

Gideon - Forgotten Hero

Series (Parts 1 to 3). Holy Trinity Twickenham, October 2008.

Part 1: Background (Judges 6:11-16)

If you ever stay in hotels for work or on holiday, chances are you've seen a Gideons' Bible by the bed or in a drawer. I never used to know why they were called Gideons' Bibles. Turns out that they're put there by a group called the Gideons, who got their name from a character in the Old Testament. But that doesn't leave most people any the wiser, because that man Gideon is one of the forgotten figures of the Bible.

With the exception of Gideon's Bibles, you never hear Gideon's name mentioned these days. Most people don't know there is somebody in the Bible called Gideon. And it's interesting to speculate on why nobody's interested in Gideon any more. I've got a theory: I think it's because Gideon isn't just a spiritual figure, he's a military figure as well.

Some eras celebrate their military heroes, while other eras are embarrassed by them.

If you walk through central London, whether it's Trafalgar Square or Whitehall or the Embankment – almost anywhere – you'll see lots of statues to military or naval heroes. The most obvious is Nelson's column. A huge granite pillar, 151 feet high, to celebrate Nelson's victory at the Battle of Trafalgar. The Column was seen as an important symbol of Britain's naval strength, almost a symbol of the nation itself.

During the Second World War, Hitler had plans when he overran Britain to cart off Nelson's column to Berlin. So these monuments to national pride and victory are often seen by enemies as important symbols too.

It's hard to imagine a generation like ours building expensive monuments to military victory. If anything, we're rather embarrassed by them. It all looks like imperialism or nationalism or a glorification of war. And that's especially difficult after a whole generation of young men was wiped out in the First World War.

But there's no escaping it: Gideon is presented as a military hero in the Bible. Maybe the reason we don't hear about Gideon these days is the same reason we don't hear much about Nelson. We're living in an age and a setting which is a bit embarrassed, or at least ambivalent, about their achievements.

So what I want to do over three weeks is look at Gideon, his life and his achievements. And as we do that, I think it will open a window on a whole era of Bible history nobody pays much attention to these days. With the possible exception of Richard Dawkins. He's the famous atheist, and author of *The God Delusion*. He likes to dip into the stories from the era when Gideon lived. Because he thinks he can find lots of examples of violent and bad behaviour that will shock people and make them want to give up on faith altogether.

Is he right? Well, we need to find out more about that whole era when Gideon lived and then we can decide for ourselves. You'll find Gideon in the Book of Judges. It's quite near the start of the Bible. And it's set just after the time when Joshua led the people of Israel into the land of Canaan.

The background is this. The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt for years. Moses leads them to freedom through the Red Sea. They then end up wandering in the desert for 40 years before they finally reach the promised land. Their leader by that stage is Joshua, who's another military leader and forgotten figure of the Bible. And Joshua's story is told in (oddly enough) the Book of *Joshua*.

The next Book after *Joshua* is *Judges*. It's about the era in the life of the nation when they're starting to settle in the land. It's a violent and turbulent period of history, not only in Bible history but everywhere. There are other groups around who keep attacking the Israelites. Including the Philistines, a powerful nation from over on the coastal area, and the Midianites, a nomadic group.

The *next* phase of Bible history is when the nation has its first kings: first Saul, then David and Solomon, and things are finally a bit more peaceful. But this era of the *Judges* comes between settling in the promised land and the anointing of the first kings. In other words, between about 1200 BC and about 1000 BC.

As you read the book of Judges, you can tell the writer wants to underline that this is a really troubled, violent period of history. You get little refrains that keep reappearing in the narrative. One of these refrains is the phrase: 'In those days, Israel had no king'. Another is: 'the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes'. I guess the word we'd use for it is *anarchy*. The absence of rules or a ruler. Chaos. Violence. No fixed reference points for how to live or what to believe in. Anything goes. The constant threat of being wiped off the map by your enemies.

And the name of the book comes from the title of the leaders who kept chaos at bay, who defended the nation at key times. When we think of judges we think of old people in wigs, trying legal cases. But that's not what the word means in the Bible. They're leaders God calls to help the nation navigate through the violence and chaos.

And to be a successful 'judge' in that era you need to do two things:

- 1) You need to lead and inspire people and win victories.** The stakes are high: would the nation survive at all or would it be wiped out? So the military and gory bits that people today get squeamish about are celebrated rather than being downplayed. Judges are people who give hope and stability amid the turmoil.
- 2) You need to keep your eyes fixed on God,** the God who'd spoken to Moses and given him the 10 Commandments and called him to lead the people out of Egypt. The danger in Canaan is that people will forget God or get drawn into some of the religious practices of the surrounding nations. Which included things like child sacrifice. So the judges act as a spiritual compass too, reminding people about the need to keep the faith.

