

I. Introduction:

A. Jonah. Exodus. The Prodigal Son. The Book of Ruth. Esther. The Flood. The Good Samaritan. Elijah at Mount Carmel. Jesus in the Temple. The Bible is full of stories. Today – in the first week in a nine-week series called *This is My Story* – we are going to look at the story of Gideon.

B. You just heard part of Jay's story – part of his testimony. Jay and his wife Lindsey attend the Crossroads campus. You'll hear more stories in the weeks ahead. How people sorted out the big picture, made sense of their life, yielded to the call of God.

C. You will also hear at how various biblical characters did the same. How they responded to the challenges and opportunities of life. And found hope and direction and their identity in a relationship with God.

1. We will be doing this with the goal of being informed and inspired to follow their lead, or of being informed and warned to not make the same mistakes. The goal is to better understand who we are and what it looks like to live well. To live in a way that works. To live in a way that matters. To live in a way that honors God.

II. Before we jump in, I feel compelled to make sure you understand that the Bible is not principally a collection of stories.

A. Yes, there are stories. I just listed some – Jonah, Exodus. The Prodigal Son, etc. So, yes there are a lot of stories in the Bible. But the Bible is less a collection of stories – an anthology of unrelated stories, some amalgamation of morality lessons – than it is A Story. The Story. God's Story.

B. If you read the Bible fast – and some of you don't. Some of you hardly read it at all. Some of you read it, but you only ever read it slow, by which I mean, you study a small section or a single book. Which is good. It's great. Keep at it. We can gain a lot by studying small segments. But if you only ever read it slow you do not see the overarching story.

C. At some point, you need to see that all the small stories are part of a Big Story. The Story – the overarching, universal metanarrative that explains what's going on. That defines reality.

D. Now, these are fighting words. If you've been to college lately, or if you've been paying attention to what has been going on beneath the headlines, you realize that many say that there is no meta narrative.

1. Many claim – and try to live – as if there is not one big story. There is no overarching truth. We all get to define our own reality.

2. To that end, for some time now, the prevailing metanarrative is that there are no metanarratives. The big claim is that you can't make big claims. There are people who are certain that we can't be certain.

3. I am being a bit snarky and unfair. There is a bit more there there to their view. But you didn't show up for a philosophy lecture – so let me stay at 30,000 feet and note, right now a lot of what we hear is, "you do you." You define yourself. There are no rules. Make your own truth. There is no overarching story.

E. The Bible claims to be The story. And it claims that it is your story. God created you and God loves you. But you (and me) are broken. We are fallen and need to be rescued. He has made provision for that through His son.

F. Your story, my story, the real story, the overarching defining story, the one that will prevail in the end, the one we really need to be paying attention to right now - the story that

begins “In the beginning” and ends 2,500 pages later with a description of the New Heavens and the New Earth” – is about God.

G. In this series we are looking at smaller stories in order to better understand the bigger – the biggest - story. We are looking to have our story shaped by The Story.

H. And today that brings us to a man named Gideon. He is not initially very impressive. But he takes some steps and he hears some things that we can learn from. Indeed, even though he has some courage and identity issues, he lands a spot in Hebrews 11 – which is the Hall of Faith. He gets a plaque in Cooperstown, the Spiritual Canton

III. The Book of Judges picks up where Joshua leaves off. As you may remember:

A. Genesis ends with a famine that forces Jacob and 11 of his sons, to flee to Egypt, where Joseph (the 12th son) is Pharaoh’s number two.

B. The Exodus picks up next, focusing on the Jews escape from Egypt, subsequent failure to enter the promised land, followed by forty years of wandering.

C. The Pentateuch in general – and Deuteronomy in particular - ends with the death of Moses. Joshua takes over with the Jews back at the Jordan River.

D. The book of Joshua tells how Joshua gets the Jews into the Promised Land.

E. Judges comes next. It covers the next few hundred years, during which time the twelve tribes exist in a loose confederation – they sometimes get along but mostly ignore each other. Everyone does what is right in their own eyes.

1. If you read it fast, what you pick up on is the pattern that repeats throughout the Old Testament - and our lives, but is especially clear in Judges: they are in a calibrated loop that goes like this: Sin – Suffering – Slavery – Supplication – Salvation – back to Sin

2. In the book of Judges, part of this pattern includes God sending a judge (not someone who presides in a court room. But a leader who: 1)

3. Pulls them together so they can fight; and calls them back to godly living. These judges have both a military and a prophetic role.

