



"In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

That was the mantra of my generation. It wasn't that we were trying to do wrong. We didn't necessarily want to disobey God and rebel. Our problem was we were trying to do right "in our own eyes." So, instead of putting God first and obeying the first commandment, we were guided by our own intellect and reasoning, believing we knew better than God.

I'm so rude... let me introduce myself. I am Gideon, son of Joash, from the tribe of Manasseh and the clan of Abiezer. My story is found in Judges 6–8.

Maybe you've heard of me? If not, you've probably seen my name on one of these Bibles in a hotel room. I'm still not quite sure why they are called the Gideons. Maybe those small Bibles remind people of my life.

I often say: You can't be too small for God to use you, but you can be too big.

You may be wondering what's a judge? The name is misleading. You're thinking of someone in the courtroom wearing a black robe, right? But, we were actually military leaders, warlords even, who were called by God to rescue and deliver his people from their enemies. There were actually twelve of us. Maybe you've heard of Ehud or Deborah. Everyone knows notorious Samson! He gets most of the attention.

Let me tell you what it was like to live in my day.

For seven brutal years we suffered under the tribe of Midian. The suffering was so harsh we lived hiding out in caves and clefts among the mountains.

The harvest was a particularly dangerous time. If we were fortunate enough to harvest grain before an attack, we could store it in our hideouts. Most were not so lucky. Midian would swarm down upon us like locusts and devour absolutely everything in site—crops, cattle, and families were plundered and destroyed.

Do you have any idea what life is like without grain to feed your family? Do you know what it's like to suffer under evil? To see your family brutalized and your crops destroyed?

You may be wondering, Why was life like that? Weren't we the people of God? Remember, "In those days, there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes."

I lived during a time of spiritual and moral decay in Israel. My people were separated into twelve tribes spread out over the Promised Land. We were fragmented politically and there was no leader like Moses or Joshua to keep us united.

The book of Judges details the dangerous cycle Israel repeated six times. The cycle went like this:

- » Israel sinned and worshipped pagan gods.
- » God removed his hand of protection and allowed other nations to oppress us.
- » Israel would finally cry out to God and return to the Lord.
- » God would raise up a judge to deliver his people.

For over 400 years we lived like that.

You may be thinking, What happened to us? Didn't Joshua take the Promised Land? Yes, he did. But Joshua died and a new generation of people grew up who didn't know the Lord and what he did for his people.

My people constantly faced enemy oppression for one simple reason—we forgot. We forgot the God who rescued us from slavery in Egypt. We forgot how he used Joshua to conquer the Promised Land. We forgot God's covenant. We failed to completely drive out the Canaanites from the land. We were told not to have anything to do with them. Instead, we slowly began to worship the gods of the land.

Because we forgot God we also failed to teach our children about him. We got caught up in the culture of our time. To be honest, we deserved what we got. The oppression and misery was God's way of breaking us and making us remember and cry out to him.

Let me tell one very important thing I don't want you to forget—take God and sin seriously. The book of Judges acts like a mirror in which we see ourselves more clearly. Joshua is a story of victory. Judges is a story about failure. Judges is a story about the spiritual and moral decline of a great nation.

We did not take God seriously about the threat our enemies posed to us. God told us to drive out every inhabitant of these Canaanite villages; not to mingle with them or have anything to do with them; not to marry with them or associate with them. But we ignored God's warning and instead we moved in among them.

The next step was open idolatry with Baal and Ashtaroth. We did not take sin seriously.

How is it that some great man or woman of God suddenly collapses morally? It's never sudden. It's a series of small decisions over a long period of time. Like Israel, it's a slow, inward deterioration that leads to a great fall. Let my life and all the Judges serve as a warning to you against spiritual deterioration and decline in your walk with God.

Take God seriously and take sin seriously.

As for me, well, I was minding my own business, secretly threshing wheat in an underground winepress. Why? For fear of Midian! Wheat was normally threshed out in the open, where the wind could blow away the chaff. Suddenly an angel of the Lord startled me and said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."

The Lord is with me? Are you kidding me? Where has the Lord been all this time? Why are my people suffering if the Lord is with us? I told the angel, right to his face, that the Lord has abandoned us! Where has he been during our suffering? Does he still care for us? Does he see what is happening? My people struggled with those questions. Have you ever felt that way?

Mighty warrior? Give me a break! I was no mighty warrior. I was a farmer, a man of the earth. I never understood why my dad named me Gideon, which means "destroyer," because I sure didn't see myself that way.

The angel wouldn't give up. He said, "Save Israel out of Midian's hand, I am sending you." Me? Really? How can I save Israel? I was from the weakest of the twelve clans—Manasseh. I was the youngest in my family of eleven. How would I be able to call out soldiers from my clan, let alone the others? I was a nobody! Surely, not a judge!

But, maybe that is why God called me. Maybe he wasn't looking for a decorated soldier, but a faithful follower of Yahweh. God said, "I will be with you. I will strike down all the Midianites."

Well, I wish I could say that I immediately believed all this. I didn't. I asked the angel for a sign. I don't recommend this practice at all. My faith was weak. Here is what I did. I prepared a sacrificial meal, laid it on a rock under the great oak at Morah and the angel burned it up like an offering. The angel disappeared immediately. And I knew this was the Lord.

Before the Lord would drive out Midian, holiness and right worship would need to start right within my own family. The angel spoke to me again and commanded me to tear down our family's altar to Baal and the town's Asherah pole.

