

Gideon Part 2: Blessing or Trial?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 May 2024

Preacher: Robin Silson

[0 : 00] So let's read together from the book of Judges, chapter seven, verses one to 23, and then chapter eight, verses 22 to 28.

And tonight we're in the second part and final part of the story of the judge Gideon. This is the word of the Lord. Then Jeruba, all that is Gideon, and all the people who are with him, rose early and encamped beside the spring of Herod, and the camp of Midian was north of them by the hill of Moray in the valley.

The Lord said to Gideon, the people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, my own hand has saved me. Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead. Then 22,000 of the people returned and 10,000 remained. And the Lord said to Gideon, the people are still too many, take them down to the water and I will test them for you there. And anyone of whom I say to you, this one shall go with you, shall go with you.

And anyone of whom I say to you, this one shall not go with you, shall not go. So he brought the people down to the water and the Lord said to Gideon, everyone who lapped the water with his tongue as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, everyone who kneels down to drink.

And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink the water. The Lord said to Gideon, with the 300 men who lapped, I will save you and I will give the Midianites into your hand and let all the others go every man to his home so that people took provisions in their hands and their trumpets. And he sent all the rest of Israel, every man to his tent. But he retained the 300 men and the camp of Midian was below him in the valley. That same night, the Lord said to him, arise, go down against the camp for I have given it into your hand. But if you were afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Pura, your servant. And you shall hear what they say, and afterwards your hand shall be strengthened to go down against the camp. Then he went down with Pura, his servant, to the outpost of the armed men who were in the camp. And the Midianites and the Amelokites and all the people of the east lay along the valley like locusts and abundance.

[2 : 25] And their camels were without number as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance. And when Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade. And he said, Behold, I dreamed a dream. And behold, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian and came to the tent and struck it so that it fell and turned it upside down so that the tent lay flat.

And his comrade answered, This is no other than the sword of Gideon, the son of Joash, a man of Israel. God has given it into his hand Midian and all the camp. And as soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped. And he returned to the camp of Israel and said, Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand. And he divided the 300 men into three companies. And he put trumpets into the hands of all of them and empty jars with torches inside the jars. And he said to them, Look at me and do likewise. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the trumpet also on every side of the camp and shout for the Lord and for Gideon. So Gideon and the 100 men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch when they had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets and they smashed the jars that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars.

And they held in their left hands the torches and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out a sword for the Lord and for Gideon. Every man stood in his place around the camp and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. And when they blew the 300 trumpet trumpets, the Lord said, Every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army. And the army fled as far as Beth Shattah towards Zerarra as far as the border of Abel Mahola by Taboth.

And the men of Israel were called out from Naftali and from Asher and from Al-Manasseh. And they pursued after Midian. And then chapter 8 verses 22 to 28. So the men of Israel said to Gideon, Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian. Gideon said to them, I will not rule over you and my son will not rule over you.

The Lord will rule over you. And Gideon said to them, Let me make a request of you. Every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil, for they had golden earrings because they were Ishmaelites. And they answered, We will willingly give them. And they spread a cloak and every man threw in the earrings of his spoil. And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1700 shekels of gold. Besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian and besides the collars that were around the necks of the camels.

[5 : 13] And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city in Ofrah. And all Israel hoarded after it there and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family. So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel and they raised their heads no more and the land had rest for 40 years in the days of Gideon.

This is God's word. It's great to be with you tonight. It's always great to be here with, it's like coming home. So it's just, and I thank so much for your prayers. Thanks for your support.

We do appreciate the prayers of God's people. And we've got a great passage tonight. It's great the looking through judges. But let me, I'm just going to pray for us, commit this time into the Lord's hands. Almighty God, we do thank you so much for your word and we thank you that you do indeed speak to us through it. We ask that you would speak to our hearts. We pray that you would change us and mold us and fashion us into your likeness. We pray that you teach us and rebuke correctness and train us in righteousness that each of us might be equipped for good works. And so far the way we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen. So the question, the question that I have this evening is what is a trial and what is a blessing? What is a trial and what is a blessing? That is a question I want us to look at this evening as we look at this second half of Gideon's story. Now, you might think that that seems an easy question to answer because if you're going to answer that off the bat, you'd say, well, trials, that's quite easy and trials are difficult, trials are things that are hard. And blessings are good things that are given to us that it's grace, it's good things.

