

An Unlikely Hero

Judges 6-8

John Breon

J. R. R. Tolkien's books *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* appear near the top of many lists of the twentieth century's most popular books. I enjoy reading and re-reading them. The movies based on them have increased their popularity in recent years.

Tolkien's stories are an example of "epic fantasy." That's the kind of story where characters set out on, or find themselves in, an adventure that takes them on long journeys, into encounters with strange creatures and people, and usually involves them in a conflict between good and evil.

One of the themes of this kind of story is that the "hero" is often a very unlikely person. The hobbits in Tolkien's work are a race that's nearly unknown and seems insignificant. In many stories of this kind, these characters who are ordinary, weak, and unlikely are the focus of the story and are vitally important to the outcome of the conflict between good and evil.

Reading about Gideon reminds me of those stories. Like many other Old Testament heroes, Gideon was an ordinary person and an unlikely choice as a deliverer of God's people. Many people had reasons not to follow God call, but God called them anyway. Abraham and Sarah were too old. Jacob was too selfish and deceitful. Moses was too weak and, besides, he was on Egypt's "10 Most Wanted" list. Balaam wasn't even a member of the covenant people (and God didn't really call him, but did use him to speak God's message). Other examples include Ruth, David, Jonah, or Jeremiah. Still God called and used these unlikely people.

The angel of the LORD first greets Gideon this way: "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior" (Judges 6:12). God often speaks through this character called "the angel of the LORD." Gideon replied, "Pardon me, sir, but if the LORD is with us, why are all these bad things happening? Where are the LORD's wonders? Has God abandoned us?" (13).

The book of Judges is about various people, really "deliverers," who led parts of Israel, who fought off various oppressors, and who occasionally

delivered Israel from their enemies in the years following their entrance into the promised land and before they had a king.

A pattern develops in the stories in Judges: The people rebel and do evil in the LORD's sight. The LORD allows them to be oppressed (usually by some foreign power). The people cry out to God in their distress. The LORD raises up a deliverer to lead the people and throw off the oppressors. The cycle repeats itself throughout the book of Judges. This pattern also reveals another theme: We see the LORD's covenant faithfulness in Israel's experience.

Gideon's story is at the center of the book of Judges and it highlights the central issues for Israel at that time. Those issues are Baal worship and the LORD's rule over his covenant people.

When the LORD comes to him, Gideon is threshing wheat in a winepress rather than out in the open. This is because the nation is in the oppression part of the cycle. Because they're doing evil in the LORD's eyes, the people are attacked by the Midianites, who bring in their flocks and herds and raid the Israelites' fields and livestock. Judges 6:6 says Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help. God sent them a prophet who reminded them of how God delivered them from Egypt and told them not to worship the gods of the land they were coming into. But they hadn't listened.

Then the LORD visited Gideon. He was fearfully trying to protect his wheat harvest from the Midianites, hiding out as he threshed, when the LORD greeted him.

Gideon complained about the present situation. Then the LORD sent him to do something about it: "Go in the strength you have and save Israel. I am sending you."

"But how can I? My clan is the weakest and I am the least."

"I will be with you." There's the key! God calls and goes with an unlikely person to carry out God's plan. That's good news for us. If God can use someone like Gideon, what could God do with us?

Gideon showed his fear and doubt by asking for a sign and God was gracious in showing him a sign. God gave Gideon peace and Gideon named that place "The LORD is peace." One called to do battle came to know peace

with God and the peace of God. God's peace within us allows us to face life's conflicts and remain calm, resting in the LORD, trusting him. Then we can have courage to confront the enemies of peace in our lives and in the lives of people around us (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Lord of the Impossible* 107).

Next the LORD called for Gideon's undivided commitment and obedience. After coming into the land, the Israelites started blending various religions. With their worship of the LORD they mixed Baal worship, Asherah poles, and Canaanite fertility rites in an effort to have productive fields. But the LORD wanted their exclusive allegiance. God wanted them to worship him alone. Gideon's father had an altar to Baal and an Asherah pole on his land. The LORD told Gideon to tear them down and use the wood to offer a bull as a burnt offering to God. Gideon got into trouble with the neighbors for this, but his father defended him.

This leads us to face the question of what hinders our full and absolute commitment and obedience to God. What are the Baals in our backyard? The Israelites tried to have both the LORD and Baal. What in our lives tries to assert itself alongside God? How do our secondary loyalties dilute our worship of the one true God? What do we cling to or try to find security in just in case God doesn't come through?

We can identify our idols by asking ourselves some questions. Where do we find security? What are we devoted to? Where do we spend most of our time, energy, and money? "Our god is anything or anyone that dominates our thinking and demands our allegiance at the exclusion of absolute obedience to God" (Ogilvie 108). "What has your attention has you" (E. Stanley Jones).

Notice that Gideon not only tore down idols, but he also offered a sacrifice to the LORD. He offered a seven year old bull. It didn't take many bulls to maintain a herd, so most bulls were slaughtered when they were young. A bull seven years old must have been prime breeding stock. So Gideon gave the best to the LORD.

