

# Gideon Part I: God's Grace Towards Rebels

*Scripture Readings: Judges 6:1-40 (text); Ephesians 2:1-10*

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Congregation of Christ: Gideon and Samson are the two most romanticized judges of Israel in the Bible. They've been subjects of “Be Like” sermons and two of the most frequently told stories in Sunday School.

Today, we will have the first lesson on the story of Gideon, which spans Chapters 6-8 of the Book of Judges. This narrative begins with the familiar opening refrain of the stories of the judges. After Deborah judged Israel for 40 years, she died. And as soon as she died, “*The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD.*” Again, the LORD responded to this rebellion by giving Israel into the hand of Midian for seven years. Unlike the stories of the previous four judges, the oppression of Israel by the Midianites, the Amalekites, and the people of the East is detailed. They would plunder the crops and the livestock, and ravage the land.

As we have seen in the first four judges, when the people were under severe oppression, they “*cried out for help to the LORD.*” Again, unlike the first four judges, God responded to their cry. But God's response was in the person of a prophet who recounted God's gracious deliverance of the people from their slavery in Egypt. The prophet then rebuked them for their unbelief, disobedience and rebellion against the LORD.

But the next scene takes us under the terebinth or oak tree at a place called Ophrah, belonging to Joash the father of Gideon. The angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon there and commanded him to save Israel from the hand of Midian. The LORD promised to be with him. But Gideon disagreed with the angel of the LORD in distrust, saying that he is not a warrior. He even blamed God for the sufferings of Israel.

In his unbelief, Gideon asks God to perform a sign – actually a total of three signs – for him before he obeys the LORD's command. Gideon first made an offering of sorts to the LORD which the LORD accepted. After this, Gideon gathered an army from the Abiezrites, his father's clan of the tribe of Manasseh, and from the tribes of Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali. These are the tribes nearest Gideon's home. But Gideon was not finished with doubting and testing God. He asked God to perform two more signs, to which God obliged. Now Gideon was ready for battle, or was he? Will God's grace deliver these rebels from their oppression?

Our theme today is “**Gideon: God's Grace Towards Rebels.**” This narrative is not just material for a be-like-Gideon story with a moral lesson, but has applications in our life as individuals and as a church. We have three headings: first, **Rejected by Rebels**; second, **Delivers Even Rebels**; and third, **Assures Doubting Rebels**.

## Rejected by Rebels

The people of Israel were helpless as the Midianites, Amalekites, and the Easterners came up and plundered them. They would “*devour the produce of the land,*” which means that the oppressors would bring their livestock and camels to graze in the land that the Israelites have planted with crops. These raiders would also steal their sheep, oxen, and donkeys. Israel would be left with no sustenance. The oppressors would be so many – “*they and their camels*

*could not be counted*” – that they are like locusts that ate the crops, devastated the land, and darkened the skies. Locusts are often used in the Bible as symbols of God's judgment on a nation, but God often actually sends them against unbelieving people like the Egyptians (Exo 10:4) and Israelites themselves (Joel 1:4).

This happened for seven years after Deborah died, and it was unbearable. The Israelites would actually hide in caves with their livestock and produce when these Midianite swarms came. After seven years of these, how did God respond to Israel's cry for help (not repentance by the way)? He sends a prophet!

Why did God send a prophet instead of a military deliverer like the first four judges? The people must have been thinking, “We needed someone to lead us into victory against the Midianites. Can a prophet do this?” But God wanted to send a message to them: that the most important thing they need is not a deliverer, but a prophet who will indict them for their rebellion. They have ignored God's grace in delivering them from slavery in Egypt, in conquering the Promised Land, and in settling them there. They were being oppressed because they were disobedient rebels!

We often respond to God's testing and discipline like Israel. While our sufferings may be God's testing and discipline, our disobedience often results in them. Then we don't realize that our own disobedience has caused us pain and trouble. And our only response is asking God for help. Like Israel, we don't see our need for repentance; just a cry to God for relief. We don't understand that our greatest need is repentance and turning away from the idols of our heart.

And this greatest need is brought to us by God's Word. It convicts us of our sin. It calls us to repent and turn back to God. It guides us in our pilgrimage to our heavenly Promised Land, searching our hearts, rebuking us, and correcting us. It converts us from rebels to believers!

