



Without a King: Gideon (Part 3)

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At my previous church in the Adelaide Hills, my small group got together and thought about a project we could complete together, and one of our group members had seen an image of what I will show you in a moment and we decided to replicate it in a larger format.

Our small group spent an evening of painting, using a projector to ensure that the words were the large enough that we could easily trace around, and then mounted this image on a prominent wall of the church hall building for passer by's to see. And in many ways I think it reflects the humour of our group, but the image was just words on a relatively plain background reading "You asked me to send you a sign. – God".

And most people go around life asking God to send them a sign. Maybe you do it without even realising. Maybe you say like me, God, if I win the lottery it will be a sign that you want me to quit my job and instead work for the church for free living off the income. Maybe that's not you and that was me, or God, if my house sells quickly that will be a sign that you want me to move and take that job opportunity in another state; or God, if he or she calls me back that is a sign that you want us to be together and get married and have babies.

We possibly find ourselves doing it without even realising at times. Maybe its in the parking lot, God, send me a sign that you love me by giving me a park that is close to the doors of the shopping centre; God, send me a sign as to what to have for dinner because that is what the next advert on television will be.

And today, as we continue to journey through the book of judges, who were without a King, we are going to see that testing God is often at times a show of doubt and fear and lack of trust, and that the judges, the 'saviours' or 'delivers' of God's people were at times, not dissimilar to us in that they too, like us, had doubts and fears and a lack of trust, even as God used them to deliver God's people from their enemies.

And as we look at the story of Gideon today, we are going to see again that all the judges in their flaws and in their strengths, that they point towards the coming King, the one who we know lived and died and lived again, Jesus Christ.

And so far we have looked at the judges Othniel, Ehud and Deborah, stories of how God's people, living in an age of spiritual pluralism went through what is or will become a familiar pattern as we see that the people do what they thing is fitting or right in their own eyes.

And this cycle or pattern went that the people would rebel against God, God gets angry, the people are oppressed by their enemies, which leads them to cry out to God, salvation is delivered for the chosen judge, there is peace in the land, but then the judge dies and the cycle begins around again.

And the story of Gideon we read in Judges chapters 6 through 8, and we see the judges cycle begins again as we read from chapter 6 verse 1: **The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.** (Judges 6:1)

Now, this is one of the worst oppressions to date, because God's people are forced to leave their homes as we read: **Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count them or their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help.** (Judges 6:2-6)

We see this cycle continue as the people cry out to God for help. And you can understand why – I mean the military strategy of burning and destroying their crops would have been annoying the say the least, but it is no different today in the way that the UN sanctions countries and their trade which prohibits anyone buying or selling to that country to bring about economic stress.

Here, it was not just economic stress that was being brought about, but even further than that it was starting to bring about starvation. By this method, the invaders who were oppressing the Israelites, God's people wanted to try and starve them out of existence, which brings the people to their knees to cry out to God for help.

And then we read what happens next from verse 7: **When the Israelites cried out to the Lord because of Midian, he sent them a prophet.** (Judges 6:7-8)

I'll pause there, because the Israelites are wanting another judge. By now they would have had some idea of this cycle, and what the judges could and did do for God's people, but this time, in response to the cry from the people, God's response is not to send a saviour or salvation, but instead to deliver a sermon.

And the reason for that is because before they can appreciate the rescue that will come, the people need to understand why they need rescuing. In the same way, we can tell people until we are blue in the face about Jesus and the life, forgiveness and salvation that comes through him, but until we get down into the fact that because we are sinful and need a saviour, all that life, forgiveness and salvation stuff is almost irrelevant. It only becomes relevant if I realise that I am a sinner and in need of a saviour.

And God's people, at this time, needed to hear why they needed rescuing, and the sermon that the prophet preached went like this. He said: **"This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. And I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors; I drove them out before you and gave you their land. I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me."** (Judges 6:8-10)

The prophet comes to help them understand why they are in the trouble they are in. He wants them to understand where their idolatry, where their sin has led them.

And the nature of this sermon from the prophet really shows that God is trying to convict the people so that they would be truly repentant, which suggests that the crying out that they had done as we read, was not a sign of real repentance.

Once again, if you go through the history of the last few weeks of our series, and the way the people returned to evil ways after the deaths of the judges Othniel, Ehud and Deborah is strong evidence that their repentance was skin-deep and not heartfelt at all.

So God reminds them of two things: what he has done, and what they have done. What has God done? Delivered them from the Egyptians; what have the people done? They have not listened to God.

God sends this prophet because the people are regretful but not repentant. It is in some ways like when you get caught in the middle of stealing a piece of rhubarb and apple pie from the fridge.

Now when or if that was the happen, you might pose the question. Am I sorry that I stole the piece of rhubarb and apple pie? Or am I just sorry that I got caught? Personally, if this was my situation, I would probably be sorry I got caught, but in a two-person household, the only other person I can really blame is our dog.

But in some ways, the regretfulness of the people is almost like they are sorry that they have been caught, where as God is trying to poke them towards them realising that they are repentant of what they have done.