The judges aren't perfect, and there are lots of other gory bits in the book of Judges, as well as all the battles. Which is why Richard Dawkins loves the book of Judges so much, because he can then say: 'See, look what people in the Bible do in the name of God!' What Richard Dawkins forgets is that the Bible itself says the same thing: this was an era when 'the people did whatever seemed right in their own eyes'. Nobody's claiming it's all good and perfect. It's about how people can live in violent and turbulent times, and keep some sort of hope and security – and some measure of faith – alive.

So with all that as your backdrop – to be a successful judge you had to be a leader, who could motivate people to victory and give them hope and security, and be a spiritual compass that pointed people back to God when they drifted away. The best known judges were Gideon, a woman called Deborah, and Samson (well known for his strength).

Throughout the book of Judges, a cycle repeats itself. The people start to settle down and get comfortable. They forget God and start worshipping the demon-gods of Canaan. God allows neighbouring countries to attack them and oppress them. They cry out to God to save and help them. God raises up a judge who rescues them (like Gideon). Peace is restored. But then the people start to settle down and get comfortable, and the whole cycle starts up again.

Now, we still haven't said why the Bible distribution group called The Gideons named themselves after Gideon. The reason is that there's a key episode in Gideon's life where he wins a great victory against overwhelming odds, with just a tiny group of committed people who trust in God to give them victory. And the first Gideons at the start of the 20th century saw themselves in a similar situation. A small group of committed people, facing an overwhelming challenge. To get a Bible into all the hotels and other public buildings around the world.

We'll find out more about Gideon's great victory next week. But for now, here's a challenge from one era – transplanted to another, more than 3,000 years later. From one time of turmoil and crisis to another. From one era where everybody did what was right in their own eyes to another.

Judges like Gideon were people who offered people hope and security in turbulent times. And they were leaders who kept the flame of faith alive in an era when people were turning their back on God. How true is that of me too? To what extent can I be a Gideon, in our own troubled era of history?

Part 2: Be bold! (Judges 7:1-8)

Last week we started a new series on one of the forgotten heroes of the Bible, Gideon. We talked about the background to the era when Gideon lived: it was a violent and turbulent time, a time of political and moral anarchy.

It's the era after the Israelites have settled in the land of Canaan, when they'd escaped from Egypt under the leadership of Moses. But it's *before* the time of the first kings, Saul and David. It's a time when the Israelites are under constant threat of being wiped off the map by other nations. And it's an era when God raises up key leaders to steer the nation through the choppy waters.

These leaders are called Judges, and their main calling is to be strong leaders of the people – often military leaders, but also a spiritual compass, to remind the people about the reality of God. And one of these 'judges' was a man called Gideon.

Today we're looking at the most famous episode in Gideon's life. The enemies of the Israelites at this time were the Midianites. They were a nomadic group originally from the East, in Arabia, and they rode camels to carry out raids, especially at Harvest time. So you've got to think: violent desert warriors who come to attack and pillage.

Gideon's called by God to lead the Israelites in defending themselves against the Midianites. But the story of how he does it is the strangest story of self-defence you've ever heard. You'd expect Gideon to do what any good leader would do and round up every potential soldier they have. To get them as well trained and equipped as possible to match the enemy's fire-power.

That's what Gideon's about to do, when God speaks to him and tells him to do something that seems on the face of it to be crazy and self-defeating. And we'll look at that in a moment. But I want to digress for a moment and think about this whole idea of God speaking to Gideon. In the story of Gideon, it says a few times: 'God said to Gideon,'. What does that actually mean? Well, I think there are two possibilities:

1) Angelic messenger: The start of the story of Gideon is in chapter 6 of the book of Judges. It says an 'angel of the Lord' came and sat under an oak in Gideon's home town and spoke to Gideon (6:11). Now, to us that implies a translucent white shining figure with wings. But that's not what the Bible means by an angel.

When the Bible talks about angelic beings, they look exactly like human beings. No wings, no shining appearance. Messengers from God in human form (the word 'angel' actually just means 'messenger'). Interestingly, in the account of the angel appearing, it then says 'The LORD turned to Gideon and said,' (14).