We know what a trial is and we know what a blessing is. But I just, let me read this quote to you and I want you to hold this as I'm speaking this evening. I read this a few years ago and I think I think it was Mother Teresa who said it just before she died. She said, at the end of her life, she said that she struggled to see the difference between a trial and a blessing. She struggled to see the difference between a trial and a blessing. And as we go through that, I want you to think that through as we think through Gideon's life. Gideon in his life faces trials. He faces the big trial that we're going to look at first and then he, but he also receives the blessings of victory. In fact, you might say that the whole story of Gideon's centers really around how he's going to fare against the oppression of the Midianites. You'll remember from last week as you looked at that with Corey. It's one of the reasons he's called by God as a judge, isn't it, in response to hearing the cries of God's people. God raises up Gideon as the judge who will deliver his people from Midianite oppression. That is one of the patterns that we see all the way through the book of the judges is that God raises up a judge as the people cry out and then he calls a judge to deliver them from oppression. But what I want to think about this evening is how does the role of the judge impact Gideon, his character? Because there's no doubt about it that in these two chapters that we see here, we see two very different sides to this man. We see Gideon before the victory, leading up to the battle. And we see Gideon after the battle, after he's won. After the Lord has won through him. How he responds to blessings and trials. So that's how we're going to split up. We're just going to split it up and to do things, get in before and get in afterwards. What happens in judges? It's good to remind if you've dugged into the book of judges before. It's good to remind us what happens in the book of judges. It is basically one big downward spiral where God's people go from pretty bad at the beginning to really terrible at the end. It doesn't get any better.

So at the end of the book, we read one of the, I think it's one of the final verses, is everyone did what was right in their own eyes. That's what we see in judges. Judges is a book that tells the story of how God's people get to that point. Just to bring us up to speed with where we're at in Gideon's life from last week also before the victory over the Midianites.

[9 : 32] In the previous chapter, God demonstrated with the fleece and the Jew that he was with Gideon and that he would be with him against the Midianites. God had sounded, Gideon had

sounded the trumpets and men across Israel had come to stand alongside Gideon to fight. So Gideon before, before the battle. We can imagine how Gideon feels, right? We can imagine how Gideon feels seeing all these men answer the trumpet calls, signing on the dotted line to fight with him.

Men from all over Israel answering the call to stand with God's man, Gideon, leading the way. You look at the numbers, we read it, we know there's 32,000 men. That's 160 times the size of St. Columbus membership. It's not bad, is it? It's a decent army. Can you imagine he's feeling pretty confident in what lay ahead? But let's just, I just want to pause and put ourselves in Gideon's shoes with what comes next. The army is whittled down by the Lord's instruction. Verse two, just look with me. The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand lest Israel boast over me, saying, my own hand has saved me. We get a military call.

Verse three, 22,000 people basically give them the chance to a runner. They're not, they're not, they're not up for it. They heard the call, they were full of enthusiasm, but given the chance they do a runner. 32,000 men down to 10,000 loses two thirds in one go. And the reason of the call, I take it to me, I take it to me that the reason of the call is because they actually would win the battle with that many. I take it to me that because that's what the Lord says. He says that so that they can't boast, which means that it's likely that with 32,000 men they would actually win and boast in themselves. And if they did, they would not be boasting God's provision but themselves and their ability and strength God strips them down so that they can't win by their own strength because if they did, they would boast. Now we'd be tempted to think, okay, okay, you've lost two thirds. That's a lot, a lot in one go, but he's still got 10,000. I mean, that's, that's still a decent number, right? But stage two of the military call, it's on a whole different level. We get this quite bizarre selection process with how the men drink water, whether they drink it from their hand, whether they lap it, whether they kneel. And we get 9,700 a cold, leaving just 300. And we know about the Midianite army too, we read that it is not small. What do we read?