We're called to let God be God and let people be people, let money simply be money, let possessions just be possessions. Don't let those things become idols. Then, let's put God first and give our best to God. We first

give ourselves to God and surrender to him as Lord. That relationship then guides how we relate to the people and things in our lives.

After calling for Gideon's undivided commitment and obedience, the LORD gave him power to accomplish what the LORD called him to do. "Then the Spirit of the LORD came on Gideon" (6:34). The Hebrew here literally says, "The Spirit clothed himself with Gideon." God's Spirit filled Gideon and empowered him for the impossible task set before him—a task his obedience to God led him into.

We need God's power to live God's way. We can't pull it off on our own. And the Holy Spirit's power is available for us when we're willing to trust God, obey him, and attempt the impossible task God sets before us. We need God's power to enable us to live the Christian life, to be the people God wants us to be, to be the church God intends us to be, to meet the needs and reach the world God calls us to go to.

This power is available to us because of Jesus Christ. He has made it possible for us to become channels of God's Spirit. In the Old Testament there was no general outpouring of the Holy Spirit as in the New Testament. The Spirit came upon individuals for specific tasks, like with Gideon. But after Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, we can be cleansed from sin and God's Spirit can dwell in and abide in God's people. The Holy Spirit still gives special power and gifts for special tasks, but the Spirit continually fills us with God's love, makes us to be like Jesus, and empowers us to be disciples. The same power present in Jesus and available to the first disciples is available to us today.

Next God confirmed Gideon's call. Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised, give me this sign." He put a fleece on the threshing floor and asked God to let dew be only on the fleece and the ground around it dry. "Then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." What Gideon asked for is exactly what happened. Gideon asked again, "Don't be angry with me, but let me make one more request." This time he put the fleece out and asked that the fleece be dry while the ground around it was covered with dew. And that's exactly what happened. (6:36-40).

Some say that in the New Covenant we shouldn't ask God for signs like this; instead we should let God speak to us directly. But God is gracious and allows us to ask questions concerning his will. God uses various means to confirm his will for us and give us assurance. Guidance and confirmation of God's call arise out of relationship with God. Staying current in that relationship, following God each day brings us to the place God wants us to be.

If we spend our time energetically following the Master in the basics of discipleship—loving, communicating his grace, seeking first his kingdom and righteousness, forgiving, being peacemakers and agents of reconciliation—we will be open to guidance on special challenges which need specific guidance. The secret is the will. When we will to do God's will, as Jesus promised, we shall know (John 7:17). Spread out the uncertainty before him. Does it fulfill what he has said in Scripture? Will it bring his ultimate good for all concerned? Is it an expression of his love? Will we grow in deeper companionship with him if we do it? Will the kingdom of God be extended? If we can say yes to these questions, we can cast doubt aside. If there is still a lingering uncertainty, tell him. He created the world and raised Christ from the dead. Can he not get through to our open minds and receptive hearts? Indeed he can. (Ogilvie 112).

The number of warriors in Israel's army proved the people's dependence on God (Judges 7). Gideon started with 32,000 men. God had him reduce that by 22,000 by letting whoever was afraid go home. Then the army was reduced to 300 as God directed Gideon to watch how the men drank when they came to a stream. Apparently, those who stopped and got down by the water to drink were dismissed. Those who scooped up water and drank on the move were allowed to fight.

God encouraged Gideon by allowing him to overhear one Midianite tell another about a dream he had. The interpretation of the dream was that God had given the Midianites into Gideon's hands.

The strategy for battle showed that Israel relied on God for the victory. Gideon gave trumpets and torches to his 300 men. In the dark of night, at Gideon's signal, the Israelites blew their trumpets and smashed the jars that covered their torches. They shouted, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!" The Midianites may have thought this was the signal for a vast army to attack. The Midianites panicked and God set them against each other. They attacked each other and ran away in confusion. Gideon pursued them and gathered more Israelite soldiers to finish routing the enemy.

At the end of Gideon's story (8:22-32), we see that the people tried to make Gideon their king. But he refused, saying, "The LORD will rule over you." But then he asked them for gold from the plunder they took from the enemy. And with that gold Gideon made an ephod. An ephod was part of the high priest's clothing—sort of a robe or overlay the priest wore. Gideon's ephod may have been solid gold or had gold thread woven into it. He may have intended it to be a means of hearing from God and giving messages from God. But the people made an idol of Gideon's ephod. They worshiped it and it "became a snare to Gideon and his family" (8:27).

It's interesting how honest the Bible is about its heroes. That helps us see that these people are real and it helps us identify with them.

What do you suppose God is calling you to do? What's God calling us as a church to do? We know that God wants us to know him personally and live in relationship with him. God wants us to live in dependence on his guidance and provision, to love God with all our heart and love our neighbors as ourselves. God wants us to be disciples of Jesus—learning from him and becoming like him. God wants us to reach out to people around us with love, introduce them to life in right relationship with God, tell the good news of Jesus, help meet needs and make disciples.

All that and more is God's will for his people, but how does it apply to us specifically? Realizing all of this in our life and making it a reality in our experience is the great adventure God sets before us. Will we go with God in that adventure?