

Gideon and God's Unconventional Ways

DAVE BAST

In 1865, a young Methodist preacher named William Booth began to serve in the slums of London's East End. He used stunts like brass bands to attract a crowd for preaching; he also addressed the physical as well as spiritual needs of the poor. Booth attracted co-workers, whom he organized along military lines: The Salvation Army. Today on *Groundwork*, we will look at God's original salvation army. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and we have come now to the third of five programs in this series, a series that studies the book of Judges; and we have seen that the basic pattern of Judges is the same throughout. There is a turning of the people away from God; they have forgotten the Lord; they have embraced the idols of their neighbors, the gods that seem to promise a good life to them; and then things don't go as they hoped; they end up getting oppressed by different enemies...lots of different enemies; and finally, things get so bad they cry out to God and he raises a judge or a champion or a savior.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we have noted in this series, Dave, it is sort of like there is just this long line of other peoples waiting to attack, harass, or otherwise make life miserable for the Israelites. So, in the last program when we looked at the judge, Deborah, it was the Canaanites. In the next program, when we get to Samson, it is going to be the Philistines. In this program, it is the Midianites...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it is sort of like every time they get rid of one enemy, another one is right in line to take their place. So, this is going to be the story of one of the Judges—one of those champions—named Gideon...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And his story starts in Judges Chapter 6, which begins with these familiar words:

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years, he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. ²Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in the mountain clefts, caves, and strongholds. ³Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites, and other eastern peoples invaded the country. ⁴They 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. ⁵They 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. ⁶Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the

Lord for help.

DAVE BAST

And there is our pattern, as we pointed out more than once. So, they cry out to the Lord, and the Lord is going to respond to that; but note the situation here. The Midianites...I mean, these are raiders who have come in, basically, from the East...from the desert...maybe from the South as well. They are mobile, they have camels, so Israel cannot match them because the people of Israel are all on foot. So, it is a kind of blitzkrieg, as they sweep in, in their huge numbers...maybe a little bit exaggerated...but there are a lot of them...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And they time their raids to coincide with the end of harvest; so, the people of Israel are trying to hide their grain, you know; they have gone to all the work of planting and tending, and then harvesting and threshing; and now they are trying to hide their grain in caves or rocks or places where the Midianites won't find it, but the Midianites are just swooping in and grabbing it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So Israel needs help. They have sinned; they don't deserve it. God sort of has let the Midianites run wild and run amok here; but, they cry out for help; so, God has got to do something.

DAVE BAST

He is going to do something; and it is going to involve the Angel of the Lord. So, we are going to continue reading now from Judges Chapter 6, and bear with us; it is kind of a long story, but it is hard to cut any of it; so, let's just go through it.

¹¹The 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 wine press to keep it from the Midianites. ¹²When the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." ¹³"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." ¹⁴The 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?" ¹⁵"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." ¹⁶The Lord answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive."

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹⁷Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me. ¹⁸Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you. And the Lord said, "I will wait until you return."
(Gideon now goes, he gets a young goat and some flour. He brings it all back, and then) ²⁰the Angel of God says, "Take the meat and unleavened bread; place them on this rock and pour out the broth; and Gideon did. ²¹Then the Angel of the Lord touched the meat and the unleavened bread with the tip of his staff, and fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread; and the Angel of the Lord disappeared. ²²And when Gideon realized it was really the Angel of the Lord, he exclaimed, "Alas, sovereign Lord, I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face!" ²³But the Lord said to him, "Peace, do not be afraid. You are not going to die." ²⁴And so, Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it The-Lord-Is-Peace.

DAVE BAST

Wow, yes; quite a story; and it involves this very mysterious character called the Angel of the Lord...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, the Angel of Yahweh...

DAVE BAST

Or at some points in this story, referred to simply as: The Lord...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, Yahweh.

