the Midianites. Hiding in a little bit of a pit.

[17 : 35] Trying to thresh out some grain. And his response in verse 13. That doesn't really increase our estimation of the man. He's cynical.

He questions the presence of God with his people. To be honest, it sounds like he's fed up hearing about this God. Who's done nothing in his estimation to warn any praise.

Notice how he completely dismisses everything that's said of God. Please sir, 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. The only thing that Gideon attributes to God. Is the current disaster that they face.

[18 : 40] But God is seemingly unperturbed. By the faithlessness of his chosen servant. And he commissions Gideon to go on to save Israel.

And the phrasing is rather odd. It says, go on in this might of yours, save Israel from the hand of Midian.

We'd expect it to say something more like, go on in my strength, save Israel from Midian. But that's not what it says. And I think it's deliberate that it's kind of ambiguous and a little bit difficult.

And I think next week perhaps we'll see what sort of strength Gideon has. But Gideon is not convinced. Now he begins to list all the reasons why he couldn't possibly deliver Israel.

But God again assures Gideon that he will go with him. That the victory will be as if there's only one man to defeat. And the whole conversation reminds us of the calling of Moses, doesn't it?

[19 : 58] The false sense of humility. The coming up with excuses. And I think that's meant to be there.

I think we're meant to instantly take a wee flashback there. We're meant to wonder in our minds, hold on, is God doing something special here? Is God going to raise up another Moses for us?

But then we instantly get set into this rather odd section about Gideon giving this angelic visitor a meal. And here I think we get an insight, a particular insight into Gideon's ignorance about his whole situation.

We read that it is Yahweh who is talking to Gideon. Perhaps in your Bible it's the Lord in small capitals or something along those lines.

But notice that Gideon has never referred to his visitor in that way. He's always used Lord with just normal letters, perhaps your Bible puts it.

[21 : 06] And in this offering, there's no resemblance of any kind to the offerings of the sacrificial system. Gideon goes and prepares a massive amount of food.

35 litres of flour and a whole boiled goat. And this doesn't look like an Israelite worshipping Yahweh.

This looks to be straight from the Canaanite playbook of how to prepare a feast for a God visitor.

And only when the visitor consumes the offering, doing exactly what Gideon requested, does Gideon finally, the penny drops, he realises who this is.

And what's his response? It's not being firm in his faith. It's not being built up and ready to go and defeat whatever is coming his way. No, he's full of terror.

Only then does Gideon realise that this messenger was from God. And Gideon has enough knowledge to know that seeing God face to face is a fearsome thing.

[22 : 29] And he cries out. But again, God mercifully answers his desperate pleas. And there's a lovely little triplet in verse 23.

Peace to you. Do not fear. You shall not die. That is what God says to this fearful Gideon. And Gideon builds an altar and worships.

Doing something slightly more acceptable than preparing a ridiculously large amount of food. And the name of the place he calls the Lord is peace.

Yahweh shalom. And as we think back over all these events, can you see how the puzzle starts to fit together? And how the graciousness of God towards Gideon is just staggering.

Despite faithlessness and ignorance, God graciously works to bring Gideon around. And perhaps as we think through our own lives of our own faithlessness and ignorance, we can appreciate the

patience that God has shown to us.

[23 : 42] The slowness that he has to give up on us. The willingness that he has to wait for us. And even to accept from us what is completely unsatisfactory.

But we come back to this idea. Let us never seek to emulate Gideon in these things. Yes, we can take great comfort.

Yes, we can even seek to emulate the patience that God has shown here on those who are perhaps younger in the faith. But let us strive to worship God truly.

Let us stir one another on to know God rightly. To speak of him well rather than cynically.

To recognize his gracious working in our lives. Let us never use Gideon as an excuse to worship God like the world worships.

[24 : 41] And would that we never be so utterly compromised that our worship looks like and smells like the dead religion and the vain philosophies of all the surrounding culture.

God raises up a deliverer. God raises up a deliverer. God raises up a deliverer. But now what will God do with him? What will Gideon's first act be?

Will he go and will he slay the Midianites that have just entered the land? No. The very same night as Gideon's encounter, God speaks again to Gideon.

There are now two places of worship in Ophrah and they cannot coexist. Particularly when this was to be the source of God's deliverance from the nation.

And so Gideon is told to go and to destroy the altar and the Asherah pole. Notice Gideon is not the child being sent to every Bible camp.

[25 : 47] This Baal altar is owned by his father. Gideon's father is the ringleader of Baal worship in the area. Not only that, but his father is relatively wealthy.

Notice Gideon takes ten servants to help him. This was a man raised in both privileged position, but also into a family that seems to have been completely full of idolatry.

And Gideon's speed of action is commendable. As soon as he's told to do it, he goes and he does it that very same night.

Although again, don't be too awestruck by it. He does it because he's afraid. He wanted to do it under cover of darkness. Because he feared his family and the townspeople.

Sometimes when people are dealing with Gideon, they're very harsh against him here. They think that his fear isn't warranted. But it obviously is.

