

"Gideon - An Unlikely Hero!"

Judges 6:11-24
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Judges 7:1-22
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I can't believe it! That's the dumbest idea that I've ever heard! Why would anyone want to do that? Gideon's reaction and the reaction of his followers might well have been along those lines when they first heard about God's plan for the battle against the Midianites. Everyone knows that you don't prepare for battle by weakening your forces. Rather, you take the time that you need to carefully build them up until you have an overpowering force. Then and only then are you ready to attack. What general has ever said, "I have way too many men in my army. Let's cut back to less than 1% of what you've given me, that's all that I really need to win this battle?"

But God's instructions to Gideon were far different than standard operating procedure. First of all, God told Gideon that he had too many soldiers - 32,000 was way too many, 10,000 was still way too many, 300 was just right. How about weapons? Most soldiers want the best weapons possible. Back then swords and bows and spears were common weapons of war. But Gideon's soldiers never lifted a sword, and may not even have carried them into battle. Torches and trumpets were all that they needed. How incredibly ridiculous! Or was it?

You see God's strategy was quite clear. Let's make the odds so overwhelming, the strategy so ridiculous that afterwards no one can claim that this battle was won by strength of arms. God knows that we like to take credit for good things that happen - even when we have very little to do with their happening. So God set up a situation in which there was no way that the army could take credit for this victory. If they won, it was going to be very clear to everyone that they had won because of God. This was going to be one victory tale that however much it grew in the telling - God would still receive the credit.

Perhaps what's most amazing is that Gideon went along with all of this, reducing his army from 32,000 to 300, and then taking trumpets and torches instead of weapons. It makes you wonder what was going through his mind. Why did he willingly agree to this bizarre behavior? But then our scripture passage gives us some good clues as to why Gideon obeyed.

Gideon was not always an easy person to convince of something. When the angel of God first appeared to Gideon and said that God was with him, the first thing he said was, "why has all this happened to us if the Lord is with us?" In other words, why have we been conquered by the Midianites? If God is really with us, why are things so bad? You see, Gideon had a very skeptical streak running inside of him and he wasn't pulling any punches. If this angel wanted him to cooperate, then he better be ready to explain God's will in a very convincing manner.

When Gideon is told that he can rescue Israel. He doesn't jump at the chance. Once again he questions why God thinks that he is the one. After all, Gideon is a member of the weakest clan of the weakest tribe, and he is the least important member of his family. No one thinks of Gideon as a great and powerful leader. Almost anyone else would seem to be a more logical choice than Gideon, and so he is asking, "why me?"

Now we can all understand Gideon's position. There are times when each of us has wondered why we have been singled out for something that is particularly bad or particularly good. There are so many other people that seem more appropriate or better suited, and so we wonder, "why me?" In fact, if we had lived back then, we too probably would have looked at the situation, looked at the potential leaders, and asked, "why Gideon"?

Gideon was an unlikely choice to be the hero who would save Israel. Gideon had no experience in leadership. Gideon was not looked up to by his peers. He was literally the least of the least. In Gideon, God chose the weak, the powerless, the unexpected.... But Gideon did have one quality that made him particularly suited for the task. While he was not a mighty warrior, a great strategist or a renowned leader, Gideon was faithful to God. It took a while for the angel to convince him that God had really chosen him, but once Gideon realized that it really was an angel of the Lord who had been talking to him, once Gideon realized that it was God who had chosen him, then there was no looking back. Gideon was willing to do whatever God wanted, however unusual or even ridiculous the request might seem. Gideon was obedient to God.

In that sense Gideon was the perfect choice, for he was willing to serve God, and to allow God to act through him unobstructed. Because Gideon was willing to go along with all of God's commands - no matter how unusual they seemed - Israel won the battle, and it was clear to everyone that the battle was won by God, not by the strength of Israel's might.

I find a great deal of hope and inspiration in Gideon's example. You see, Gideon reminds us that we don't have to be great and powerful to serve God. Gideon was the least of the least, and he was chosen by God to make a real difference in the life of Israel. God doesn't choose just the great and the powerful, God doesn't choose just the wise or the strong, God chooses each of us, and God has something for each of us to do.

Now I also identify with Gideon because he had trouble realizing that this message was really from God. That's certainly one of the things that I struggle with and I suspect that you do too. We often are left in the position of saying, "I'm willing to serve God, I just wish that I knew what God wanted me to do". Gideon had that same question. Even though the message of the angel was clear, Gideon was not clear that the message was from God, and it took a great deal of convincing before he was sure.

One of the important things that Gideon did right was that he was willing to let God make a case. In other words, while Gideon was feeling and saying, "How can I rescue Israel... I am the least important member of my family"? He was also willing to listen to the response. Gideon didn't just decide that it was obvious that he couldn't do that, and so decide to not even listen to this crazy idea. Rather, he listened and he was open to God's will. He just needed to know for sure that it was God's will, and not some other purpose that he was being asked to serve.

Once Gideon was certain that it was God who was telling him what to do, then he had no more questions. He went ahead and did what God wanted without hesitation. That's a real challenge for me and perhaps for you as well. It's easier sometimes to not be sure what God wants, because then we've got the perfect reason for hesitating. But when we are sure, and when we don't like what God wants us to do, that's when the heroes step forward. Gideon was asked to do some pretty unorthodox, pretty ridiculous things. Can you imagine what the real soldiers in the group must have said? I suspect that people ridiculed what he was doing and called him crazy, but he did it anyway, because he knew that that was what God expected him to do.

Gideon was a true hero, because he did what God wanted him to do. Each of us has the same opportunity today, and tomorrow, and each day. We don't have to be wealthy or powerful to be a hero. We have to be faithful, and when we are, then God can use our faithfulness so that the power of God's love will shine through us, bringing light and hope to this world in which we live.

Amen.