4. To that end, it’s worth noting that the ultimate judge is Jesus, who not only defeats our enemy but is also the greatest prophet.

5. There is a lot going on. See again that this all points to Jesus, but also hold on to the idea that one of the things the Judges do is help the people realize that the problem they are focused on is not the real problem, it’s a symptom of the problem. In our passage today it will look like their problem is the Midianites, but it’s really their sin and the way forward is a deeper walk with God.

F. OK, Judges 6. In Judges 1-5 we hear the stories of Ehud and Deborah. In chapters 8 through 21 we will hear about others (such as Sampson and Micah). In Judges 6 it is Gideon.

G. When Judges 6 opens, the nation of Israel has doing well – the bills are paid, the kids are behaving and business is good. Which means, the people are proceeding to forget about God. And so Judges 6:1 reads: **The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.**

1. The Midianites are thugs. Nomadic thugs who wander around preying on various people. It’s now on their schedule to invade Israel at harvest time, taking all the food (the text says there were so many of them that it was impossible to count their camels and that they devoured the crops like locust. It also notes that what they can’t eat or carry away, they destroy).

H. Verse 2 says that when the Midianites showed up, the Israelites leave their homes to hide in caves. And... that after seven years of this they finally got around to asking God for relief. (You might ask, “Why did they wait seven years?” A better question might be, why do we wait so long?”

I. In response to their cry, God sends Gideon. I’m now reading verse 7: **When the Israelites cried out to the Lord because of Midian, he sent them a prophet, who 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.”**

J. 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.

1. Normally you thresh wheat on a high spot out in the open so that the wind can blow away the chaff. But Gideon is trying to hide, so he is working in a low spot – a winepress (all the juice would run down to collect there). And he is doing so hoping to avert the attention of the Midianites. This suggest is that he is living in fear, and no doubt facing frustration and discouragement.

K. V12: **When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”**

IV. A lot is going to happen involving Gideon. His Story takes three chapters, and involves 7 event

A. We have his call, where the angel of the Lord commissions Gideon to mobilize the people to fight the Midianites. A call to which Gideon will initially respond just like Moses or Jeremiah – or you and me? - “here am I, send someone else.”

1. He will claim to not be qualified. “You have me confused with someone else. Send my brother.”
2. He will protest that he is the weakest link in his clan, the youngest in his family. He doesn't have the authority to call anyone to dinner let alone organize the army. To which the Lord will reply, " I will be with you."

B. We have his interaction with God. There will be a sacrifice of sorts, followed by Gideon building an altar.

C. We then have a, “get your own house right” moment. Before God allows Gideon to lead the troops, he has to clean up his own backyard. This involves destroying the altars for Baal that are on his family’s property.

1. He is instructed to tear down an Asherah pole, cut it up and use the wood to build an altar, on which he is to sacrifice his dad's prize bull. (He does this at night so no one knows who does it).
2. This seems to be a “before I used you with others, set your own house in order. This raises obvious questions of us. Are there sins that you're clinging to? What idols do you need to knock down?
3. Mother Teresa famously said, “if you want to change the world, go home and love your family.”