Is it, I think it's verse, is it verse 21? That we read it that it's like locusts in abundance, camels without number, as the sand on the seashore. The army has gone from 32,000 men to 300, Gideon's army is less than 1% of what he started with. We look at their situation.

They are dead men. They're dead men. They would have thought exactly the same, they're as good as dead. You can picture the despondent faces of those 300 men and of Gideon, because they know that when they meet the Midianites on the battlefield, that they're as good as dead. I don't know if you've heard of the Atacama Desert in Chile. They say it's the driest place on earth. There's very little life and nothing grows. The land is dead. Every five to seven years, the rain does come.

[13 : 29] Nobody knows when it's going to arrive. It could be five, seven, perhaps sometimes longer. But deep in the Atacama Desert, deep underground, there's seas that it doesn't matter how long they stay there. Once the rain hits the deep underground, when that rain comes, they germinate. And the dead, dry wasteland becomes a sea of purples and green oranges and red, blooming flowers full of life from a dead, dry wasteland comes life. On the day of Jesus' crucifixion, Jesus' friends, the woman crying at the cross, they felt just like Gideon and his army of 300, because a dead man is put in a tomb. It looks like the end. It looks like a dry, dead wasteland.

But the rain comes. The rain does come. The Atacama Desert needs God to bring the rain so that life can bloom. The desert doesn't water itself. New life comes. Jesus is raised. Victory for Gideon and his army is impossible, but it is given to him. They are as good as dead the next day, if they go in without God. But rain comes. He gives victory into his hands. And we get this, there is this small detail, this amazing picture, foretaste perhaps of Gideon, how he points forward to Jesus. You look at me, what happens? Gideon is led by the Lord. He is fearing of what is going to happen. The Lord tells him that he is going to win, but he still is not quite sure. And Gideon leads him with his servant. The Lord leads Gideon with his servant, Purat, to overhear this dream of one of the enemy soldiers retelling it to one another. And the dream reveals that despite how things look, despite the fact that they are as good as dead, that victory is at hand. And we see this, which I think is the high point of Gideon's life, is verse 15. As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped. In the biggest trial Gideon faces, the biggest test he had, he trust God's plan and worships the God who gives victory. It gives us a foretaste, points us to the character of Jesus Christ, because the night before Jesus faces his biggest trial, the long road to Calvary, he would worship. Firstly with his friends, then alone as he prayed, also knowing the plan for the following day, knowing the plan that he made with his father before the creation of the world, to die the death

of a slave, take on the sins of the world and be separated from his father. Jesus trusts the plan, he goes ahead and because of the God who gives victory in what looks like a dry desert wasteland. Victory looks impossible for Gideon.

300 men is weak. A dead man on a cross is weak. Who would have thought that night, out of those 300, when they saw one another, that they would in fact triumph? And who would have thought on that crucifixion Friday that a dead man and a small number of grieving would become the church that it is today? It looked like a dry, dead desert. The biggest victory God ever achieved was when the church looked its weakest and most pathetic, the death of his own son. The pattern, what we see here, what we really see here is the pattern of Jesus dying and rising. What we see in Gideon is the cruciform life, the crucifixion, that it's the form of the crucifixion, which is the pattern of life for all believers, that God works through weakness. And when we look our weakest, we're actually strong because we depend on our Father. Gideon, the 300, because without any doubt this is victory comes at the hand of God because they depend on him in that moment. They trust the plan.

And so that question that I started out with, you do wonder, is this a trial? Or is it in fact a blessing? Yes, it's hard, but Gideon's character, his faith, it's the high point of his life in the middle of the trial he worships. Gideon is blessed, not despite the trial but because of it. And so you do question, is this trial or blessing? The Lord's victory in your life and mine and in the wider life of the church happens not in spite of weakness, but because of it.

Because of difficulty, because of suffering, because of situations when it looks like things couldn't get any worse because we turn to him and cling to him in desperation and we're near to him like at no other time in our lives and that's when victory happens.

