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## Judges 6 - 9

### Relying on and Glorifying God Alone

These 4 chapters, Judges 6 - 9, tell the story of Gideon. A lot goes on in the story, and it has many ups and downs. And one of the most striking features of the story is that it doesn't paint the hero, Gideon, as much of a hero at all. From beginning to end, it showcases Gideon's fear and flaws, his weaknesses and failures. In fact, it makes it clear that *God* is the hero of the story. Gideon isn't held up as some moral exemplar or picture of virtue; he's actually very relatable, filled with flaws, being very wishy-washy at times, having good intentions and faith in God while also struggling with fear and doubt. As we read the story, Gideon is not the hero that we want him to be. And yet, for this reason, the story can actually be very encouraging to us, because it is a story of how God graciously uses Gideon, a very flawed, fearful, and fickle man, to accomplish His purposes, save His people, and show His glory. This story should encourage us because, even as we relate to Gideon, it lifts our eyes to rely on God, the true hero of the story - just as Christ is to be the hero of the story of *our lives*, today.

So let's dive into the story, beginning with the background to the story of Gideon..

#### **I. The Background to Gideon: The Need for God's Word (6:1-10)**

Before we get to God calling Gideon to be the next judge, we first see, once again, Israel's *need* for deliverance. Israel's sin is getting worse and worse, and so is their oppression under the hands of their enemies. In verses 2-5, We're told that the "Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east" would come upon Israel with such force that devoured all the food Israel grew, they pillaged all their livestock, and they so forcefully raised Israel that it drove the people into caves and strongholds. The enemy soldiers and camels were so numerous that they were like plagues of locusts that covered the land, being too numerous to count. Finally, as the people are "brought very low" by the oppression of their enemies, they cry out to God for help. And, once again, God answers them. But he doesn't send a deliverer to save this time - at least, not at first. First, he sends a prophet.

And the prophet proclaimed the Word of God to Israel in vv.8-10: "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery. 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.” It’s easy to imagine how the Israelites might have responded: “We’re being crushed by our enemies, we have no food, we’re driven to hide our families in caves, we cried to the Lord for help, and he sends us a *prophet* instead of a deliverer to save us? Really?” But God sends the prophet to show Israel - and us - that their greatest need was not to be delivered from their earthly circumstances and worldly enemies and temporary suffering; their greatest need was to be reconciled to God!

Like Israel, we are often tempted to think that our greatest need is to have our earthly circumstances in life changed. We can be so quick to think our greatest needs are *earthly needs*. Suffering and difficulty come, and we think, “Everything would be fine if this particular difficulty would go away! If God would just take away my suffering and change my circumstances, *then* I would be able to praise God and have faith and obey Him!” But that’s backwards thinking. Our greatest needs are spiritual. Our greatest need is to be reconciled to God. And that means we need God’s Word. Do you believe that this morning? Do we believe that we really do need to hear God speak and to understand His Word, the Bible, to know God Himself and have greater faith in His promises? That we need this even more than our physical needs, even more than being delivered out of our earthly trials, sufferings, and circumstances in this life? God’s Word brings us back to reality and shows us that, as critical as all of our circumstances may seem from our perspective, our *greatest* need is to be reconciled to God, to repent from our sins, to remember and believe all that God has done for us, to worship, believe, and obey Him - to trust in the Lord for salvation and be saved! This is why is it so essential for us to prioritize the Bible in our lives - as individual Christians and as a church. When we read and rightly understand God’s Word, it exposes the realities of our hearts, shows us our true spiritual needs, and shows us the solution: GOD Himself. It reminds us of GOD’s mercy and salvation, and points us to rely on God’s sovereign, glorious grace for salvation. That’s what God’s Word shows us. And that’s exactly what we see here, as the story continues.

We see this in point 2...

## **II. Gideon’s Reluctance to the Call: Our Fearful Hearts are Prone to Doubt God (6:11-40)**

After sending the prophet, God does, indeed, raise up another judge to save His people. But just as Israel gets worse and worse over time, we see this happening in the judges themselves, as well. Last week, we saw Barak hesitate when God called him to deliver Israel. Here, we see even *greater* hesitation, fear and doubting on display in Gideon. We see it in three scenes which make up the process of Gideon's call.

