

Gideon and the problem with mustard seed faith \* Judges 6-8 (6:11-18)  
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As I thought about Gideon this week, it struck me that his life would make for excellent TV. His life is jam packed with memorable events; there's conflict and drama and tension and Gideon himself is a very complicated and complex character. He would make for excellent TV.

I'm not so sure though that he would make for a valuable model for us as believers. Yes, in the power of God, he does some really great things, but in his own strength, he does some really crummy things and so he sits here in the book of Judges as the ambiguous central judge in the whole of the book.

Sometimes he's wholeheartedly committed to God; sometimes he's only half-heartedly following along and other times it just seems as if his heart's not in it at all.

You wonder what kind of faith this guy really had.

And that's where Gideon's story intersects with ours.

His story begs us to ask 'What kind of faith do we have?' Do we trust God to do the incredible and unexpected things that He promises to do? When we call us to action, do we believe that He knows what He's doing and get right to it, or do we require a lot of poking and prodding? In short, how big is your faith?

That's the question at the heart of Gideon's life and I want to walk you through his whole life to help us to answer – how big is your faith?

Turn with me to Judges 6 and as that chapter opens, you'll see right away that Gideon is yet another turn around the Judges cycle. Look at verse 1 –

6:1 – Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites (Jdg 6:1 NIV).

Let's pull up our chart from last week - (I had some feedback last week about which emoji was God and which one was the people, so I've added a little crown to the God emoji just to clarify. Super responsive). So at the end of chapter five, the people are in relationship with God. Then, 6:1, what happens? They do evil in the sight of the LORD. They are unfaithful to God and chase after other gods instead. And, so, following the cycle, what happens next? God rejects them – He gave them into the hands of the Midianites – that's a people south east of the Jordan River.

And so, since they turned away from Him, God rejected them. And Judges 6 tells us just what that rejection looked like.

The people were reduced to hiding in mountains and caves in order to protect themselves and the invaders made a constant habit of stealing whatever was not nailed down so that Israel was in a heap of trouble. And they cried out to the LORD for help.

2 Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds.

3 Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country.

4 They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys.

5 They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it.

6 Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.  
(Jdg 6:2-6 NIV).

And once again, God acted with unexpected mercy and raised up a judge who would deliver His people from the oppression of the Midianites. Now this is important. Gideon's story gets long and complicated so it's easy to lose sight of this – but everything that happens from here on out – all of Gideon's story – is the story of God delivering His people. Gideon is the agent that God chooses to work through, but this is God rescuing His people.

And He does it through a man named Gideon. Now I wasn't kidding about Gideon making for good TV because the biblical record of Gideon's life falls very neatly into four distinct episodes spanning from chapter six to chapter eight. So I'm going to take you through all four episodes, starting at the first one, 'Gideon vs the idol.' This is chapter one, Gideon vs the idol.

It starts at verse 11.

11 The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites.

Now hold on – where do you thresh wheat, usually? Outside right? Where the wind blows away the chaff. Where it doesn't get as hot and sticky and stuck to every part of your body? But this is what Israel is reduced to – hiding away, doing work in secret so that the Midianites don't come in and steal this wheat away.

And the angel of the LORD (which often simply means 'the LORD' in the OT) shows up and says to Gideon "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."

12 When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."  
(Jdg 6:12 NIV).

Now Gideon isn't so sure of this. I mean, just look at him. He's no mighty warrior. His overalls are covered with wheat, his face is smeared with dust and chaff. This is no mighty warrior.

12 When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."

And Gideon's not entirely sure that God is with him either. Verse 13.

13 "But sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian."

Now interesting that you should say that Gideon, because before God sent the angel to Ophrah, He sent a prophet to Israel to answer that very question. Look up just a few verses – verse 7 –

God sends a prophet who says: "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 9 I snatched you from the power of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them from before you and gave you their land. 10 I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me" (Jdg 6:8-10 NIV).

That's why the LORD has abandoned Israel and given them over to Midian – because they turned their backs on the unfailing goodness of God to chase after other gods and they are now lying in the bed they've made.

