

## “Please, Lord, How Can I Save Israel?”

*The ninety-seventh in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”*

**Texts: Judges 6:1-40; Romans 11:1-10**

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**B**y now the basic plot line for the Book of Judges is becoming quite familiar to us. Four times we have heard of how the people of Israel fell away from YHWH and began to do what is right in their own eyes. We have seen how doing what the people Israel thought was “right” meant behaving like Canaanites and worshiping Canaanite gods. We have seen that YHWH’s response to Israel’s disobedience was to raise up a series of neighboring tribes who would then defeat and oppress the people of God until the Israelites cried out to YHWH for deliverance. And when things got so bad that the people of Israel finally cried out to the Lord, YHWH responded to his people by raising up a series of “judges” (or rescuers) to save his people, and help them throw off their current oppressor. As we have seen, the judges God sent to Israel are often the most unlikely of people, and the way in which God uses them to rescue Israel is completely unexpected.

As we move into the next cycle of judges, we take up the story of Gideon. This is the most complex cycle we find in this book (100 verses) eclipsing even the account of the more famous Samson (96 verses). The story of Gideon has three distinct parts. The first part (6:1-8:3) tells the story of God sending an oppressor upon Israel (the Midianites) along with the account of God’s rescue of Israel by raising up Gideon as a warrior who will lead Israel to another stunning victory. Throughout this first section, it is clear that it is YHWH who sovereignly calls Gideon to lead his people, and it is YHWH who is completely responsible for Israel’s dramatic victory over their Midianite oppressors.

The second part of the story (8:4-28) deals with Gideon’s status as a warrior and his sinful and self-aggrandizing behavior. While Gideon is mentioned in the Book of Hebrews as a man of faith, and indeed, Gideon accomplishes what the Lord wants done—a defeat of the Midianites—eventually Gideon sees the power of his office as the means by which to take revenge upon several of his personal enemies. Sadly, in this part of the story, YHWH’s name virtually disappears, except when he’s flippantly mentioned on the lips of Gideon. Then, in the third part of the story, which includes the account of Gideon’s son through a concubine, Abimelech (Judges 8:29-9:57), the author of Judges once again points out the surprising extent of Canaanization then prevalent in Israel.<sup>1</sup> God’s people have fallen to new lows, it seems. Israel needs a king (which God will give them during the time of the monarchy), but it should now be clear to all that it will take God in human flesh to rescue his people from the guilt and power of sin, something this series of human judges could never accomplish.

The story of Gideon comes on the heels of the story of Deborah and Barak (Judges 4-5) in which we read of several heroic women (Deborah the prophetess, and Jael the woman who put a tent peg through the bad guy’s head—Sisera). But as Israel’s downward spiral into unbelief and apostasy continues, we find that the next “judge” in the series is a man (Gideon) who will take on the Midianites, but who, in the end, refuses to serve as Israel’s king and pursues his own agenda. Gideon will selfishly enjoy the benefits of his fame and prestige, using the gold of his defeated foes to create an Ephod (a priestly garment, like that worn by the high priest) which became an object of worship to the people of Israel. As is typical of Israel’s judges, Gideon is a man who does heroic things and is regarded as a man of faith, while at the

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<sup>1</sup> Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 250.

same time, his many sins and shortcomings are clear for all to see.

Throughout the account of Gideon, we continue to see Israel's spiritual schizophrenia.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the Israelites still identify with YHWH (to some degree, however weak) and they do seek to remain a distinct nation bound to the covenant God made with YHWH at Mount Sinai. On the other hand, the people of Israel want to do all the sinful things the Canaanites around them were doing. This includes worshipping Canaanite gods, inter-marrying with them, and allowing Canaanite high-places (places of worship) to exercise influence over the people of Israel. As long as these high-places remain, the temptation to worship other gods will always be present. This tension between faithfulness to YHWH, and the desire to behave like the Canaanites, will become all-too apparent during the days of Gideon. It is the same struggle many of us feel today as we desire to serve the Lord but find the attractions of the paganism all around us to be a great and continuing source of temptation.

**W**e now turn to our text (Judges 6:1-40), in which we read of yet another period in Israel's history when the people turned their backs upon YHWH and soon found themselves in serious trouble. This time, another old enemy returns and wreaks havoc upon Israel.