First, we see Gideon's initial call from the Lord in 6:11-24. When we first meet Gideon, he is "beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites", which is another reminder of just how badly oppressed they were by their enemies. But then the angel of the LORD comes to Gideon; and what this means is, that God Himself comes and speaks to Gideon, saying, in v.12, "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor." But Gideon responds by essentially arguing with the angel of the LORD, pushing back and declaring his doubts that the Lord really is with Israel. He argues, in v.13, "Please, my lord, 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." Gideon, like Israel, is doubting that God is really with them; he thinks God has abandoned them because of how bad things are. He struggles to believe that God really is who he says He is, that God will keep His promises for His people.

But amazingly, God is very patient and gracious towards Gideon's struggling faith and doubts. In v.14, he proves Gideon wrong by telling him that He will, indeed, bring deliverance to Israel - and He's going to use Gideon to do it! Yet Gideon still argues; he says "my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house" (v.15). He doesn't believe that God's Word will prove true; and he tries to support this by pointing to his own weakness, his own inability. But God responds, in v.16, "But *I* will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man." IN other words, God tells Gideon to not rely on his own strength, but to trust in God! To obey because *God* will be with him! But even in the presence of the Lord, Gideon still doubts, and so, in vv.17-24, he asks for a sign from God as proof that it really is God speaking to him, and God graciously gives it, by accepting Gideon's offering in miraculous fire. Yet Gideon responds in fear, being afraid of the Lord! Yet God, being ever so gracious, offers this incredible word of encouragement: "Peace be with you. Do not fear; you shall not die" (v.23). Yes, Gideon responded with doubt, struggling faith, even fear - and yet, God was still with him, by His wondrous grace.

Next, in 6:25-32, God gives Gideon his first marching orders: but rather than march against Midian, he first has to march against the idolatry of his own house and family. Gideon's father hosted a pagan shrine in his backyard - an altar to Baal and an Asherah pole - so that the townspeople could worship the Canaanite idols instead of Yahweh. So God commands Israel to go tear these down, as a clear sign that Gideon will not serve these fake gods but will serve the one, true God; this is a demand for Gideon to proclaim where the loyalties of his heart, where his true faith, lies. Thankfully, Gideon shows his faith by obeying God. And yet, even here, his faith is mixed with fear, as we see in v.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." We see faith here, but still a weak faith, mixed with fear. And yet, God graciously protects Gideon from the town, even using his idolatrous father to protect Gideon.

And finally, we see a third scene in Gideon's call. IN verses 33-35, the enemy armies start to gather against Israel, but "the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon," and he calls for iSrael to gather for war, and several tribes answer the call. And yet, Gideon still doubts; he's still afraid. We see this in verses 36-40. He says 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" (vv.36-37). And the next verse tells us God did as Gideon asked. Now, I've heard many Christians appeal to this story as a sort of template for how we should seek God's will. And sure enough, we are supposed to ask God for wisdom when we aren't sure what He wants us to do. But that's not what's going on here. Gideon is *testing God*; he's saying that he doubt's God's word and he demands proof that God will do what He said he would! God already told Gideon he would deliver Israel through his hand; but Gideon doubts God. He demands further proof. And remarkably, God graciously gives it! But that's not enough for Gideon; his fickle heart is still doubting, and he tests God further, this time asking for the fleece to be dry in the morning, while all the ground around it is wet (something that would be even *more* unlikely than the fleece being wet!). This further shows Gideon's lack of faith and fear; it seems like Gideon is just desperately for an excuse to walk away from God and not go into battle! He demands that God prove himself! And he knows that what he is doing is wrong. He says, in v.39, "Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the

fleece.” Deut. 6:16 commands, “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test.” Gideon knows he’s testing God. And yet, again, the remarkable thing is, rather than rebuke him, God graciously gives him the sign he asks for! This doesn't mean that what Gideon did was right; instead, it shows *God's incredible mercy and patience with Gideon!*