But even so, God is going to deliver them. And apparently, with Gideon, God is more interested in how He will deliver them than why they need deliverance – because He skips straight to the plan. Verse 14 –

14 The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

Now how did Joshua and his generation respond? Let's do it. Let's be strong and courageous, knowing that our God is with us wherever we go. And God has promised to be with Gideon 'the LORD is with you mighty warrior.'

But what does Gideon say?

15 "But Lord, " Gideon asked, "how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."

16 The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

Now again, Joshua and his generation would have said 'ok, let's do it' but here Gideon says 'ok, but prove to me that it really is YOU talking to me' and they do this whole thing where Gideon prepares a meal and God miraculously consumes it with fire and then Gideon realizes that God has indeed been talking to him and so he builds an altar there at Ophrah. Remember that name.

17 Gideon replied, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me.

18 Please do not go away until I come back and bring my offering and set it before you." And the LORD said, "I will wait until you return."

19 Gideon went in, prepared a young goat, and from an ephah of flour he made bread without yeast. Putting the meat in a basket and its broth in a pot, he brought them out and offered them to him under the oak.

20 The angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread, place them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And Gideon did so.

21 With the tip of the staff that was in his hand, the angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared.

22 When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, "Ah, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!"

23 But the LORD said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die."

24 So Gideon built an altar to the LORD there and called it The LORD is Peace. To this day it stands in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

Later that night, the LORD appeared to him again and said

25 That same night the LORD said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. (Now that's an interesting insight into Gideon's life. His household is actively worshipping Baal. They have their own altars to other gods and God says – tear it down, build an altar to me, and then sacrifice the bull you use to pull down the idol on the altar to me.)

26 Then build a proper kind of altar to the LORD your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering."

27 So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the LORD told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the men of the town, he did it at night rather than in the daytime.

So he's showing faith here, right? Even if he's afraid. Even if it is just faith the size of a mustard seed. He is willing to stick his neck out for God and he does as God has commanded. Good for Him.

Now the next day everybody gets all worked up about the idol that Gideon has just taken out and they say 'he deserves to die for taking out our idol.' Now again, that should tell us something about *Israel's* faith at this point. If they have an idol, according to Deuteronomy, they're the ones that should die. But now they're actively persecuting someone who is standing up for God. It makes their cries of 'oh God, why have you forsaken us' seem a little hollow when they are actively honouring another god. It's a little like a guy wondering why his wife is mad at him while he's clearing flirting with another woman – you gotta ask – buddy, where's your loyalty really lie here? Israel, where's your loyalty here.

And fortunately, Gideon's dad steps in at this point and makes a really theologically astute point. Look, if Baal is all powerful, then Baal should be able to look after himself and handle this trouble maker – my

son – so leave him alone and let Baal handle it. And the neighbours say – that’s a good idea – and they give him a new name – Jerub-Baal – which means ‘let Baal deal with it.’

And so with that, the screen fades to black and episode one is over. Gideon vs the idol. Gideon comes out looking pretty good, doesn’t he? He’s acted with faith and good things have come of it.

Now don’t worry, no need to wait until next week to find out what happens next – we’re going to Netflix this whole season. Skip intro – episode 2 – Gideon vs the Midianites.

Verse 33 - 33 Now all the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. (They’ve entered Israelite territory and there’s going to be a battle).

34 Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him.

“And other tribes in Israel sent help and they went and won the day in the power of God. Because the Spirit of the LORD was on him, right? That’s what it says right?”

Verse 36 -

36 Gideon – who is cloaked in the power of the Spirit of the LORD - said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—[then prove it to me].

Gideon – buddy – where is your faith? God has PROMISED it. God KEEPS his promises! He’s already seen God keep him safe with the whole idol affair from episode 1 but here he goes through this whole rigamorole where he puts a fleece on the floor and if God keeps it dry while the ground is wet, then he’ll believe. And then when God does it, Gideon says – ok, do it again but the opposite now – wet ground, dry fleece – and God does it but still – buddy – where’s your faith?

It’s amazing that God accommodates Gideon’s failing faith here and it is a reminder of God’s grace in meeting us where we are that. Because, with this encouragement, Gideon prepares for battle.

37 look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said."

38 And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew--a bowlful of water.

39 Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew."

40 That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew.

NIV Judges 7:1 Early in the morning, Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) and all his men camped at the spring of Harod.