The account of Gideon opens the fifth cycle of judges with the now familiar lament recounted in verse one of Judges 6. *"The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years."* Some historical background here is vital to understand what follows. The Midianites lived in the Sinai desert and western Arabia. They were semi-nomadic, and by this time (well after Israel's initial occupation of Canaan) there were allied with the Amalekites (a long-standing enemy of Israel) and other unnamed tribes from the East. The Midianites were distant relatives of the Israelites (Abraham's second wife Keturah was a Midianite) and they had a long history of contact with the Israelites—most of it friendly. It was Midianite traders who carried Joseph into slavery in Israel, thereby preserving his life (Genesis 37:25-36). Moses hid among the Midianites when he fled from Egypt after killing an Egyptian. Moses even ended up marrying a Midianite woman (Zipporah).

But the friendly relationship took a bad turn when the Midianites attempted to lead Israel away from YHWH, as recounted in Numbers 25. From that point on, Israel was forbidden from any contact with them. In fact, Israel eventually went to war with the Midianites as recounted in Numbers 31. At some point, the Midianites lost their fear of the Israelites, they sought revenge, and as providentially directed by YHWH, the Midianites began to plunder the Israelites living in Canaan by joining with another of Israel's old foes, the Amalekites. This coalition of old enemies made life absolutely miserable for the Israelites, leading to the deplorable conditions described in the opening verses of chapter 6.

The bleak conditions faced by Israel are spelled out for us in some detail in verses 2-5. *"And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in."* While the other oppressors God had sent sought tribute (payment) from the bounty of Canaan, and from the riches of Israel, the Midianites and their allies simply plundered the

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<sup>2</sup> Block, Judges, Ruth, 250.

land. Moving from point to point, they would set up camp throughout Canaan, steal animals, and the produce of the land, as well as taking any personal property they could haul away. The Midianites' own animals grazed on Israel's land, ruining it, so that it was now useless to the Israelites. Things were so bad that the Israelites were forced to hide in caves or flee to the mountains to escape from the bands of marauding enemies. It was a horrible time in Israel's history and God's people were suffering greatly.

But in verse 6, we see the familiar cycle playing itself out again. *“And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to the Lord.”* When we read that Israel was brought low, the Hebrew text indicates that Israel was “made small.” Not only did the bounty of the land disappear along with the people's possessions, the entire nation was staggering under the shame and humiliation of having to hide in the mountains and caves while the Midianites plundered the land at will. The people of Israel lived in fear and shame, losing all self-confidence, and the will to fight back.

Because he is faithful even when his people are not, YHWH heard the pleas of the Israelites when they cried out to him. As a response, he raised up a deliverer for Israel, a man named Gideon. But before Gideon is introduced a mystery of sorts unfolds in verses 7-10, when we learn that an unknown prophet was sent by God to call his disobedient people back to himself at some point shortly before Gideon enters the scene. *“When the people of Israel cried out to the Lord on account of the Midianites, the Lord sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage. And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. And I said to you, ‘I am the Lord your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.’ But you have not obeyed my voice.”*

The appearance of this mysterious prophet sets the stage for the call and commissioning of the fifth judge, Gideon. Through the prophet, YHWH reminds Israel that their current problems stem from the fact that they've forgotten YHWH, and they are disobeying the terms of the covenant that YHWH had made with them at Mount Sinai. This prophecy therefore sets the stage for Gideon's call described in verse 11. *“Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezerite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites.”* The son of Joash, the name Gideon is a nickname (his real name was Jerubbaal), and means “hacker”—certainly a fitting nickname for a man who will soon destroy pagan high places.<sup>3</sup> A terebinth is an oak or a turpentine tree, while Ophrah is a place where women gather to watch celebrities jump off a couch. Actually, Ophrah is in the Jezreel valley, in the northern part of Israel, closer to the Mediterranean Sea than to the Jordan River. Being located so far to the west in the northern part of Israel, this is a clear indication of how widely the Midianites were then marauding throughout Canaan.

When called to be Israel's deliverer, Gideon is secretly grinding wheat in a winepress. This otherwise unimportant piece of information tells us about the level of fear which existed throughout Israel at the time. People cannot even sift wheat in the normal way—using a threshing floor—for fear that the Midianites will see the dust and come and take away the fruit of the thresher's labor. All of that was about to change. As we read in verse 12, *“And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, ‘The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor.’”* The angel of the Lord (the messenger of God, likely the preincarnate Christ) suddenly appears and tells the startled Gideon (who is hiding wheat in a winepress) that YHWH has chosen him to be the next deliverer of Israel. Gideon's response is about what we'd

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<sup>3</sup> Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 258.

expect. *“And Gideon said to him, ‘Please, sir, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.’”*

While Gideon knows Israel’s history and fully understands the nation’s current predicament, Gideon has not yet grasped the fact that YHWH has chosen him to be the one who will reverse the current situation of fear and shame. Gideon (a very unlikely choice for such an important role in redemptive history) is to become a mighty man of valor—a great warrior. He will be the one to save Israel. In verse 14, we read that *“the Lord turned to him and said, ‘Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?’”* Gideon has just been called by God to save [deliver] his people from their oppressor. His response is incredulity. *“And he [Gideon] said to him [the Angel], ‘Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.’”* Even though Gideon comes from an insignificant clan from the tribe of Manasseh, and even though he is not his father’s oldest son, YHWH has chosen him.