This story does not give us permission to test God. But it does give us much reason to be encouraged! Maybe you can relate to Gideon; maybe you know what it’s like to be full of fear, to have a struggling and fickle faith. Maybe you, like me, have had moments where you have struggled to trust God; in fact, maybe you’re in one of those seasons right now, where you know what God has said, and yet you’re struggling and failing to have the faith in God you want to have. If that’s you, then this text should encourage you by reminding you of the incredible mercy of God! All through this chapter, Gideon’s faith is fickle and floundering! His faith is mixed with doubts and fear! And yet, GOD does not forsake him - even when he lacks faith! Even when Gideon thought that God did, God was still with him! Brother, sister, God is with you! He has not forsaken you! God’s mercy, grace, and patience abounds for us, even in our weakness, even in our failures, even when our faith is lacking, when our hearts are fearful and fickle! See the wondrous patience of our great God towards our fearful, fickle, faithless hearts! Amidst your fear and doubts, turn to the Lord! Ask Him for grace to trust Him more, crying “I believe, help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). We can even be encouraged that God will use us for

God calls us to trust Him - and we can do so because His grace is so great that God works in our lives *despite* our weaknesses; we’re not called to be the hero of the story or believe in ourselves - we’re called to have faith in God as the hero of our story. Just like He is in the story of Gideon. Bringing us to point 3...

### **III. Gideon’s Weakness and God’s Glory: Salvation and Glory Belong to God Alone, Not Us (7:1 - 8:3)**

The story continues to highlight Gideon’s weakness, and God continues to use Gideon, in such a way that it reveals not only God’s grace, but His glory. IN fact, God doesn’t just use Gideon despite his flaws, fear, and struggling faith; God actually *intentionally makes Gideon’s army weaker*, stacking all the odds against the Israelites, so that it will be very clear that *God* is the one who saves them, not Gideon or their own military strength. We see this clearly in 7:1-8. Gideon goes out with his army of 32,000. But then God says, in verses 2-3, “The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying,

‘My own hand has saved me.’ Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, ‘Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.’ Then 22,000 of the people returned, and 10,000 remained.” 32,000 people may seem like a lot, but later in the chapter, in v.12, we’re told that the enemy army is so numerous that it covers the land like locusts, like sand on the seashore, too numerous to count. So already, Gideon and his army were afraid because they were sorely outnumbered by their enemies! This is why over two thirds of the army is so fearful that they walk away! But astoundingly, God doesn’t say it’s too few - He says it’s too many! He wants there to be no doubt at all that this salvation will come from God alone, not from Israel, not from the might of man, in any way whatsoever! And so, God whittles down the army even more! In verses 4-8 he tells Gideon to divide the army between the men who kneel down to lap the water out of the river and those who cup their hands to bring the water to their mouths, so that there’s only 300 men left - barely any at all!

Why does God have him do this? It’s because God is teaching them to trust in Him. God’s making their weakness and inability crystal clear. And it works. Gideon, who’s struggled with fear all along, is still afraid. So God tells him, in verse 10-14, to sneak down to the enemy camp at night; and when he does, he and his servant hear the enemies talking about a dream one has, where this cake falls and smushes the tent, and the other says, “This is no other than the sword of Gideon... God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp.” And when Gideon here’s this, it encourages his heart, strengthening his faith. Sure enough, in verses 15-25, we see the Lord bring deliverance in a remarkably unexpected way. They come at night, smash jars to light their torches and blow their trumpets, and shout, “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!” and as soon as they do, God causes panic to break out in the enemy camps; in the chaos, the enemies destroy each other. After this, Gideon rouses the ISraelites and they finish the job, hunting down the Midian princes, Oreb and Zeeb. But make no mistake, the point is clear: their salvation from their enemies clearly came from God, not Gideon.