Unlike the later prophets of Israel like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, this prophet in Judges 6 convicted Israel, but did not pronounce judgment. But the angel of the LORD confronts Gideon threshing out wheat in the winepress to hide from the Midianites. The messenger greets him like the angel greeted Mary the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:28), “*The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.*” Gideon really objected to this greeting: “How can God be with us when all this time, he has been sending Midianite marauders? Where was God when we needed him? Where is this God who delivered us from Egypt? God has surely forsaken us!”

Isn't Gideon a mirror of ourselves? He has forgotten all four judges whom God has sent before him who relieved Israel of their oppression and pain. Or maybe he was ignoring what he surely had known. Gideon is us when we ignore all the prayers God has granted to us in the past. Didn't he heal us from our illnesses? Didn't he give us the job that we desperately needed? Didn't he heal our broken relationships? Didn't he heal us from our addictions? Now, when we have a serious problem, we completely forget, or maybe even ignore, God's grace and mercy in the past. We even blame God for our sufferings, and then we rebel against him, not wanting to go to church, read the Bible, or even pray. We think, “God has forsaken me!” or “What kind of God is this who causes my sufferings?”

But we often forget that, as in the past, God delivers us rebels, not once, but many times.

## Delivers Even Rebels

Gideon also objected to God calling him a *“mighty man of valor.”* “How can you call me mighty to save Israel when my clan is weak, and I’m the least in my family?” Gideon repeats Moses’ objection to God’s call, *“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”* (Exo 3:11)

But Gideon misjudges and underestimates God’s mercy and love. The first four judges who delivered Israel were all ordinary, flawed men and a woman. Other than Othniel and Shamgar, they were not mighty warriors to begin with. Othniel was Caleb’s younger brother. Ehud killed the king of Moab by deception. Barak was an unwilling warrior, and Deborah was a woman who didn’t go to war.

But over and over in Israel’s cycle of rebellion and unbelief, God came to their rescue. It didn’t matter that their cries for help were not cries of repentance; God still delivered them. Gideon had forgotten God’s promise to Moses after Israel worshiped the golden calf at Mount Sinai, *“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin”* (Exo 34:6-7).

God never breaks his covenant with us, his people. In fact, we are the covenant breakers, rebels, and wretched sinners. Even when his justice and anger demand satisfaction with his wrath, he doesn’t destroy us. This is his amazing grace, love unknown! When we were dead in our sins; following our wicked desires and the ways of a rebellious anti-Christian world; children of wrath because of our rebellion – He responded with his grace, mercy and love. He *“made us alive together with Christ – by grace we have been saved”!* How can a holy God, wrathful against sin, promise that in the coming ages, *“he will show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus”?* (Eph 2:1-7) This is why Isaac Watts, the great 17th century hymnwriter, was overwhelmed at God’s grace:

Was it for crimes that I have done, He groaned upon the tree?  
Amazing pity! Grace unknown! And love beyond degree!

King David also has a psalm praising our gracious God, *“The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. He will not always chide, nor will he keep his anger forever”* (Psa 103:8-9). Paul also exclaims in praise of God’s mercy toward us who are disobedient rebels, *“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!”* (Rom 11:33)

This was how the LORD assured Gideon, the doubting rebel.

## Assures Doubting Rebels

Gideon’s doubt and lack of assurance in God’s promises are a continuing thread in this chapter. But didn’t Moses also doubted God? Yes, at the beginning, when he answered God’s call, *“Who am I?”* He didn’t ask God to perform a sign; God volunteered the staff that he can turn into a serpent.

Gideon was different. He continued to ask for signs. First, he prepared an offering of a young goat and unleavened cakes, and presented it before the angel of the LORD. He placed it on a rock. When the messenger touched the offering with his staff, fire came up from the rock

and consumed the offering. So Gideon was fearful that he would die because he really came face to face with the angel of the LORD. But the LORD assured him that he would not die.

