

Lesson 6

Unlikely Victors: Deborah and Gideon

Through faithfulness to God, even the unlikely are empowered to do His will.

THE LESSON OVERVIEW

God repeatedly used unlikely people to deliver Israel. Deborah was a prophetess and a judge in Israel. She encouraged the reluctant Barak to lead Israel's army against King Jabin and his general, Sisera. Jabin's army had better weaponry and more soldiers, but God gave Israel the victory. Another woman, Jael, courageously killed Sisera, a deed generally reserved for a man. Finally, this lesson explores the leadership of Gideon, who was hiding from the Midianites while threshing wheat. God saw in him a man of valor and used Gideon to lead a force of three hundred against the Midianite army, miraculously triumphing over superior forces.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Canaan was never a single kingdom ruled by one king, so the reference to Jabin as "*king of Canaan*" (v. 2) suggests he was the dominant king in the region with perhaps the largest army. The text may mean Jabin was *a* king in Canaan (one among others) and not *the* king over the entire region. Verse 2 notes he "*reigned in Hazor*," and verse 17 states Jabin was "*the king of Hazor*," which was in northern Galilee and was an important city. The size of Jabin's army, both chariots and soldiers, reveals he had amassed much power and was asserting his dominance in the region.

THE LESSON OUTLINE

1. DEBORAH: JUDGE AND PROPHETESS Judges 4:1–23

- A. Deborah's Inspiring Courage (1–10)
- B. Jael's Courageous Act (11–23)

2. GIDEON: COMMISSIONED TO RESCUE ISRAEL Judges 6:11–16

- A. God Saw Valor in Gideon (11–13)
- B. God's Presence Gives Courage (14–16)

3. GOD GIVES A MIRACULOUS VICTORY Judges 7:1–25

- A. God Thins the Ranks (1–9)
- B. Gideon Gains the Victory (9–25)

DISCUSSING THE LESSON

1. DEBORAH: JUDGE AND PROPHETESS *Judges 4:1–23*

A. Deborah's Inspiring Courage *Judges 4:1–10*

Judges 4 contains the accounts of Deborah and Jael, two women who were instrumental in defeating an oppressor of Israel named Jabin and his general, Sisera. After the judge named Ehud died, *“the children of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD”* (v. 1). As a result, God allowed Jabin and his impressive army to oppress Israel until they cried out to God. During this time, Deborah was both a prophetess and a judge (v. 4). She sat beneath a palm tree at Mount Ephraim, where people *“came up to her for judgment”* (v. 5). Deborah is the only person in the Book of Judges identified as both a prophetess and a judge.

As a judge, she provided godly wisdom for people seeking guidance on various issues. As a prophetess, she spoke for God to His people, and one of the people God told her to speak to was Barak. She told him God was commanding him to take ten thousand men from Naphtali and Zebulun to engage the armies of Sisera at the Kishon River, where God would deliver Sisera into his hand (vv. 6-7). However, Barak refused to go unless Deborah went with him (v. 8). She agreed to accompany him but forewarned him that a woman would kill Sisera. Barak seemed unconcerned that a woman would get the glory of ending the life of the opposing general and agreed to the condition stated by Deborah. Barak marshaled ten thousand fighting men from Zebulun and Naphtali, and with Deborah, they went to Kedesh as God commanded (v. 9).

B. Jael's Courageous Act *Judges 4:11–23*

In verses 11 and 12, Heber, a Kenite, is introduced. The Kenites were largely nomadic people of the Middle East. Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, was a Kenite. They had shown kindness to Israel in the wilderness, later settling among the tribes of Judah and Naphtali. At this time, the Kenites were on peaceful terms with Jabin, and Heber had pitched his tent in the plain near Kedesh. The writer does not immediately reveal why this was important. Instead, the storyline continues with Sisera, his chariots of iron, and his soldiers gathered in the valley near the River Kishon (v. 13). God had Jabin's army right where He wanted them, so Deborah told Barak, *“Up; for this is the day in which the LORD hath delivered Sisera into thine hand: is not the LORD gone out before thee?”* (v. 14). Barak then led his men down from Mount Tabor to engage the enemy at the river. God planned these events so that the soldiers and chariots of Sisera's army became *“discomfited”* [in disarray] (v. 15). Israel gained the advantage and won a decisive victory by killing their adversaries by the edge of the sword.