But God is still committed to him and so God said to him: “You have too many men. If you go against Midian and win, you’re going to think that you won in your own strength and that’s no good, so send anybody home who wants to go home.” And that brings the army down to ten thousand.

4 But the LORD said to Gideon, "There are still too many men. Take them down to the water, and I will sift them for you there. If I say, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go; but if I say, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go."

Then God says – still too many – take them down to the water- tell them to drink – if they kneel down to lap the water up, send em home; I’ll work with the ones that scoop the water to drink – that leaves three hundred.

So now Gideon is going up against (135,000 ish 8:10) men with three hundred – and God probably anticipates that Gideon is feeling a little nervous so God pre-emptively I think does something to bolster his faith – he sends Gideon and his servant down to the enemy camp and they ‘just happen to overhear’ to soldiers talking about this dream that one of them had. A loaf of bread came rolling down a hill and destroyed the enemies camp and the one says – oh that must be Gideon because God has given us into his hand. And Gideon’s like – yeah! Let’s go! He goes back to camp and rouses his men and goes on the offensive. This is the high point of Gideon’s faith I think – he takes three hundred men up against a hundred thousand – you gotta have faith in God with those odds! - and they route them without drawing a sword.

13 Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. "I had a dream," he was saying. "A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed."

14 His friend responded, "This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands."

15 When Gideon heard the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped God. He returned to the camp of Israel and called out, "Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands."  
(Jdg 7:13-15 NIV).

Sure enough, God has delivered His people.

And if the story ended there, I think we would say that the lesson is that God will strengthen our failing faith and does great things when we believe Him.

But the story doesn’t end there. And it’s fascinating, because the rest of the story plays as a reverse, bizarro kind of reflection of the first half. Remember, episode 1 – Gideon vs the idol, episode 2 – Gideon vs Midian – now episode 3 is Gideon vs Israel and episode 4 – Gideon builds an idol.

Episode three – Gideon vs Israel begins at chapter 8, verse 4 – Gideon and his army have broken the Midianites and they’re chasing them down to finish them off but then they come to an Israelite town named Succoth. Now notice – this is an ISRAELITE town.

Gideon says to the men of Succoth (v5) “we’re chasing these guys – the kings of Midian – and we need some bread to keep going” and the people of Succoth says “why should we give you anything? You haven’t even caught them yet.” Now, admittedly, that’s not very brotherly but then Gideon ups the ante. He says ‘Fine. You’re not going to give me anything? Then when the LORD gives them into my hand, I’m going to come back and tear up your flesh with thorns and briers.’ And then he goes a little ways down the road to another town and they refuse to help and so he threatens to tear down their defenses and slaughter them all. He catches the kings, kills them and then comes back and lays waste to the Israelite towns (.v 16 says that he ‘taught them a lesson’ but literally it says he ‘threshed’ them).

Uh... Gideon? Where’s your faith? Where’s your reliance on God? What happened to that whole hearted faith that God would defeat thousands of men with only three hundred? What happened to doing God’s will God’s way? Because slaughtering your fellow Israelites is not God’s will, God’s way.

And the next episode is just as bad.

Episode 4, Gideon builds an idol.

22 The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us--you, your son and your grandson--because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian." (They want him to establish a hereditary monarchy).

23 But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you."

Now that’s the right answer. That’s the way Israel should be behaving – “we have no king but YHWH” – and yet... Gideon isn’t done talking. And this is a real do as I say not as I do kind of thing. Because he continues – verse 25 -

24 And he said, "I do have one request, that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder."

25 They answered, "We'll be glad to give them." So they spread out a garment, and each man threw a ring from his plunder onto it. So he’s collecting a portion of the plunder, as rulers do.

And skip down to verse 30 – he had seventy sons with many wives – as rulers do.

He had a son with a concubine named ‘Abimelech’ which means – wait for it – son of the king.

If you have a son and you call him son of the king – what does that mean you think about yourself? You are the king.

And the worst part is verse 27 – Gideon took all of that gold – and made an ephod with it (he made an idol) and placed it at Ophrah. Remember back in episode one, Gideon made an altar at Ophrah? I’ll bet he put this ephod on that altar. And all Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there and it became a snare to Gideon and his family (v. 27). Gideon started by cutting down an idol. Gideon ends by creating a new one. The narrator tells us that there was a measure of peace and relationship with God while Gideon lived, but then, verse 33, they did not remember the LORD their God, who had rescued them from the hands of their enemies and they prostituted themselves after other gods. And the downward spiral continues.