[26 : 50] He has the measure of his neighbors down to a tee. Because the next morning they wake up. And they go and they look and Baal's altar is destroyed and the Asherah poles cut down.

And the first thing they do, they start an investigation. They get the police on the job. And by the time the police have found that it was Gideon's thing, they arrive at the door.

And they ask Gideon's father, send out your son. He needs to die. Gideon's fear was perfectly warranted. And do you see the irony here?

These folk living in Israel. Who claim some small way to have called out on God. And here they are about to kill somebody who's destroyed a place of false worship.

The thing's all upside down and backside front. Surprisingly, it's Gideon's father who gives Gideon some leeway. He makes a valid point.

[27 : 59] Baal ought to be God enough to deal with Gideon himself. But again, the renaming of Gideon is a troubling point. And it points to the fact that Joash, Gideon's father, he isn't a devout Israelite who's defending his son righteously.

But rather he's an unrepentant idolater. Gideon's renamed Jerubal. Let Baal contend against him. This is a prayer to Baal to deal with Gideon that would get said every time somebody shouted his name. This is a curse given by his father.

Gideon's deliverance is off to a rocky start. The last section of our passage is perhaps the best known of the whole section.

A year has gone past, or a good part of it, and the Midianites had marked in their calendars to go and consume the land of Israel just like every other year.

[29 : 10] And here they come again, and they camp near Gideon's hometown. But something different happens. God has his man in the right place.

And God comes and he fills Gideon. Or rather, he clothes Gideon. And Gideon calls to his own people, and to the whole tribe of Manasseh, and to the neighboring tribes as well to come.

And the most surprising thing, in verse 35, they assemble. This Gideon, who maybe only nine months ago could barely keep himself alive, has mustered an army of the very same people that wanted to kill him.

God is powerfully working through him. But let us never think that the people God uses are perfect. The very next verse, we find already Gideon vacillating about whether God was really going to use him or not.

He has an army camped outside of his tent, and he's cowering inside going, God, I really don't know if you're going to use me. Gideon's unsure.

[30 : 29] And Gideon tests God, as if God was the unreliable party of the two. As if God was prone to saying one thing and doing another.

And we've already seen God's grace in dealing with Gideon. And here again, God graciously condescends to Gideon. Even though Gideon is disobedient to the law.

And Deuteronomy 6.16 says, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test. But here's Gideon testing God. And yet God does not deal with him according to his sins.

But rather he allays his fears and bolsters his courage so that he can lead God's people. And for the final time tonight, we must be careful and not emulate Gideon in this.

I perhaps need to make a careful distinction here. Forgive me for running a couple of minutes over time. Perhaps asking God to do something in order to guide us is somewhat allowable if and only if God's word says nothing about the choice that we have to make.

[31 : 52] Perhaps asking God to do something to guide us is kind of okay only if the Bible is completely silent on that choice that you're going to make.

I'm sure many of us have wondered if God wants us to take a certain job or do something with our lives. And some of us probably, many of us maybe, have laid out a fleece or so it's called.

We've set a condition for God to fulfill that will let us know whether or not we're meant to do something. And most of the time, it's about choices that God says little or nothing about in the Bible. God doesn't say to my knowledge whether being a lawyer is better than being a joiner. It's a free choice. And in those cases, although I maybe think it's foolish, although I maybe think it's a bad way to seek God's guidance, I'm convinced that it isn't sinful.

I think God has given us much better ways to make such decisions based on the use of our brains and our circumstances and the wisdom of godly Christians.

[33 : 08] But if you are asking God to confirm to you something that he's already talked about definitively in the Bible, if you're asking God to attest to something that's already black and white, then please, for your own sake, stop it.

For the good of your spiritual health, stop it. Because you are in grave spiritual danger. The only sign that you need, the only true miracle that you desire is that God has given us his word in our hands, in our language that we can read at our convenience.

And he's already given us everything pertaining to life and godliness. So if you're in that position, can I say lovingly, obey his word and stop wandering foolishly after experiences.

And rather ask our gracious God to give you wisdom and he will give you generously and without reproach.

Gideon's call is a great story of God's grace to his people and to his chosen servant.

[34 : 34] God's grace to his people but we look forward to someone else. Someone who would not deny his calling. Someone who would not test God.

Someone who would openly challenge the idolatry of his society without fear. We look forward to one who promises not only to clothe us with the spirit but to fill us with his spirit and to work in and through us.

We look forward to the true deliverer to Jesus who has delivered us from our slavery and oppression of sin and who has patiently dealt with us ever since.

As we continue to struggle with his word and his demands on our life. Can we just pray as we finish? Father, we thank you for your word.

Thank you that you worked through Gideon despite his folly. Despite his many failures. Yet you took him and you used him.

[35 : 49] And we pray that you would take us despite our waywardness. Despite our sin. And that you would take us and use us for your glory.

We pray this evening if we are struggling with obeying your word that you would bolster us. That you would come and make your presence known in us.
And that we would have the courage to follow your word whatever it takes. So Father, bless us as we go, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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[36 : 57] Amen. Amen.