Perhaps with his iron chariot unable to move in the soft soil of the river valley, Sisera ran for his life (v 17). After running to the point of exhaustion, he came to Heber's tent, where the wife of Heber, Jael, was alone. Because of the peace between Jabin and the Kenites, Sisera asked Jael to allow him to rest in the tent. She invited him in, and he asked her for a drink of water. Instead, she gave him some milk and covered him (v. 19). While Sisera slept, she drove a tent peg through his temples into the ground, killing him instantly. Barak, who was tracking Sisera, came to the tent where Jael revealed Sisera's dead body. As Deborah prophesied, the glory of taking the opposing general's life went to a woman. With the army defeated and the general dead, Jabin was subdued.

2. GIDEON: COMMISSIONED TO RESCUE ISRAEL *Judges 6:11–16*

A. God Saw Valor in Gideon *Judges 6:11–13*

During the days of Gideon, the Midianites oppressed Israel. One of their tactics was to allow Israel to plant and harvest their crops and then come and take or destroy the harvest they had labored to produce. Therefore, to hide his harvest from the Midianites, Gideon was threshing the wheat beside the winepress rather than out in the open on the threshing floor (v. 11). To properly thresh wheat, a bundle of stalks of grain, called a sheaf, was struck with a stick or beaten on the floor. While doing this, the sheaf was shaken in the wind to allow the grain to fall to the floor while the lighter husk of the wheat, the chaff, was blown away. While Gideon was trying to thresh the wheat without being seen by the Midianites, the Angel of the Lord appeared to him with the greeting, *“The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valor”* (v. 12). Gideon, however, responded by asking why the God who miraculously delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage was now allowing the Midianites to oppress them. In fact, Gideon accused God of forsaking Israel (v. 13), but the truth was that Israel had forsaken the Lord.

B. God’s Presence Gives Courage *Judges 6:14–16*

The Angel of the Lord did not respond to Gideon’s questions. Instead, he told Gideon to do something about the situation. He said, *“Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?”* (v. 14 NKJV). That surprising statement gave rise to another question from Gideon. He asked the Angel of the Lord how he could possibly do anything to save Israel. He said his family was the poorest in the tribe of Manasseh, and he was *“the least”* (smallest or youngest, the runt) in his family (v. 15). Gideon claimed his family was poor, but his father was a clan leader, and his family had wealth (v. 19, 25,27). Some see humility in Gideon’s description of his family as poor. In contrast, others view it as a cultural practice of diminishing one’s position or standing in the presence of someone more powerful or important.

Had Gideon been listening more closely, he would have heard the Lord say He was with Gideon (v. 12) and was sending him (v. 14). Instead, Gideon focused only on his weaknesses. Gideon asked how he could save Israel, and the Lord answered, *Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite [defeat] the Midianites as one man* (v. 16). Saying he would defeat them as one man means there would be one decisive battle instead of many skirmishes spread out over months or years against various Midianite forces.

3. GOD GIVES A MIRACULOUS VICTORY *Judges 7:1–25*

A. God Thins the Ranks *Judges 7:1–8*

Perhaps testing the Angel of the Lord, who apparently looked like a man, Gideon killed a goat, made a meal for the Angel as instructed, and laid it on a rock (6:19-20). Fire came up from the rock and consumed the meal, which was essentially a sacrifice (v. 21). Gideon cried out in fear, saying he had seen *the Angel of the LORD face-to-face* (v. 22 NKJV). But the Lord spoke peace over Gideon, told him to tear down the family altar to Baal and *the grove* [wooden image], and build an altar to the Lord (vv. 25-26). Gideon was afraid of his father’s household, so he did what God commanded under the cover of darkness. The next day, when the people saw the destroyed idol and altar and demanded to know who was responsible, they discovered it was Gideon. When they threatened to kill him, Gideon’s father told the people if Baal was real, then Baal could defend himself (vv. 31-32).

Before accepting the call of God upon his life, Gideon laid out sheep's fleeces before God to confirm he was hearing God correctly (6:36-40). God honored Gideon's fleece twice, and Gideon finally agreed to be God's champion. When Gideon first mustered the men to form an army against the Midianites, there was a significant response of over thirty-two thousand men. However, God intended to show Himself strong on behalf of His people, so He told Gideon he had too many men. God instructed him to tell the men they could go home if they were afraid. Twenty-two thousand left, but God said the ten thousand remaining troops were still too many (7:3), so God thinned the ranks again. This time, God told Gideon to send the men down to a stream of water, and any who lapped the water from their hands would remain, while those who bowed down to the water to drink were sent away (v. 7). This left Gideon with only three hundred men. Then, God said, *By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand* (v. 7).