God will share his glory with no one. God is the one who brings salvation, not us. God is the one who deserves all the glory and praise - not us, or anything else! In fact, God loves us so much that if we start to trust in and rely on ourselves or something else more than God - God just might strip them away from us so that we’ll stop glorifying and praising and trusting fake gods and false promises and instead turn to the one, true, living God! This is one reason why God allows us to go through suffering and trials. This is why God allows us to be humbled by

circumstances that are impossible for us to deal with on our own; it's so that we will *know our weakness*, and the weakness of the idols we trust in! It's so that we will rely on God alone! So that we will give God alone all glory, honor, worship, and praise! But this is not because God is selfish or prideful. If I went around telling everyone that I was the greatest, most glorious person in the universe, and that I deserve everyone's complete adoration and praise, everyone would immediately recognize just how ridiculous and prideful I was being. This would be so wrong because I would be telling a lie - I'm actually not that great! I am not worthy of that glory! And the reason we all immediately know that is because for something to truly be the greatest and most glorious in all the universe, it must be worthy of our complete devotion, capable of bringing meaning and purpose to our lives! I can't do that for anyone; in fact, if someone tried to make me the thing that gave meaning and purpose to their life, they would be utterly disappointed and dissatisfied (a fact I'm sure I don't have to convince anyone here of today!). But God *is* that glorious and wonderful! God really can deliver on such a promise! God is the *only one or thing in all the universe* that really is worthy of all glory, praise, worship, satisfaction, and delight! We really can rely on and glorify Him completely! So when God shows us just how glorious He is it is because He *loves us* and wants our hearts to more fully trust and delight in His glory! So that we will trust in Him alone with our whole hearts and not wander to other gods! So that we will rely on Him alone for salvation and not trust in any false assurances or turn from Him in fear and doubt!

God will be first in our hearts. God will share his glory with no one. And don't be mistaken: relying on God and giving Him all the glory is the *best thing in the world for us* because apart from this, we don't have any hope of salvation! We cannot save ourselves from our sins or by being good enough; our only hope is salvation from God by His glorious grace! God shows us His glory through our weakness to teach us to rely on Him alone so that we will fully believe in the gospel - so that we will truly believe that we can be saved from our sins and the wrath of God we deserve *only* by trusting in Jesus Christ, who lived a perfect life in our place, died on the cross for our sins, and rose again on the third day, so that whoever repents and believes in Him will be saved by grace through faith in Christ alone! So when God humbles us in our circumstances, showing us our weakness, let us not despair; let us seize it as an opportunity to trust in Christ alone and to worship and praise His glory! Even we start to fear and doubt, let

us be assured: God is simply weakening us - that is, weakening our faith in ourselves and false gods - in order to strengthen our faith in Him! And this is for our salvation and for His glory.

But just in case we need any other reason to rely on God alone, this story ends by giving us a sobering warning of what will happen if we *don't* rely on God and exalt Him alone. Which brings us to our final point...

#### **IV. Gideon's Fall: A Warning Against Self-Reliance and Self-Exaltation (8:4 - 9:57)**

If the story ended in 8:3, it would be a happy story. But unfortunately, as it goes on to show Gideon's slow decline into sin, self-reliance, and self-exaltation. We see a second battle in chapter 8, 4-21, but this time, there's no mention of God in it. Gideon no longer exhibits fear; instead, he seems a much aggressive man. He even takes vengeance on the two Israelite towns, Succoth and Penuel, for not helping him when he asks. As the story continues, it becomes even clearer that all is not right with Gideon's heart: he starts to trust, but not in the Lord - he's start to trust in himself, and think too much of his own name.