Because God is gracious and Gideon is still perplexed, the Angel now reassures Gideon that a great victory will indeed come to pass and that YHWH will strike down Midian through the leadership of Gideon. *“And the Lord said to him, ‘But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.’”* In fact, YHWH will destroy the entire nation of Midian as easily as one man strikes down another. Gideon still must be convinced. He wants a sign and even tells the Angel what sign to perform. *“And [Gideon] said to [the Angel], ‘If now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you.’”* The Angel agrees. *“And he said, ‘I will stay till you return.’”*

According to verses 19-21, *“So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them.”* Responding to Gideon’s offering, *“And the angel of God said to him, ‘Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour the broth over them.’ And he did so. Then the angel of the Lord reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes. And fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the Lord vanished from his sight.”*

With that demonstration of God’s power, Gideon is now convinced of his call. But we learn in verse 22 that Gideon is also afraid for his life. *“Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the Lord. And Gideon said, ‘Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face.’”* Gideon’s reaction to this is not, “Oh, I’ve had a remarkable experience with God! I can now write a book and go on TBN.” Gideon’s reaction is terror. He has seen the preincarnate Christ. He fears for his life! No one sees God and lives to tell about it. But the Angel graciously reassures him. *“But the Lord said to him, ‘Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.’”* Gideon’s response to all of this amounts to an acknowledgment of his call. *“Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and called it, The Lord Is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites.”* The author of Judges reminds the reader of the truth of this account by appealing the presence of Gideon’s altar, which was still in existence in the days of the monarchy when the Book of Judges was written.

Gideon has been called to be YHWH’s chosen deliverer of his people, now he is given his marching orders in verses 25-26. *“That night the Lord said to him, ‘Take your father’s bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in*

*due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down.”* We now learn that Gideon’s own father had either built (or allowed to be built) a pagan altar somewhere on his own property in Ophrah. Gideon’s tenure as Israel’s deliverer must begin in his own house, and it must begin the same night he is called. He is to take two of his father’s bulls, use them to demolish the pagan shrine and Asherah pole on his father’s land, and then Gideon is to sacrifice one of the bulls (a very valuable commodity) as a burnt offering (a sacrifice for sin).

Gideon’s natural temerity is clear from verse 27. *“So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the Lord had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.”* Yes, Gideon did as commanded. He tore down the alters to Baal (the storm god) and his consort, Ashtoreth. An Asherah was probably a grove of trees dedicated to Ashtoreth, which served as a shrine where she was worshiped, and included the placing of a carved figure of this female deity with grossly exaggerated female features. But Gideon did his deed at night so his family and the citizens of Ophrah could not see him do it.

In any case, Gideon could not hide his handiwork for long. There was quite reaction when the sun came up the next morning. *“When the men of the town rose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the Asherah beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built. And they said to one another, ‘Who has done this thing?’ And after they had searched and inquired, they said, ‘Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing.’ Then the men of the town said to Joash, ‘Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has broken down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it.”* Let us not miss the irony here. The men of Ophrah want Gideon executed for taking down a pagan shrine, when the covenant YHWH made with Israel spelled out the covenant curses which will come upon idolaters—the death penalty. Israel has fallen to the very brink of apostasy.

To the reader’s surprise, it is Gideon’s father who speaks in his son’s defense. *“But Joash said to all who stood against him, ‘Will you contend for Baal? Or will you save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down.”* Like any good father, Joash doesn’t care about the property damage or the loss of one of his bulls as much as he does his son. Again, the irony here should jump out at us. If Baal is real, why defend him? Can’t Baal speak and defend himself? Why do the citizens of Ophrah need to defend Baal against a man like Gideon? Baal can take care of himself.

The irony here is that Baal is the figment of the human imagination and can do nothing. What is even more tragic is that throughout this entire discussion, no one even seems to know of YHWH’s command in Deuteronomy 13 that those attempt to lead Israel after false gods are to be put to death. It is the men of Ophrah who stand condemned, not Gideon, a point which is completely lost to them. The outcome of all this hubbub is that Gideon’s call is confirmed through a re-naming ceremony. *“Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, ‘Let Baal contend against him,’ because he broke down his altar.”* The “hacker” is now known as Jerubbaal. Gideon’s zeal for YHWH—despite his temerity—is becoming apparent. Soon, Gideon will be utterly transformed from a timid man into a mighty warrior.