DAVE BAST

So, what is the deal? Is this an angel, or is it God himself in human form?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we have seen that before, you know; when Abraham, in the book of Genesis, has those three mysterious visitors under the oaks of Mamre, people all through history have seen it as almost being like the Trinity...could that have been Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Who were these special messengers? Who did Joshua encounter, you know, when he encountered the Angel of the Lord? Are these prefigurements—previews—of the Son of God himself, who will become Jesus? Maybe; but certainly, there is a little bit of imprecision here...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But it certainly is a direct representation of God—the God of Israel: Yahweh.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; this is no ordinary angel, if there is such a thing as an ordinary angel. This is an awe-inspiring figure; and so, Gideon is suitably distressed...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

When he realizes who he has been talking to here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But, like Moses, who encounters God in the burning bush, so Gideon is pretty good at bargaining with this figure. For one thing, he is not one hundred percent sure...well, I am not really sure if it is really you; but if you are bringing me a message from God that he is with us, well, yes; you used to do a lot for us, God, back in Egypt, I guess; but you haven't done anything lately; and how can I do anything? So, he is like Moses: I am too weak; my tribe is the weakest; are you kidding? And God says: You are going to do it because I will be with you...the same thing he did say to Moses, actually...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, Gideon is not necessarily buying it until this miraculous fiery consumption of his offering happens; but God has said: You are going to do it because I am with you.

DAVE BAST

You know, I don't think there is any character in the Bible who is as chicken as Gideon, frankly...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because it doesn't end here. He has got this thing with the fleece.

DAVE BAST

The fleece thing, yes. He takes so much convincing; and you know, I have got to believe, too, the first part of this story, at least, was told for laughs. You know, you can imagine the people sitting around and hearing these stories told in oral form: Hail, mighty man of God—mighty man of valor, the angel greets Gideon, while he is hiding in a wine press, you know, trying to thresh this little bit of grain and keep the Midianites from seeing it. Go in the strength of your power and deliver my people; and Gideon goes: Who, me?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; he kind of believes eventually that this was indeed a divine visitor. He does the thing with the fleece, right?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am going to put a fleece out one night. If there is dew everywhere and if the fleece is dry, I will believe it's you; okay, that happened. Okay, but let's do it again; if the *fleece* is wet, and it is dry everywhere, I will believe it is you; okay, that happens. So, Gideon is out of excuses; and in Judges Chapter 7, we are going to see how the rest of his story plays out.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, let's get right back to it, because this is a fairly long story about Gideon...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Who God has just visited with this very important Angel of the Lord, and has said: You are mighty; and Gideon said: No, I am not. You are going to do it; Gideon said: I am too weak. You are going to do it, God says; and so finally Gideon gets going.

So, we pick it up now in Judges Chapter 7, and a well-known story about Gideon, who has gathered a really good army, and there is something wrong.

DAVE BAST

You mentioned, Scott, that there is always a different enemy who shows up to oppress the people of Israel, but there is always a different part of Israel to respond, too. This was a period when the tribes were kind of loosely affiliated; they were not really united. So, the Deborah and Barak story...those were the northern tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali; here it is the central people, the Manassehites and the Ephraimites, who respond and turn up; and there are thirty-two thousand of them who show up to fight against the Midianites; so that is a pretty good start, but here is what happens.

Early in the morning, Gideon and all his men camped at the spring of Harod. The camp of Midian was north of them, in the valley near the hill of Morah. ²The Lord said to Gideon, “You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands or Israel would boast against me, ‘My own strength has saved me.’ ³Now announce to the army, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’” So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, he lost two thirds of his army, basically. If you are a little bit afraid, you can go home; and a lot of them said: Yes, I am a little bit afraid; I am going home. So, now he is down to ten thousand. It is an interesting story. God says there are too many people. It is like, well, how would fewer people work in a military campaign? But God is very clear for the reason here: Israel has to know...when this is all finished, Israel has to know that it is God who did it; and if their numbers are too overwhelming, they will say: Well, sure; we had the edge, man. We had more people. We did it, we did it; yay! Then God says: No, I don't want them to say: We did it. I want them to say: God did it...

DAVE BAST

God did it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am going to whittle down your numbers by two thirds now, still too many.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, he starts by saying: Okay, anybody who is nervous; anybody who is afraid, you tell them to go on home. I can never read this story without thinking of a famous speech in Shakespeare, in King *Henry V*, where the prince says to his army: He which hath no stomach to this fight, let him depart. His passport shall be made and crowns for convoy put into his purse. So, he kind of does the same thing, or at least with him it is a bluff. He needs all his men, but he says to them, in effect: You have got to really want to be here. I am looking for the committed few. We talked about the salvation army of God, and God always works through minorities, I think...not necessarily through the majority. He doesn't need big numbers. He can save, says 1 Samuel 14:6 in this way: Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few. So, he is deciding he is going to save by few now.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and we have, you know, what could be called the committed few—those who really want to stick with it. So, these ten thousand are stouthearted enough. They didn't take the option to say: Yes, I am afraid. I am going to go home. They are still there; and God looks at that and says: Hmmm, well, that is good. I mean, these are ten thousand stouthearted men, and that is great, but it is still too many. I think you still would not give me (God) the credit. So, a further test; and here, we will pick it up in Judges 7:4