In other words, this same figure who's talking to Gideon is first identified as an angel and then as God himself. And this often happens in the Bible. An angel is so identified with God and God's Word, that it's as if God himself appears in human form. God's 'Word' taking on human flesh? Now for Christians, that should make us sit up and take notice. Where do we find God's Word in human flesh? Jesus.

So is this angel a kind of foreshadowing of Jesus, God taking on a human body? To be theological for a moment: is this a pre-incarnation appearance of the second Person of the Trinity, as God's messenger? Maybe. In any case, what it tells us is something interesting. When the Bible says: 'God said to Gideon', maybe it means this angelic messenger from God told him something.

2) An inner voice: It's been the experience of people down the centuries, who're intensely close to God, that God gives special words of insight from time to time. Now, I hasten to add, this has to be treated carefully. There are plenty of people who say God speaks to them, who're simply mentally ill. They hear imaginary voices.

But Christian history shows that God does communicate to people through a 'voice within'. It might feel like a strong impression of the rightness of a particular action. Or a message for another person from God. When St Paul talks about 'Gifts of the Spirit' in his letters, he talks about a 'word of knowledge' or 'prophecy', where God supernaturally reveals something to somebody. And Paul says hearing direct from God ought to be a normal part of the life of the church.

There isn't time to go into all this now, except to say there have been times in my life where somebody whose faith and wisdom I respect has said: 'I think God may be saying such and such to you'. And it's been clear and specific, in a way they could never have guessed on a human level. Using exact words and phrases that connected with things only I could know about.

So this still happens, and it's happened throughout history. And in a way it's what we should expect. If God really does exist, and he cares about us, you'd expect him to want to communicate directly into people's lives now, as well as through the Bible.

That's all a long way of saying: when Gideon heard from God, it was either through an angelic messenger from God, or through an inner voice, guiding his actions.

So back to the message itself. God tells Gideon that he actually has too many soldiers. He has to tell anybody who's scared to go home. So 22,000 men leave, only 10,000 remain. But God again tells Gideon he's got too many men and he finds a way of whittling them down to just 300. Which is of course a fraction of the number of the Midianites, riding their camels and rattling their sabres.

The rest of chapter 7 tells the story of how Gideon and his 300 men won a victory over the enemy. I won't tell you the whole story now: you can read it yourself if you want to know what happens.

But I do want to ask: What on earth is going on? Why would God ask Gideon to get rid of most of his men just as he's preparing for battle? Well, the answer's an interesting one that takes us to the heart of what it means to have faith in God.

One of the best-selling books of recent years is called *The Purpose-Driven Life* by an American pastor called Rick Warren. It's sold over 20 million copies worldwide, and it's basically a book about following Jesus, an accessible guide to the Christian life. And the opening words of the book are these:

'It's not about you. The purpose of your life is about more than your personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born *by* his purpose and *for* his purpose. The search for the purpose of life has puzzled people for thousands of years. That's because we typically begin at the wrong starting point - ourselves. We ask self-centred questions like: What do *I* want to be? What should *I* do with my life? What are *my* goals, *my* ambitions, my dreams for my future? But focussing on ourselves will never reveal our life's purpose.'

In other words, most of us are interested in faith for what it offers us, how it can enhance our lives. But what you so often get in the Bible is a reminder that it's not about us. It's a God thing. Faith is about trusting God, trying to find out what God wants. So often, that's the lesson characters in the Bible have to learn. Because they're no different from us. They just assume the purpose of life is a *me* thing, like most people do today. And they're happy to have a bit of spirituality on the side, as long as it doesn't make too many demands on the rest of their life. Same as most people today.

And that's what's going on with Gideon. God's saying to Gideon: 'Do you really trust me to give you victory?' And Gideon's basically saying: 'Yes yes yes, now let me get on and build up the biggest army Israel's ever seen.'

So God has to say: 'No, you're not listening. Do you really trust me to give you victory?' So he tells Gideon to get rid of 31,700 of his 32,000 men before the battle even starts. Why? So there can be no doubt that this victory's been won by God and not by Gideon's own military strength or cunning.

The story of Gideon tells us that finding the purpose of our lives, your life and my life, is a God thing. It's not about you and me pursuing *our* ambitions and our happiness and then seeing if we can squeeze a bit of spirituality onto the side. It's a God thing.

And this is one reason why I'm suspicious of the word *spirituality*. Because it implies it's all about me finding inner peace in a way that works for me. That I can pick'n'mix a little bit of this, a little bit of that to get it. *But Christian discipleship is a God thing*. It's trying to find out about God's big plans for history and his plans for my life, and me trying to fit in with those. Not about me trying to fit God into my plans.