We see this in 8:22-28. After the battle is over, we read, in v.22, "Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, 'Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.'" In other words, they want Gideon to become the King of Israel and to establish a dynasty, just like the kings of the nations around them. But Gideon replies, in v.23, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you." Now, this no doubt sounds like the right response! Gideon is exalting the Lord, not himself! But despite what he says, his next actions hypocritically say the exact opposite. In the next few verses, he asks for them all to give him a portion of their spoils of war, giving them their gold; and this would have been the right of a king, to take a portion of everyone's spoil And they give it to him. In verses 29-32, we see Gideon living a life of wealth, with seventy sons and many wives and concubines - another mark of kings in the ancient near east. But then, to top it all off, Gideon names one of his sons "Abimelech" - which means, in Hebrew, 'My father is the king'! Despite Gideon formally declining to be king and saying that God would rule, he seems to really believe and do the exact opposite. In his pride, he exalts himself. And in so doing, it leads away from the worship of God right into idolatry. We see this in verses 26-28. You see, Gideon takes all that gold and turns it into an ephod - a golden statue of a priestly garment - as a means of exalting himself and bringing himself glory in the eyes of Israel; and it becomes just another idol

that the people worship, as v.27 says, “And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.”

In vv.33-34, after Gideon dies, their idolatry and sin gets even worse, they go right back to the false gods, the Baals, and they forgot the salvation of the one, true God! But Israel isn't just right back where they started - they're in an even worse spot, as we see in chapter 9, with the story of his son Abimelech, another reminder of Gideon's pride and self-exaltation directly leading to more and more sin and idolatry. In 9:1-6, Abimelech kills the other seventy sons of Gideon so that he himself can be king, and his hometown of Shechem is complicit in this. But one other son escapes - Jotham - who gives a parable in vv.7-21 that rebukes and curses both Abimelech and the town. In the parable, the trees ask all of these different trees to rule over them, but each one declines, until finally, they ask the bramble to be king, and Jotham warns that fire would come out from the bramble king and consume them, as a consequence. And this is exactly what happens. Abimelech ruled over Israel for three years, but God pitted Abimelech and the leaders of Shechem against each other. Eventually, it leads to a civil war between the two, with Abimelech burning down the city of Shechem, then trapping the leaders in a tower and setting it on fire as well. These leaders accepted this wicked man as their king to rule over them, and just as Jotham warned, fire came out of this bramble king and consumed them.

And yet, even here, we see the hand of the Lord restraining wickedness and bringing about justice and mercy. For while Abimelech sets the tower on fire, a woman from up above drops a large millstone on his head, striking down Abimelech (in v.53 - 54). Then the tragic chapter ends this way, in 9:55-57: “And when the men of Israel saw that Abimelech was dead, everyone departed to his home. Thus God returned the evil of Abimelech, which he committed against his father in killing his seventy brothers. And God also made all the evil of the men of Shechem return on their heads, and upon them came the curse of Jotham the son of Jerubbaal.”

This tragic story warns us against falling into the trap of relying on ourselves, or anything else, instead of God. If we trust in and exalt anything or anyone over God, it is sin and idolatry, and will inevitably lead our downfall and destruction. Ultimately, this points us to the destruction and judgment of Hell we *all* deserve because of the sin and idolatry in our own hearts. And yet, the story of Gideon also brings great encouragement: God's Word here shows us that no matter how weak and struggling we may be, God's grace and patient mercy is far greater than our fear, doubts, and fickle faith; even greater than our sin and idolatrous hearts! So when

you're aware of your weakness, don't fear: turn to God and trust Him, believing that God is allowing you to be weak in order to lead you away from trusting in yourself and idols in order to trust Him more. Trust that this is for God's own glory and for your own salvation, teaching us to believe the gospel all the more! Let us boast in our weakness that we may boast not in ourselves but in the glory of Jesus Christ, as we remember and believe, in all circumstances, that salvation and glory belong to Him alone, for only the blood of Christ, shed for us, can save us from our own sin and the judgment we deserve!

And one glorious way we continue to remember and believe this is by coming to the Lord's Table, where we proclaim that we trust and exalt not ourselves, but Christ alone! If you're a baptized believer in good standing with a gospel preaching church, I invite you to come to the table with us in a few moments. But if you're not a Christian, there's a different way for you to respond: turn away from relying on yourself, your good works, other people, or anything else, confess your weakness and sin, and turn to the Lord, trusting in Jesus Christ alone for salvation, purely by His grace! And then, make your faith public through baptism. If you have any questions about this, I'd love to speak with you. Let us pray.