But the Lord said to Gideon, “There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will thin them out for you there. If I say, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go; but if I say, ‘this one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go. ⁵So Gideon took the men down to the water and there the Lord told him, “Separate those who lap the water with their tongues as a dog laps from those who kneel down to drink.” ⁶ Three hundred of them drank from cupped hands, lapping like dogs; and all the rest got down on their knees to drink. ⁷The Lord said to Gideon, “With the three hundred men that lapped, I will save you and give the Midianites into your hands. Let all the others go home.” ⁸So Gideon sent the rest of the Israelites home, but kept the three hundred who took over the provisions and trumpets of the others. So, from thirty thousand to three hundred.

DAVE BAST

Down to three hundred. If you know the story of Gideon, you know this part of the story, too. It is a famous Bible story; and I love the line in here early on, where God says to Gideon: I will thin them out for you. That is not the way generalship usually works. You know, usually they are trying to attract more. God says: No, I am going to thin them out; and he does it with this rather curious instruction of take them down to the pool of

water and watch them drink, and almost all of the men just get down on their hands and knees to get a good, long drink of water; but God says the ones who lap the water like a dog...and presumably he means they use their hand to scoop up water the way a dog does with his tongue...those are the ones I want you to keep.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is not a good way to get a lot of water, so there are only three hundred of them who did it; and they are the only ones that are left. Right; I mean, usually if you think back in history to World War II, what is one of the first things the U.S. had to do when it entered the war? It had to establish the draft. We needed more soldiers. Our armies were too small to take on Hitler and Mussolini; and so you want more men; but not God; he wants fewer, and fewer he's got. So, he has his army now, and it is only three hundred; but, it is God's army, right? You kind of flash back to the story of David and Goliath, almost. Saul tries to outfit young David in his armor, and David says: I don't need all that. And you know, we often think: Oh, wasn't that amazing? David got five smooth stones, and just with one stone, David killed Goliath; and we always take away from that story: See, little guys can do big things. David doesn't say that in the story. David says: I am going to win because God is going to do it. I am just, you know, the instrument. The stone didn't kill Goliath, God did. David was just the proximate cause.

DAVE BAST

Right, yes; in a sense, David is the opposite of Gideon, because David was full of faith and full of confidence that God would work through him, and use him, as young as he was. Gideon, we have seen already, has nothing but excuses. He is difficult to convince; he has got to throw out these fleeces a couple of times; and even then, he is not totally, one hundred percent sure. He goes through this whole process of winnowing away, thinning out his army; and he is still not quite ready to join battle with the enemy. So, God is going to do one more thing for him before the fight takes place; and that is what we will look at as we wrap up this program.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this third program in our five-part series from the book of Judges, Dave; and we are looking at the story of Gideon from still fairly early in the book of Judges; and we have seen that Gideon has been hesitant all along; he wasn't sure that he was the right man, but fine, he agrees. He gets together a great army: Thirty thousand men; now, that ought to give you a little confidence. Well, God doesn't like it, so he gets it down to ten thousand, and now three hundred; and now Gideon's fear has come back. It is like: Are you kidding me? Three hundred men against all of these Midianites, who are like swarms of locusts, we were told earlier...

DAVE BAST

Yes, covering the whole face of the land.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, his fear has come back; and so, God is going to give him one last piece of encouragement and prodding.

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, nobody got more encouragement or was given more signs than Gideon...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So, we have already seen the Angel consuming the offering with fire; we talked about the fleece; now we are going to see something...I don't think we should draw from this story the lesson that, oh, we can ask God to give us a miraculous sign. That is not necessarily what we are meant to take away; but, we can see how patient God is with Gideon; and finally, one last piece of encouragement comes in Chapter 7.