And this is what Gideon learns the hard way. That moment when Gideon releases his tight grip on his own life and destiny is the moment God's able to achieve extraordinary things through him. It's only when he renounces what the world sees as power that he finds real power. It's only when he becomes a disciple that he can become a hero.

One of the exciting things about Holy Trinity is that so many people who come here are new to church, or just dipping their toe in the water of faith. That's great. But I hope it's also a place where people can go deeper too. Becoming a Christian means reaching a point in my life where I say to God: 'Thy will be done', rather than 'My will be done'.

But the curious thing is that as I lose my life, I begin to find it. As I surrender, I triumph. As I admit my weakness, I find new strength. As I offer my life, I find fullness of life. If you've never reached the point of entrusting your life into God's hands, perhaps you can echo the words of this next prayer... [*prayer of deeper faith commitment*].

Part 3: Gideon's Fleece (Judges 6:33-40)

We've reached Part 3 in our series on Gideon, one of the forgotten heroes of the Bible. We've looked at the background to Gideon's life and the era when he lived: it was a turbulent time, when the Israelites first entered the land of Canaan. Gideon was called by God to lead the people and mobilize them against the invading Midianites. They were violent desert nomads who rode in on their camels to kill and plunder. Gideon was also called to act as a spiritual compass, so the people didn't forget God.

Last week we looked at how Gideon won a victory over the huge Midianite army, with just 300 men. But he had to learn a hard lesson: his victory came through trusting God, not through military power or superior numbers. God whittles down Gideon's army from 32,000 men to just 300, so there can be no doubt that his victory comes from God.

This week we're rewinding the story a bit, to an episode in the run up to the battle. And that's the episode of Gideon's *fleece*. Now, when I say Gideon had a fleece, I don't mean he had a warm, lightweight top for hiking in. This was a real fleece from a real sheep! And it's all to do with Gideon wanting to be sure about God's guidance.

What happens is this. When God calls Gideon to lead the people, that call comes in the form of an angel. We said earlier in the series that angels in the Bible look like normal human beings. And not little girls in nighties. They're more like strong, slightly scary men. So you've got this mysterious figure who comes to Gideon and claims to have a message for him from God: You're going to be the person to deliver the nation from the enemy. You're going to be one of the greatest heroes the nation's ever seen.

But Gideon's not exactly up for the challenge. He makes all sorts of excuses about how he's insignificant, from an insignificant clan, and he's not even the strongest person in his family. (Interestingly, that's a common response when God calls somebody to do something brave or controversial in the Bible. It happens with Moses, the prophet Jeremiah and lots of other people. They find excuses why they can't do it.)

So this messenger says: 'You won't be left to your own devices. God will be with you'. And Gideon says: 'OK. But this really isn't what I'd planned to do with my life. God couldn't send a *sign*, could he? Something miraculous to confirm what you're saying?'

And that's what happens. Gideon gets meat and unleavened bread, which he puts on a rock as an offering to God. A huge flame appears. The meat and the bread are consumed but the rock is still intact. Gideon's blown away by this. He's utterly convinced, and he builds a shrine to mark the spot where he witnessed the power of God with his own eyes.

The day of battle gets nearer. The Midianites gather on the far side of the River Jordan and they pull together a coalition of other nations to attack the Israelites. Gideon peers across the river and sees them all there, and he starts to get cold feet.

So he prays to God and says: 'Look, this is getting serious. If you're telling me I'm going to win a famous victory, I'm going to need another sign. Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to get a woollen fleece and put it on the threshing-floor (where people thresh the grain at Harvest time). If you really want me to do this, in the morning I want to find dew on the fleece but the ground around it bone dry.'

So he does that. And in the morning he's able to wring out a bowl of water from the fleece but the ground is still dry. But Gideon still isn't convinced. He prays again. He says: 'Don't be angry with me, let me make just one more request'. And this time he asks God for an opposite sign: for the the fleece to be dry, and the ground to be wet. And sure enough, when he gets to the threshing floor the next morning, that's what he finds.

Now, this has led some Christians to see Gideon's fleece as a template for divine guidance. In other words, if you want God to guide you, you ask for a sign. So somebody might pray to God: 'If it's right for me to marry this person, let Manchester United beat Tottenham this evening'. Or: 'If it's right for me to move job, let me see a blue Reliant Robin in the next 24 hours'. Or something a bit less trivial: 'If it's right for me to do this job, let a number of people approach me and suggest it to me; that will be a sign from God that it's right.' People sometimes call this 'putting out a fleece', after the story of Gideon asking for a tangible sign so he'd be in no doubt about God's guidance.