I knew my family and the town would go nuts if they saw me do this, so I took 10 men and demolished it all in the middle of the night so that no one would see me. I set up a new altar to the Lord and sacrificed a bull on it.

As you can imagine, the next day the townspeople were not happy. They soon found out who did it and they were ready to kill me right then and there. But you know who rescued me? My dad, Joash. Incredibly, he pleaded with the people, "If Baal is really a god, then let him defend himself!" They agreed and left me alone. They gave me the name, Jerub-Baal. I hated that nickname!

In the midst of all this, the Midianites, Amalekites and a group of northern peoples joined forces, crossed over the Jordan River and camped in the Valley of Jezreel, which was only four miles away. Attack was imminent.

Suddenly, the Spirit of the Lord empowered me. I blew this trumpet and rallied the people of God together, 32,000 strong! It was an incredible feeling to have the Spirit of God overpower me. Then to see 32,000 men come under my leadership was just unreal.

But to be honest, I still struggled to believe God would actually do what he said. Because of my weak faith, I asked for another sign. I asked for a wet fleece on dry ground and then a dry fleece on wet ground. A fleece is the wool of a sheep still attached to the skin, like a rug or a blanket. God did exactly as I asked and I knew that it was his will.

Again, I really don't recommend anyone doing this. God doesn't work that way anymore. You don't need a sign from God to know his will. You have the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit living in you.

My time was different. I asked for a sign because my faith was weak. If I am honest, I was a coward and a skeptic. Six times God promised to give the Midianites into my hands. Yet, I still asked for a sign, twice! Don't put the Lord your God to the test!

So there I was, encouraged by the fleece, standing strong with 32,000 men and ready to attack Midian. Suddenly the Lord said, "You have too many men." Too many men? Are you kidding me? There is no such thing as too many men for battle. Midian already outnumbered us 4 to 1. I'll do the math for you... that's 135,000 Midianites! What do you mean, too many men?

But God was insistent, "If you win, Israel will boast in themselves and in their strength. Tell everyone who is scared to go home." So I did and can you believe it, 22,000 men left. Talk about discouraging! I believed with 10,000 men we had a fighting chance to beat Midian. But the Lord spoke again, "Still too many. Take them down to get a drink of water. Those who use their hands like a cup and drink lapping like a dog, keep with you. The rest send home."

Guess how many we had left? 300. Can you believe that? 300 men. That's all. I was terrified. How could 300 men defeat Midian? Not a chance. I needed to be assured we'd win. I needed encouragement. I wasn't the mighty warrior God said I was, at least not yet. Thankfully the Lord graciously intervened again.

The Lord told me to go down to Midian's camp and hear what they were saying. So, I took my servant Purah, and in the middle of the night we snuck down to the camp.

I want you to imagine seeing thousands upon thousands of your enemies camped out right in front of you. There were camels as far as the eye could see. I was ready to run right then and there. But then I heard someone telling a friend about his dream. Here's what I overheard, "A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed." The friend replied, "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands."

It was music to my ears! I was overwhelmed with joy and immediately bowed down and worshipped the Lord. Yahweh was truly at work, fighting on behalf of Israel. The dream gave me great courage, even though God was saying the same thing all along.

Here's what happened next. I went back to our camp, made the 300 men get up and told them, we are attacking now! I divided them up into three companies, each with a trumpet and a jar with a torch inside. Trumpets and torches, that's all we had. I told them to follow me and do exactly as I said.

We carefully crept down to the outer edge of camp and separated. My company was positioned in the middle. I gave the word and we all blew the trumpets and smashed the jars yelling, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!"

You'll never believe what happened! The Lord threw Midian into great confusion. They screamed, ran around in terror and began attacking themselves. We went running after them, chasing them all the way to the Jordan River. We captured their kings. Victory was ours!

It's incredible to look back and see that during my lifetime, Israel had peace for 40 years.

But, make no mistake about it, I was far from perfect. I'm too embarrassed to even get into why I made myself an ephod of gold. The pain of that disobedience is too hard for me to talk about. Like you, I was both a man of faith and a man of fear.

Why did I come to share my story? What's the point? Let me leave you with one thing: You can't be too small for God to use you, but you can be too big.

As I look back on my life, I see a God who saw something in me that I did not see. I could only see a farmer, from the weakest tribe, who was the youngest in my family. God saw a "mighty warrior."

A lot of us feel that way, don't we? We feel like we are nobody and nothing. And we really aren't capable of doing anything but failing. This is how we see ourselves and it is how we have always seen ourselves, as nobodies. It's how I saw myself.

But God says, "I will be with you. Gideon, you aren't nobody, you are mine. I created you and I made you. I am leading you and I will be with you. You are not alone."

If you're unsure of yourself, if you're aware of your failings, then you're just the sort of person that God can use. Allow him to speak to you and tell you what he wants you to do. Ask him to empower you for the task.

Despite my shortcomings, I believed God, and he gave me great victory against all odds.

God is looking for people who will worship him and take him at his word. So, the next time you see one of these Bibles in a hotel, remember my story and may it always point you to Jesus.

You can't be too small for God to use you, but you can be too big.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2014 Central Peninsula Church North, San Bruno, CA
Catalog No. 1404-8N

This message from Scripture was preached on Sunday, November 9, 2014 at Central Peninsula Church North
300 Piedmont Avenue | San Bruno, CA 94066 | 650 349.1278 | www.cpcweb.org. Additional copies available on request.