**18th May 2014**

**Judges 6-8**

He was a farmer who really enjoyed his trade. Unlike some farmers, he had no desire to be anything more than a farmer. He never had political ambitions, nor did he dream of becoming a military leader and yet God had a different plan for his life. I’m talking about Gideon – not the guy that wrote all the Bibles in the hotel rooms, but Gideon from the book of Judges in the Old Testament.

We started to look at Judges last week. The Israelites have entered the Promised Land but their life would go in cycles. They would forget about God and God’s ways of justice and peace, disaster would fall on them and then God would raise up a deliverer or a judge to call the people back to him.

The Midianites are causing bother to the Israelites. They were a nomadic people who would wait until the people of Israel had finished planting their crops and they would sweep down upon them stealing their crops and herds and destroying what they couldn’t take with them. Well this went on for seven years (Judges 6:1) and it was starting to get hard, and so the people cried out to God to deliver them, and He called someone to lead His people. And that person was a man named Gideon.  
  
When you think of a hero, you’re usually inclined to think of strength, great intellect, personal charisma and beauty, or enormous wealth. But our hero today had none of these. He started out as a bitter and weak farmer, but was transformed into a warrior in a most unlikely fashion. He experienced a personal revival.  
  
I am going to use THREE PICTURES in the making of a hero. The first picture…  
  
GIDEON THE COWARD 6:1-24  
  
Judges 6:11 pretty much says it all: 6:11 The Lord’s angelic messenger came and sat down under the oak tree in Ophrah owned by Joash the Abiezrite. He arrived while Joash’s son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress so he could hide it from the Midianites.

Gideon is not exactly a picture of strength and courage here. He is hiding down in a winepress threshing wheat. Normally they used an open flat place where the winds and open air would blow away the chaff, but Gideon was hiding in a winepress beneath a tree, threshing wheat with a stick, desperately trying to save a little bit of food that he had hidden from the Midianites.

This is not a picture of a courageous hero; it is a picture of a defeated, discouraged man, filled with doubts and fears. Not only was he in the winepress physically, but he was there spiritually and emotionally. Gideon appears to be a timid and bitter man. While being challenged to deliver Israel, he said to the Angel of the Lord in Judges 6:13: 6:13, “Pray my lord, but if the Lord really is with us, why has all this happened to us? What has become of all those wondrous deeds of his… the Lord has cast us off and delivered us into the hands of the Midianiates’

Gideon was bitter with God for not coming through for him. Why has all this happened? We will from time to time, be the victims of life’s injustices. Why has this happened to me? Adversity can turn us bitter or can turn us to seek the better. You can understand why people can turn bitter – but bitterness is corrosive and damaging to an individual and all that they touch. We will all have unanswered questions in this life. God often remains silent. In this story he doesn’t answer Gideon’s question ‘why’. Instead he points him to something better. What good can come from this? He gives Gideon the challenge – bitter or better.

Stephen Sutton, the 19 year old who charted his battle with terminal cancer on social media helping to raise a staggering £3million for charity, died this week. He was just 15 years old when he was told his colorectal cancer was incurable. But he made a decision not to be bitter but to do something for the better and inspired millions with his courage and bravery.

God challenges Gideon to make a difference and not wallow in bitterness. But Gideon felt that he had nothing to offer to help improve things. He didn’t have the skills and power to turn things around he thought. He told the LORD’S angel in Judges 6:15: “But Lord, how can I deliver Israel? Just look! My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my family.” You’ve got the wrong guy. You need a hardened warrior to do this.  
  
Are you hiding down in a winepress threshing wheat The Midianites are winning. You have suffered. You are afraid are taking hold of life, afraid of going public with your faith in God – afraid to do the task that God wants you to do? Gideon was bitter, disappointed, timid, and afraid. Like Gideon, we can all give great reasons to be bitter, and push away from God but there is no life there.   
  
What was it that began to transform this coward hiding down in the winepress?