Now, the interesting question is this: is that a good way to look for guidance now? Should we ask for tangible signs, or fleeces, before we make big decisions? Well, let me tell you why it ISN'T the best way to receive God's guidance. Very briefly, three reasons:

1) Gideon isn't asking for circumstantial evidence. In other words, he's not asking for normal circumstances to turn out in a certain way, as a sign. Like Manchester United winning the game or the Reliant Robin driving by. Gideon asks God for a miracle. Something that couldn't possibly happen by chance. He wants to hear directly and specifically from God. So if you or I ask for everyday circumstances to turn out in a particular way, and call it a fleece, that's not doing what Gideon did.

There's no precedent in the Bible for God guiding people through trivial circumstantial evidence. God isn't in the business of manipulating soccer games or forcing Reliant Robin drivers to go home by a different route, so that you can know whether to marry somebody or change your job!

2) Gideon wasn't asking for guidance at all. That might sound odd, but it's true. Gideon already knew what he had to do. He already knew God had called him to do it. In verse 37, he says absolutely explicitly: 'If there's 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'. He knows God has spoken to him, he knows what God's asking him to do. Now he's asking God for the faith to see it through. He's asking for confirmation of guidance he's already received.

So if you or I really don't know whether to go for that job, or marry that person, and we ask for Manchester United to win or the Reliant Robin to drive by as a sign, we're not doing what Gideon was doing. To ask God for that sort of sign isn't the same situation as Gideon's fleece. So we can't use Gideon as a precedent.

3) Gideon's fleece was an expression of unbelief. God's already met with Gideon through his messenger. Gideon's already seen meat and bread supernaturally consumed on the rock. He knows what God has asked him to do. The story of the fleece is not a blueprint for guidance. It's an example of Gideon's lack of faith.

And Gideon knows this. That's why he says to God: 'Look – I'm sorry, don't be angry with me, but I want one last sign'. This constant testing of God isn't seen in the Bible as a good thing, it's seen as Gideon's weakness. In fact, Jesus explicitly condemns people who're always looking for signs because of their unbelief. So we're not encouraged in the Bible to keep on asking for signs to settle our doubts.

So if that's not what we should be doing, how should we expect God to guide? The answer is more subtle than wet fleeces or Reliant Robins. It's one word: wisdom. One of the main emphases of the Bible is on the need to develop wisdom. To be a wise person.

So when we're faced with big life decisions, of course we need to ask God to guide us. But this guidance might come in a number of ways:

- i) As we pray to God, we feel a **peace** and **rightness** about a course of action.
- ii) The Bible says Christians have the power and presence of God in them, the **Holy Spirit**. And the Spirit guides and gives inner promptings, pointing us in certain directions.
- iii) God can speak to us through **other people** and their insights.
- iv) We can ask whether a course of action plays to our God-given **strengths**. And whether it goes with the grain of the unique **gifts** God's given me.

- v) God can **close doors and open them**. If you apply for the job and they don't want you, chances are it's not the right job. Or if you ask somebody to marry you and they say no, that's a sign!
- vi) Has God already given guidance on this in the **Bible**? Christians believe God speaks through the Bible, and we can find his general will for us there. So if you want guidance on whether it's OK to carry on losing your temper with your family, or whether you should have an affair with your boss, God's already given an answer on that.

More than anything else, guidance is about *wisdom*, and wisdom is arrived at in a number of ways. It's about a number of pointers pointing in the same direction. And that brings me back to something I mentioned earlier. I was talking about the person who says to God: 'If it's right for me to do this job, let a number of people approach me and suggest it to me, that will be a sign that it's right.'

Actually, that's quite a good idea. Not because it's a fleece like Gideon's, because it's not. It's a good idea because it might be part of a wise approach to finding a job. If a number of people come up to you and ask if you've thought about a particular job, or a particular area of work, that shows they think there might be a close match. And that can help the process of discernment, which is a wise way of going about things.

We worship a living and loving God who's passionately interested in every area of our lives. Particularly the big decisions we all face from time to time. Let's be people who look to God for his guidance, but let's be people who do it by cultivating wisdom and godly discernment. And let's ask God to give us the gift of courage, so that when we do sense God's guidance in a particular area, we don't drag our heels. We get on and do it.