So, we read the story:

⁹During the night, the Lord said to Gideon, “Get up; go down against the camp, because I am going to give it into your hands. ¹⁰If you are afraid to attack, go down to the camp with your servant, Purah, ¹¹and listen to what they are saying. Afterward, you will be encouraged to attack the camp.” So, he and Purah, his servant, went down to the outposts of the camp. ¹²The Midianites, the Amalekites, and all the other Eastern peoples had settled in the valley, thick as locusts. Their camels could no more be counted than the sand on the seashore.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹³Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. “I had a dream,” he was saying. “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.” ¹⁴His friend responded, “Oh, 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.” ¹⁵And when Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down and worshipped.

DAVE BAST

So, yes; here is a pretty interesting story. Somehow, one of the Midianite soldiers knows about Gideon, and when he hears his friend’s dream about a loaf of bread tumbling into a tent and making it fall over, he says: Why, this is none other than the sword of Gideon, and he is going to whip us. God has given us into his hand! And when Gideon hears that...this wonderful phrase, he bows and worships—worships before the battle, not after.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and what is interesting is that the dream matches the reality. Gideon knows he only has three hundred men. No way could they win, all things being equal. Well so, also, you wouldn’t think a loaf of bread would flatten a tent; and yet, here a loaf of bread doesn’t seem terribly threatening; it is the kind of thing you would wake up laughing about usually. It is like: Ha; I had this dream that a loaf of bread crushed our whole house! A loaf of bread?! Three hundred men?! It is the same thing...

DAVE BAST

Crazy dream, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We won’t read all of it because we don’t have time, but of course, many of us know the story, that Gideon was encouraged. After he worshipped God, after God let him hear this dream and its interpretation, Gideon takes his three hundred men...they have a very clever strategy, that they’ve got torches and trumpets and they hide the torches under jars, and they eventually let out a great cry in the night, and the Midianites and the Amalekites get disoriented; they think it is a whole lot more people that is after them...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

They have been spooked, if this dream got around; and anyway, long story short, of course, Gideon won the victory; and so, again in this era of this difficult time in Israel’s history, God used Gideon to deliver the people from yet another foe, the Midianites, and the Amalekites, in this case. So, there it is. Gideon was a reluctant soldier if ever there was one, and yet, God still worked through him.

DAVE BAST

Again, it is one of the recurring themes of Judges: God will deliver his people, no matter how difficult the circumstances, no matter how long the odds are...and God deliberately, in this case, lengthened the odds against his people; but, he is going to give the victory; he is going to bring the battle to a successful conclusion; and really, this is one of the great stories—themes—of the whole Bible, especially the New

Testament. We know how the whole thing turns out. We know who is going to win in the end. So, if you are feeling discouraged about your life circumstances, or what is happening around you, or your church...as we said in this series, sometimes our churches look like they are dying...well, go to the end of the story. Read Revelation 21 and 22, and see where it is all headed; and that is why, in effect, we can bow our heads in worship before the battle has even been totally finished, because we know how it all ends.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we know that this is how God likes to work. You know, the Church, granted...the Church, all through history and into the current moment, too...we sometimes try to grab worldly power...we try to grab worldly glitz. We want to kind of look tough and play...mix it up with the big boys in Washington and Ottawa or London or wherever the capital city is; but the Church is small. The odds for the Church have never looked good; they are never supposed to look good; but then again, God started out the whole project of salvation by taking a childless senior citizen couple: Abram and Sarai, to make a family out of...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And God keeps choosing the runt of the litter, like David, and it will go all the way down until a little baby who is born to poor parents and laid in a manger...a feed bunk... We are not supposed to look powerful as the world reckons it: Greater is he that is in you...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

Scott Hoezee: Than he that is in the world, as the New Testament tells us. That is the secret of the Church; not that we amass for ourselves worldly brawn and might...political influence. That is not how God is saving the world; he is saving the world intentionally through little old us.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I had a friend and mentor, a missionary named Harvey Hoekstra, who used to talk about the committed few, and he was thinking of the missionary movement...the modern missionary movement in the Church, but it could be the whole story of the Church, really. It is the story of Gideon's salvation army; it is the committed few; it is the story of the twelve disciples of Jesus; it is the one hundred twenty in the upper room. Really, that is how God does his work in the world, and how he will win the final victory. Thanks be to God. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we learn about God's love through the story of Samson found in Judges 13 through 16.

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