Meanwhile, YHWH’s promised defeat of the Midianites begins to take shape. As we learn in verses 33-35, *“Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel”* [where Ophrah was located]. *“But the Spirit of the Lord clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them.”* In order to give

this rather timid man the strength needed to lead the armies of Israel, YHWH's Spirit now comes upon Gideon, who, suddenly, was rallying the men of Israel for battle against their combined enemies.

But just as soon as Gideon rallies the troops and summons them for battle—a battle which YHWH has promised that Israel will win—Gideon goes weak in the knees and seeks yet another sign, the famous “fleece.” This is recounted in verse 36-40, *“Then Gideon said to God, ‘If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said.’ And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, ‘Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew.’ And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.”*

God has called Gideon to lead his people, and yet Gideon is his own worst enemy. Because YHWH is gracious, and because Gideon is a weak and sinful man, YHWH graciously grants Gideon's request and gives Gideon yet another sign. Throughout all of this, YHWH is teaching Gideon to be confident that YHWH can and will do as he has promised. Like the rest of us, Gideon is weak and he is learning the lesson that we all need to learn—God is great, and his power is made perfect in our weakness. Indeed, as we press ahead next time into chapter 7, we will witness Gideon lead Israel to a stunning victory over the enemies of Israel. We will also witness Gideon's growing confidence give way to sinful arrogance.

There are several things we can take with us from this passage.

The first thing we need to address is the fact that there has been along history of people doing as Gideon did—leaving out a fleece of some sort, and then asking God for a sign which will confirm his will so that the fleece-leaver knows what it is they are supposed to do. Remember, this not a sign of faith on Gideon's part, it is a sign of his double-mindedness and weakness. That God grants Gideon's request is a sign of God's faithfulness and mercy. What God expects of us is that we study his revealed will (the Ten Commandments), and then through prayer, Godly counsel, wisdom, and good old-fashioned common sense, we make our decisions accordingly. God's revealed will is very clear. We cannot do those things forbidden by Scripture, while we must do those things commanded in Scripture.

But the way in which we grow in the Christian life is through the struggle to take those things God has revealed, and then work out them out in the grind of daily life when Scripture does not specifically speak to the matter at hand. The story of Gideon does not teach us to leave out a fleece. The story of Gideon teaches us that God is faithful, and as his purpose for us is revealed in our lives (tragedy, blessings etc.), we need to remember that he does indeed work all things together for good, even if we can't see the good right now. We see in Gideon a weak man, whom God made strong to accomplish his purpose. Gideon's lack of trust in God's promise reflects the struggles of many of us, but he's hardly an example. Gideon is a fellow sinner, struggling to take God at his word. He points us to Christ, who saves us from our doubts.

The second thing we need to consider is that when Gideon cries out to YHWH, *“Please Lord, how can I save Israel?”* the answer should be obvious. Gideon can't save Israel. Only God can save Israel. Indeed, YHWH will transform the timid Gideon into a mighty warrior, equipping him with his Spirit. When Paul looks back upon Israel's history in Romans 11, Paul asks the same basic question Gideon did when the Angel first appeared to him. Gideon wanted to know why Israel was in such bad shape. Paul is dealing with the same basic question. Did God reject his people? No. Even though Israel had fallen into sin and

apostasy during the days of Gideon, God will accomplish his purposes and save his people Midianites.

In the days of Paul, when God had sent Jesus Christ (the perfect judge and deliverer), Israel rejected their own Savior. Did Israel's current state (unbelief and apostasy) mean that God did not keep his promise? The answer is that God always keeps his promises. In the opening verses of Romans 11, Paul takes this up, *"I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? 'Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.' But what is God's reply to him? I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.' So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace."*

Under the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai, the Jews in Israel at the time of Gideon suffered blessing or curse based upon the nation's obedience. But the covenant God made with Moses at Mount Sinai did not eclipse God's covenant prior with Abraham (the covenant of grace) through which God saves his elect. Under the terms of the covenant of grace, God will save all those who believe the promise no matter how bad off the nation is as a whole. Like the other judges, God sent to Israel, Gideon was a national savior. God raised him up to save Israel from the Midianites. But it will take Jesus Christ, God incarnate, to save his people from their sins—that elect remnant chosen by grace. And that is why God sent Jesus Christ—not to save Israel from Rome—but to save his people from their sins. God uses Gideon to save Israel. But Gideon can't save sinners. That will take the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, who will indeed save that elect remnant chosen by grace.