It was a personal encounter with God. You need a God-encounter if you’re going to make it out of the winepress.

Five-year old Johnny was in the kitchen as his mother made supper. She asked him to go into the pantry and get her a can of tomato soup, but he didn’t want to go in alone. "It’s dark in there and I’m scared." She asked again, and he persisted. Finally she said, "It’s OK-Jesus will be in there with you." Johnny walked hesitantly to the door and slowly opened it. He peeked inside, saw it was dark, and started to leave when all at once an idea came, and he said: "Jesus, if you’re in there, would you hand me that can of tomato soup?"

The only difference between that kid and us is that he’s more honest. We need reassurance from God that we’re doing the right thing. Gideon needed it too. God provided assurance when he needed it the most. It all began with a personal encounter.  
  
The second picture of our hero improves somewhat. A coward who had a personal encounter with God becomes…  
  
GIDEON THE CHALLENGER 6:25-32  
  
It was one thing to meet God in the secrecy of your winepress, but quite another thing to stand up for the Lord in public ways. Gideon began to make a difference right at home. He cleaned up the idolatry. 6:25 That night the Lord said to him, “. Pull down your father’s Baal altar and cut down the nearby Asherah pole. 6:26 Then build an altar for the Lord your God on the top of this stronghold So Gideon took ten of his servants and did just as the Lord had told him. He was too afraid of his father’s family and the men of the city to do it in broad daylight, so he waited until night time.  
  
Even though he was still fearful, he was willing to take a risk right at home. This inspired at least ten to go with him on this occasion, and a little later in this story, he rallied 32,000 men. The great thing about risk-taking is that it inspires others to move out in faith.  
  
Fifty years ago on the 6th May 1954 something special happened. A human being ran a mile in under four minutes. ? They’d been trying to do it since the days of the ancient Greeks. Someone found the old records of how the Greeks tried to accomplish this. They had wild animals chase the runners, hoping that would make them run faster. They tried tiger’s milk: not the stuff you get down at the supermarket, I’m talking about the real thing. Nothing worked, so they decided it was physically impossible for a human being to run a mile in four minutes. Our bone structure was all-wrong, the wind resistance was too great, our lung power was inadequate. There were a million reasons. Then one day one human being proved that the doctors, the trainers, and the athletes themselves were all wrong. On 6th May 1954 Roger Bannister broke the four-minute mile. And the year after that, three hundred runners broke the four-minute mile! You can see the knock on effect. Once someone comes forward others follow. Even though Gideon was still fearful and did his deed in the dark – it still had a powerful effect.   
  
Not only do modern day Gideon’s overcome their cowardice, but they live their lives in such a way that they challenge others to do their best. You can’t win any battles down in the winepress! You’ve got to come out into the open and take your stand. Often people need someone to rally behind as God’s will is pursued.   
Transition: Finally, we see…  
  
GIDEON THE CONQUEROR 6:33 - 8:3  
  
Well with this victory under his belt, Gideon issued a call across Israel to arms and they responded and as they came Gideon began to get a little nervous. It was one thing for a farmer to say he was going to lead an army into battle it was another thing for a farmer to actually lead an army into battle, especially when you have 32,000 men (Judges 7:3) and the other guys have 135,000 (Judges 7:12; 8:10). And so our hero got into a little discussion with God. He said “Tell you what God, if this is what you really want me to do you have to give me a sign, so here’s what we are going to do. I will put out a sheep’s fleece on the ground tonight. If in the morning the ground is dry and the fleece is wet then I’m your guy.” Judges 6:38 says: 6:38 The Lord did as he asked. When he got up the next morning, he squeezed the fleece, and enough dew dripped from it to fill a bowl. But Gideon is not convinced. Gideon again prays and says, “I don’t want to get annoying here God, but let’s try it the other way. I’ll leave the fleece out again tonight and in the morning if the ground is wet and the fleece is dry then I’ll know that I need to listen to you.” He gets up the next morning, and sure enough the ground is covered in dew and the fleece is completely dry. And so Gideon begins to think, “God must be serious here.”   
  