B. Gideon Gains the Victory Judges 7:9-25

That night, God sent Gideon and his servant Phurah into the enemy's camp, where they saw the Midianite army spread out *in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude* (v. 12). They had more camels than Gideon could count. The number of soldiers looked as numerous as the sand on a beach (vv. 9-12). God wanted Gideon to hear an enemy soldier sharing his dream with a fellow soldier. The man said he dreamed of a loaf of barley tumbling into the camp of Midian, where it knocked over a tent (v. 13). The second soldier interpreted this to mean Gideon would defeat Midian (v. 14). This revelation encouraged Gideon, who went back to his camp, divided the three hundred men into three groups of one hundred. He armed each man with a sword, a pitcher with a torch inside, and a trumpet (v. 16). Sending the men in a three-pronged attack, they were to follow Gideon's lead. When he blew his trumpet, his men were also to blow their trumpets and yell, *The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon* (v. 18).

As the Midianites were changing shifts of troops on watch, the three hundred Israelites did as Gideon instructed, alarming the Midianites with trumpets and shouting. They saw the lights suddenly appearing and coming down the mountain toward them. The confused Midianites, thinking the enemy was over-running their camp, began killing one another as they ran from the enemy (v. 22). Men from the tribes of Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh were enlisted to pursue the Midianites. Gideon also sent for men from Ephraim to head off the fleeing enemy at the Jordan River. The Israelite men finished the fight by capturing and killing the Midianites' princes, Oreb and Zeeb, and bringing their heads to Gideon (v. 25).

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to *"walk by faith, not by sight"* (2 Corinthians 5:7). We will sometimes face battles that are bigger than we are but never bigger than the Lord.

MINISTRY IN ACTION

Ministry requires courageous faith and trust in God's ability to empower you for the challenges you will face. Don't listen to anyone who says you cannot do what God has called you to do.

WORKSHEET

The Rest of the Story About Gideon

The Story About Gideon, told in the Book of Judges, chapters 6-7, is well-known to Christians, but the rest of the story about Gideon, told in Judges 8:22-32, gets very little attention.

After Gideon, With God's Blessing, led the Israelites to freedom from the cruel oppression of the Midianites, the men *of Israel* appealed to Gideon to become their king, and the head of a proposed dynasty of kings (*thy son, and thy son's son also*) to rule over Israel (v. 22).

Gideon Emphatically Refused to Be Israel's First King: *And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you* (v. 23). Gideon was firmly committed to the principle that only the LORD should be the King of Israel.

But What Gideon Did Next Was Not Good. He asked the men who had asked him to be the king of Israel to provide for him, from the gold they had taken from the Midianites, enough gold to make himself an ephod (vv. 24-27).

What Was the Ephod Gideon Made? Elsewhere in Scripture, an ephod was an elaborately adorned garment worn by the high priest of Israel (Exodus 28:6-14; 39:2-7). A linen ephod was worn by Samuel (1 Samuel 2:18) and by King David (2 Samuel 6:14) in the worship of God. It seems the ephod, a robe-like garment, was a visible symbol of the presence of God. However, *The Jewish Study Bible* states that Gideon's ephod was most likely not a garment, but a gold statue of some kind, set up in the town of his nativity (Ophrah), celebrating his and Israel's God-given victory over the Midianites.

Gideon Judged Israel 40 Years, *and the country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon* (Judges 8:28). But during Gideon's lifetime, the ephod he had made became to many Israelites a thing to be worshiped, and this idolatry was an evil blight on the life of Gideon and his family (v. 27).

Life-Altering Encounters

1. Explain Deborah's response to the sight of 900 iron chariots opposing Israel (Judges 4:13-14).
2. What three questions did Gideon ask the Angel of the Lord, and why (6:13, 15)?
3. What one question did the Lord ask Gideon (6:14)?

Has the Lord ever asked you a similar question? If so, what happened?

4. What did Gideon name the altar he built, and why (6:23-24)?

Name an important experience you have had at an altar.

5. Who gave Gideon a new name, and why (6:31-32)?

6. Describe the leadership Gideon demonstrated (7:16-18).

What can leaders today learn from this example?