They are regretful for what they have lost, and they want all of that restored, but they are not repenting of their idolatry, worshipping the other gods of the age.

And it is at this point that we see Gideon injected into the story. And we read in verse 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.** (Judges 6:11)

So, Gideon is working hard threshing wheat in a wine press, and in normal conditions in order to separate wheat from the chaff, farmers would select an open, elevated location where the grain could be pitched up so that the wind could blow away that useless chaff.

But here, we because of the oppression that they were under, we find Gideon cowering, maintaining a low profile, labouring a secluded place, fearing the threat of invasion. And it is here that we see an angel of the Lord appear, and we read: **When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."** (Judges 6:12)

Now, Gideon is probably not thinking he is that mighty of a warrior right about now, he is just a simple farmer trying to survive. And so Gideon in his response appears cynical, you could say, maybe even rude when he replies: **"Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, 'Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian."** (Judges 6:13)

Now, Gideon makes a mistake that so many of us make when things don't go according to the way we want them to go, and that is that we tend to see our troubles as evidence that God has

left us, instead of asking how God is working in and through what we are going through for our good.

The other mistake that we make so often is that of waiting for God to do something to us or for us, or wondering why he doesn't use the someone or something we want to bring help. Our prayers are often something like 'Lord, why don't you remove this problem', rather than being 'Lord, please make me the person that can handle this problem'.

It reminds me of the scene in the Will Smith movie 'Pursuit of Happyness' where the son tells his dad a joke about a guy who was drowning in the river. A boat comes along and the captain yells at the man "Do you need some help?" "No thanks" came the reply, "God will save me" and off the ship sails. A 2nd boat comes along "Do you need some help?" yelled the captain. "No thanks" came the reply, "God will save me" and off the ship sails. Eventually the man drowns and God is there waiting for him in heaven. "How come you didn't save me?" the man asks God. "What are you talking about, I sent you 2 big boats you dummy."

We are so quick to blame God if he doesn't rescue us in the way that we want to be rescued, and are quick to blame him, which doesn't allow us the time or the space to see the people around us, and even ourselves as a way to overcome the trouble that we might be in.

Now we see God's stubborn side kick in, because despite his protests, God tells Gideon that he will be a mighty warrior and goes on to say to him as we read in verse 14: **The Lord turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" "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 Lord answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down the Midianites, leaving none alive."** (Judges 6:14-16)

It's obvious that Gideon was not a born leader, and appears far from what the people of the time would have called a hero. He's quick to jump in and tell God that he is not qualified for the task that God has called him to: he is the last-born, and he is from an insignificant family and tribe.

I wonder what excuse you have given? 'God, I'm not very good at taking the lead', 'God, I'm not very good at communicating with people', 'God, I'm not the strongest person when it comes to knowing the Bible', Gideon isn't acting very courageous, but God prepares him gradually to grow into the role he has given him.

And we see this over the following verses, but then we get to the famous fleeces. Because after some more banter, Gideon is still unsure of God's calling and promise, so he sets out a fleece and asks God to confirm his plans by making it dewy on the ground, as we read: **Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised – look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is 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." And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew – a bowlful of water.** (Judges 6:36-38)

You might think that is enough, but Gideon asks God for another sign, this time, he asks God to re-confirm by reversing the request. **Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew." That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.** (Judges 6:39-40)

Now, we get to Gideon asking God to send him a sign, twice, as it turns out, and I spoke about the sign that my small group made up for the church – really, it was meant to be a bit comical, but also to get people to think.

But we have to be careful. Because when Satan tests Jesus in the desert after he was baptised, and asks Jesus for a sign, we know that Jesus quickly rebuked him.

And we can't really use this passage as a justification to ask for little signs and signals in our life. Gideon was really here asking God for a supernatural revelation of who He really is. It was about God giving a picture of who he is, the sovereign one over the forces of nature.

Because many of the other 'gods' of that age were about the forces of nature – the rain god, the fertility god and so forth. But God in this process revealed himself as sovereign over the forces of nature.

And the request of Gideon for God to give him this sign was to build up his faith. He didn't have the Bible, or the means of grace that we have to be able to do that, and so this was his outlet, and God in his grace, responded. Not once, but twice!

When we make similar requests, God has already graciously responded to us. And he has done that by pointing us to the fullest, final revelation of his character and his purposes, fulfilled in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, the one true King.

So when we find ourselves doubting God's promises, or God's presence, we can instead of asking him for a sign, ask him to again point us to His Son. That is what Gideon needed, and what he received, and God will do the same for us.

If you know the story of Gideon then you will know that God did go on to use him to deliver God's people, but if you don't know the story, then I encourage you to read it in Judges chapters 6 through 8. At the end of the story, however, we read that **During Gideon's lifetime, the land had peace for forty years.** (Judges 8:28)

While the Israelites were without a King, we are not, because Jesus, the King of kings has come and paved a way to eternity for us. So let's not doubt, or ask for signs, or test God, and instead see what God has done and continues to do for us through sending His Son for us, Jesus Christ our Lord.