God’s will is a very mysterious thing at times. Knowing what he wants us to do and what we should wait on him to do for us is hard to balance. Gideon was having this trouble. He wanted to make sure before he launched these men into battle, so he set this little thing up with God.

By the way if you ever hear someone talking about putting out a fleece to validate the will of God, this is what he or she is referring to. But remember this scripture isn’t supporting that concept, or even endorsing it, it is simply reporting what happened. The fleece was all about Gideon’s fear, doubt, and timidity. He already knew what God’s will was; he just needed some reassurance and for some reason God conceded to Gideon’s request.

Can we ask for a sign today? Not if we make it some kind of magic formula. But if we genuinely seek God in faith, I believe we can ask God to make his will clear for us. Real power and conviction come when we prayerfully wait for confirmation from God. That’s what happened to Gideon.   
Rather than the fleece method, I have found the “Stacking Up” method to be a more reliable guide. How are things stacking up? If several good reasons can be stacked up for making my decision, it’s usually the right thing to do.  
  
Having clearly determined the will of God, Gideon became a Challenger. This is where the story gets really interesting. Gideon looks out at this army of 32,000 men and thinks “This could be cool, we can do this.” And God says, “Not so fast Gideon. You’ve got too many men.” (Judges 7:2) And Gideon is thinking: “Too many men? How can you have too many men going into battle?”

But God said “You have too many warriors and when they win they are going to think they did it all by themselves (Judges 7:2). You see God wanted this to be a God thing, and Gideon wanted it to be man thing. And you really can’t blame Gideon for that. So God says, ‘tell them that whoever is afraid can go home.” So Gideon gets up makes the announcement and 22,000 guys leave, that 2 out of 3 men clear off, leaving Gideon with 10,000 men (Judges 7:3). And just as Gideon’s kind of got his head wrapped around what has happened God says, “Still too many” “Still too many!” and so God tells Gideon “Separate those who lap the water as a dog laps from those who kneel to drink.” 7:6 Three hundred men are left!

Now at this point I’m not sure that Gideon was all that convinced of the validity of the plan and so God told him if you don’t believe I can do it sneak down to the enemy camp and see what they are saying. And that’s what he did.

He goes and eavesdrops on a conversation going on around a campfire in the Midianite camp. Two guys are talking and the first said “I had the strangest dream last night. Gideon and his men are going to whip us.” Gideon took the dream and the interpretation as a sign from God and went back to the camp to rally the troops.

Gideon took his men to the edge of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just after they had changed the guards. They blew trumpets and broke jars. When the three hundred men blew their trumpets, the Lord caused the Midianites to attack one another with their swords throughout the camp. The rest get scared and run away. Gideon wins the battle over the Midianites.  
  
CONCLUSION  
  
God can use ordinary people to do ordinary things in a great way. The steps of Gideon’s victory are easy to trace: he had a promise to believe, an altar to build, a vessel to break, a lamp to burn, and a trumpet to blow. And God gave the victory! None of these things were that incredibly difficult. But Gideon did them in obedience and God blessed him. There are so many simple things you can do that God will bless: listen, talk, help, give, pray, share your faith.  
  
A small number with God can do much. Though He is not opposed to having many on His side, God loves to work through the few. You just have to come out of the winepress to face the challenge. When challenges come we can turn bitter or choose to work for the better. One can grow from doubt to great faith. Gideon did it.

Good Leadership is about being courageous and examples for others to follow. Notice how so many rallied behind someone who was so courageous. Many people won’t get involved unless someone more courageous leads the way. Is God calling you to do that?

*Sermon adapted from sermon by Joey Nelson Stone Hill Community Church*

[*http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-story-of-gideon--the-making-of-a-hero-joey-nelson-sermon-on-gideon-49447.asp*](http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/the-story-of-gideon--the-making-of-a-hero-joey-nelson-sermon-on-gideon-49447.asp)