D. We then have the call people to fight moment. Which is really good.

1. A few weeks ago I had a chance to interview Jordan Gorfinkel, who ran DC Comics for ten years, including the Batman franchise. He has turned his energies to doing graphic novels of the Old Testament books. And I said, what are you going to do with Leviticus and Proverbs. I am not sure how he pulls this off. But Judges will make a great graphic novel.
 2. Anyway, as the Midianites are getting ready to make their annual raid, the Spirit of the LORD falls on Gideon and he rallies the troops. 32K men show up, ready to fight! This sounds great! Good job Gideon, but then..
 - E. We then have the famous fleece incident. Just when it looks like he is stepping up, he starts asking for more signs – which is not a good thing. He says: I need some confirmation. I know: you appeared to me, have given me favor, helped me rally the troops. But...
 1. I am reading, the end of chapter 6. V. 36: **Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—³⁷ 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.”³⁸ And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.**
 2. **“Do not be angry with me, but 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.**
 3. By the way, don’t put out a fleece. This is not what the Bible is teaching. Gideon is not acting as he should here.
 - F. We then have two events in which God has him downsize his army. A lot!
 1. There are 32,000 men there to fight. In the first reduction he sends 20,000 home. In the second, he cuts it down to 300.
 2. By the way, if you thought 32,000 was good, Judges 8 tells us the Midianite army numbered 135,000. So 32,000 meant it was 4 to 1 odds. Not good. But after their adjustments it’s now 450 Midianites to every one Israeli soldier.
 3. God creates this impossible situation of human weakness so He can display His own strength.
 - G. The seventh event is the actual battle, which the 300 win by creating confusion.
- V. So, back to the initial encounter. Back to what we need to take from Gideon’s story and apply to our own.
- A. I suspect you realize how much we could mine from Judges 6 and 7. I’ve been particularly taken by: 1) how much we might learn here about fear and courage. It’s obvious Gideon has to overcome a lot of fear and for him, courage is not a feeling it’s a decision to do the right thing in the face of fear; 2) we might also study the importance of leaders - someone (or someones) stepping up to rally others.
 - B. I want to focus on Gideon’s understanding of Gideon in light of what God says to him, because so much rests here. So much depends on how we see ourselves.
 - C. V12: **When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon.** (I think this is the pre-incarnate Jesus. I think it was Jesus who shows up to talk with Abraham and shows up with Shadrach, Meshack and Abednego, and to Joshua), **he said, “The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”** (Some translations call him Man of Valor)

1. There is no laugh track in the Bible, but if there was, you'd almost expect it to be used here. The Angel of the Lord calls Gideon – who is trying to thresh wheat in a winepress because he is hiding from the Midianites – it calls him “mighty warrior.”

D. To his credit, Gideon seems to realize that this was not a title he was living into.

1. I heard a devotion this week in which a man said. Leaders fall for three reasons: 2) they are not self-feeding (not finding ways to grow); 3) they are not self-correcting (they lack discipline); but the biggest issue – and the speaker cited a Forbes article making this point – they are not self aware.

2. Gideon seems at least alert enough to know that he is no “man of Valor).

E. **“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.”**

F. 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?”

G. **“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.”**

H. The Lord answered, “I will be with you.”

VI. Gideon was insecure. Perhaps you have seen the riff that says:

A. Jacob was a cheater, Peter had a temper, David had an affair, Noah got drunk, Jonah ran from God. It notes how flawed the people God uses are.

B. Well Gideon appears in that grocery list of broken people. The rap on him is that he is insecure.

C. Jacob was a cheater, Peter had a temper, David had an affair, Noah got drunk, Jonah ran from God, Paul was a murderer. Gideon was insecure. Miriam was a gossip, Martha was a worrier, Thomas was a doubter, Sarah was impatient, Elijah was depressed, Moses stuttered, Zacchaeus was short, Abraham was old, and Lazarus was dead.....

D. Those who cite this usually do so to note that God doesn’t call the qualified, He qualifies the Called. And that is helpful here. It is making the point I want you to see. There is a sense in which our story is not about us. It certainly isn’t only about us. We have to see ourselves in relationship with God.

1. Many have an inflated sense of their abilities. That is not Gideon’s problem. It would seem as though he is erring in the other direction. He needs to be called up. But mostly he needs to know that God is with him.

2. The money line related to Gideon is verse 16. I will be with you.

VII. This is the line that makes all the difference. Far less than saying, “believe in yourself. Look deep inside yourself. You’ve got this.” He says, Gideon, I will be with you. Some of you need to hear that.

VIII. There are some who say, my job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

A. Those who are arrogant need to be told to get off their high horse. Those who are dragging along need to be told that they can do it – they need a shot of courage. They need some hope.

- B. I don't see it that way. I think a better way of thinking about this is to help people understand what is really going on. To remind people (and myself) that our story starts and stops with Him
- C. We cannot understand reality or see ourselves or our situation accurately unless we start with him. And once we do that – once we are looking at God, then everything is very different.
1. The crazy odds don't matter.
- D. And God is with us. If we jump into the New Testament – we:
1. See that in the New Covenant God comes to live in us.
 2. And - to cite what Paul wrote in 2 Cor. 12:9f – we actually find power in weakness. Gideon's problem wasn't low self esteem. He was looking at himself and not at God and his promises.
 3. We need to understand and trust the promises of God. We need to learn to see ourselves as He sees us.
- E. There is much more that could be said and will be said in the weeks ahead. But for now I want you to hear, we do not write our story as much as we find our place in it by looking at God and trusting His promises.