Do we have the fear of God's holiness that Israel did? They knew that no one can see God and live, and their fearful reactions betray this knowledge, as did Jacob (Gen 32:30), Moses (Exo 33:20), Manoah, Samson's father (Jgs 13:22), Isaiah (Isa 6:5), and John (Rev 1:17). When Jesus calmed the storm at sea, the disciples "*were filled with great fear and said to one another.*" Why? Because they realized that they were with God face to face, and they would surely die (Mark 4:41). No sinner can stand before a perfectly holy God!

Many Christians today do not have this sense of God's pure holiness. They come to God – the Judge of heaven and earth – flippantly in the worship service, dressed in their most casual clothes, dancing, screaming and clapping merrily as if they are watching the World Series. They don't have any sense of the holiness, splendor, glory, and honor that must be given to God by mere, sinful creatures. Most churches invite people, "Come as you are," not realizing that all who come unrepentant and disobedient will be consumed by God's holiness. They would sing, "*Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness,*" but forget the next line, "*tremble before him, all the earth!*" (Psa 96:9). They would joyfully praise God in Psalm 95:1, "*Oh come, let us sing to the LORD; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!*" But then they would not even read five verses later God's invitation to reverent worship, "*Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!*" (Psa 95:6)

After his offering was accepted by the LORD, Gideon obeyed God's command to destroy his family's altar to Baal and Asherah pole. But he obeyed with fear, knowing that death will follow if he was discovered. So he obeyed, but at night, in a similar fashion that Nicodemus came to inquire of Jesus at night. It is ominous that after he destroyed the Baal idol, the name Jerubbaal, which means "*Let Baal contend against him,*" stuck with Gideon. We shall see how this name comes into play later in Gideon's life. His popular name should have been "Gideon the Hacker," which is the real meaning of his name, since he hacked or cut down the idols (Deu 7:5; 12:3).

But why did God command Gideon to destroy the idols? It was a test of commitment. It was also part of Israel's deliverance. Israel, including Gideon's idolatrous family, must get rid of their idols. The LORD is a jealous God. They cannot serve both Baal and Yahweh.

And this is also Jesus' demand: total allegiance. Jesus tells us that we cannot serve both God and money. There is no sitting on the fence between God and the world, between God's Word and our pleasures. As the LORD wanted to cleanse Israel first before they are delivered from their oppressors, Jesus demands faith and repentance to cleanse us from our sins. But even this faith and repentance are gifts of God; they don't come from our own decision. So Jesus doesn't give us a bulletin sidebar with a box saying, "I asked Jesus to be my personal Savior," that we have to check. He first exposes our idolatrous desires, and ungodly thoughts and deeds. Then when the Spirit convicts us that our only hope is the broken body and shed blood of Christ on the cross for our sins, we are actually delivered from our sins. The Spirit makes us wail in mourning over our sin, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*" And when we see God's grace toward wretched sinners like us, we exclaim in praise, "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" (Rom 7:24-25a) This is our only salvation from God's holiness and wrath against us who are hopelessly dead in our sins.

Next, Gideon tests God twice with the fleece on the threshing floor. If God performed these two signs for him, Gideon says, *“then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said.”* In the whole narrative, God assured him, *“The LORD is with you. I will be with you”* (verses 12, 16). This is the same assurance that God gave to Moses and Joshua before him, *“I will be with you. I will never forsake you or leave you”* (Jos 1:5; Exo 3:12).

**D**ear friends, the writer of Hebrews encourages us to avoid the love of money and be contented with what we have. Why must we keep this commandment? Because of God's promise, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”* This is the same covenant promise the LORD made to Moses, Joshua, Gideon, and to all Israel. He will never break his covenant promises to you, his people.

But it is not only concerning finances, job security, or business that God promises not to forsake you. His promises concern all things in all your life, even when you think he doesn't fulfill them. For he works all things for your good.

But most importantly, he promises to save you even in your rebellion, through a change in your heart wrought by the Spirit. Through this same Spirit, he promises to help you in all your sufferings and pain. He promises to complete the good work that he had begun in you until the end of your life, or until Christ returns. For it was Christ, not us, whom God had forsaken on the cross to suffer and die for us disobedient rebels. He will never forsake you or leave you, his beloved people, *“So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’”* (Heb 13:5-6).

He will always be with us, until we inherit the new heavenly city, when God will forever fulfill his promise of Immanuel, God with us, *“Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God”* (Rev 21:3).