Well, now that we've binge-watched the whole of Gideon's life, let's look back and see what it all means.

Looking at episodes one and two, I would say that the point is this – God can work with mustard seed faith. Do you know what I mean by that? There was once when Jesus was teaching when He said "if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you" (Mat 17:20 NIV).

And indeed, when he trusted God, nothing was impossible for Gideon. He tore down his father's idol, escaped the wrath of his neighbours and actually went on to lead them in battle against the Midianites. He went up against thousands of troops with only three hundred men and was victorious over them all.

And just consider what little faith it took for him to do that. Time and time again he needed God's assurances. Time and time again he needed a sign that God would do... what He had already promised. It feels to me as though Gideon had faith but the kind of faith that needed constant coaxing, like a child who believes you when you say broccoli won't hurt them but still won't eat it. There's a part of me that wonders if Gideon even had faith, but the NT corrects me on that.

Hebrews 11:32 says quite clearly that Gideon had faith. Gideon was one of the men who through faith conquered kingdoms and routed foreign armies. So I need to acknowledge that Gideon does demonstrate faith, even if it is only the size of a mustard seed.

32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets,

33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,

34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

The first two episodes tell us that God can work with even mustard seed faith. You don't need to have stunning, extravagant, radical faith in order for God to work through you – if you have faith as small as a mustard seed nothing in God's purposes will be impossible for you. Dale Ralph Davis writes: "We sometimes dupe ourselves into thinking that a 'real' servant of Christ is only someone who is dynamic, assured, confident, brash, fearless, witty, adventuresome, or glamorous... Don't think that you are unusable because you don't have that air about you. Christ takes fearful folk, strengthens their hands in the oddest ways and makes them stand for him (106).

God can work with mustard seed faith.

But I think that the last two episodes of Gideon's life show us that we can't just top out at mustard seed faith. We need to keep growing.

God can work with mustard seed faith but it's best to keep cultivating it.

I mean, if not for Hebrews 11, I wonder if Gideon even had faith at all. Getting him to act on faith in the first two episodes was like pulling teeth. He got up 'just enough courage' to take God at His Word, but then when he was victorious, he ditched God's agenda and did what was right in HIS eyes. Slaughtering fellow Israelites, even if fellow Israelites who refused to give you provisions, is not an act of faith. Building an ephod that tempts people away from God – an idol really – is not an act of faith. Hypocritically claiming that God is king when you're really in your heart setting yourself up as king is not an act of faith.

God could work with Gideon's mustard seed faith, but he should have kept it growing.

And that's the same for us too. If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, God can do incredible things for you. But don't be content with a faith this big (ie. tiny). Cultivate it. Let it grow. Put an effort into helping it to grow into something that's healthy and vibrant and strong.

It's kind of funny the way this worked out. Earlier this week I had an avocado and made some guacamole for our supper and I thought 'it would be really neat to set this thing up and see if I can get it to take root. I think if I put toothpicks in it and suspend it some water, I'll be able to get it to grow.' You know where it is now? Beside the microwave. Not in water. Just, sitting beside the microwave.

But you know what? Sometimes that's how we treat our faith. We've got faith the size of a mustard seed or an avocado pit and we think 'oh I want this to grow' but then we do nothing about it. Good intentions won't make that avocado grow and good intentions won't make faith grow either.

I can't say this enough – plant your faith in the Word. Make Bible study a priority. Water it with prayer daily. Take time to cultivate your faith, weeding out any sinful thoughts and thinking over the truths of the Bible that will help you to grow. Don't be content with mustard seed faith, but instead ask God to grow it into strong and vibrant belief.

Certainly we can rejoice that God works through people like Gideon, who need a little poking and prodding, because I know that we can all be like that from time to time. And it reveals the incredible grace of God to meet us where we are at and to help us to do what He has set before us.

But let's take time to remember all that God has done for us – how we turned our backs on Him, how we were oppressed by sin and how He raised up a great Deliverer – Jesus – to rescue us and bring us back into relationship with God. In light of those mercies, keep growing your faith.