[18:56] If you're experiencing hardships and difficulty today, what I'm saying could be hard to hear. And it doesn't negate that what you're going through isn't real and isn't tough. And it doesn't mean in any way that we should pray, that we shouldn't pray for hardship to end. Of course we should, but can I assure you, can I assure you if this is you today, if this is you tonight, that as you cling to God, victory over darkness will come. I don't know when, but it will.

It will come. That God will use it, not despite the fact that it's happening, but because it is happening. With every fiber of my being, I want you to believe that. I want you to hold on to it because that is what faith is. That is what faith is. It's holding on to Jesus when the situation looks like it can't get any worse. So that's Gideon before the victory. What about Gideon after the victory? Well, Gideon, Gideon, Gideon. I mean, where do you start with this guy?

This is from the highs of the major highlight of his life, verse 15, he's down on his knees, he's worshipping when things can't get any worse. This is his big downfall. His life is basically like the story of the judges from a height to a low. It would be great if you were reading this, if you're reading the story of Gideon, you kind of get to the end of 22 or 23 of chapter 70, because we just ended there. It'd be brilliant, wouldn't it? Well, great story, everything's going well, but the human heart is deceitful. And from here on in, it all goes pear-shaped.

The victory goes to Gideon's head. He goes from being a nobody who depended on God to thinking he's a somebody who doesn't need him anymore. Now, we don't have time to look at everything that Gideon gets wrong in great detail. There's just too many things that he does, one after the other. But I do think just to get a picture of how this descent, how he goes from such a place of a great height or a great low, I think it's worth just running through of where that goes. We read the very end of Gideon's descent, how it goes from bad to worse. The first thing you notice, and stick with me in chapter seven, he's not even finished the battle. He's not even finished the battle and he goes against God's plan. Straight away, he goes against God's plan. Remember what God's plan was to use 300 men? Gideon goes with the plan initially, but just towards the end of the battle, he thinks that he needs more. So 300 men's not enough anymore. Verse 24, look with me chapter seven, he calls for men, he calls for other men to join him, going against God's plan of view of just using 300 men. It's not going to go, well, is it going against God's plan, the first incident of disobedience? Because this first act of disobedience using more than 300, it leads to the second mistake. Because when he asks for more men, he doesn't ask everyone. He doesn't ask the Ephraimites, they feel slighted that he didn't ask them. What is this that you've done to us, not to cause when you went to fight against Midian? And so because of fear, he tries to flatter them to keep them on the side because he fears them. Now, that might sound bad, but it just gets progressively worse. It does get, it gets, it gets progressively worse. And because what comes next? His torture. And then finally, just before he makes himself an idol, comes execution. Gideon

very quickly has forgotten that victory came from the Lord.

[23 : 02] He expects admiration for his achievements, that he's special and his men are special, and that they should be treated as the victorious, conquering heroes. He was a nobody. Now he really believes he's a somebody. We read in chapter 8, the men of Sukkoth and Penuel, Israelites won't, these Israelites won't feed his men. Gideon acts like a celebrity using his fame and notoriety to gain privilege. You know that classic line, the celebrities trying to get into somewhere, trying to get into somewhere, and some, the bouncer doesn't know who he is, and he says, don't you know I am? And expects to be treated well because of their stardom.

The men of Sukkoth and Penuel, they stand up to him, and so when the opportunity arises, he tortures them and kills them. He flails their flesh with thorns and breaks the tower, the tower that kills. It's worth just pausing here as we think about that. This is God's man.

God's judge, treating God's own people as a commodity to be tossed aside when they get in his way. It's the first time since Israel's coordination that we get Israelite upon Israelite violence, and it's brought about by the one who's called to lead them. It's not the way of the shepherd.

It's not the Lord's way. There's no happily ever after here. After that, we get a cold-blooded execution. He's chasing the kings from the Midianites, Zebra and Zalmona, and he catches up to them.

He orders his servant to kill them, to execute them. The servant won't do it, and so he does it himself and then steals their gold. Success goes to his head. Success goes to his head, and the people of Israel love him for it. They love him for it. It's not because they couldn't get any worse. Maybe we think, could it get any worse? Torture execution? Well, it does because Gideon wants to be their king. He says he doesn't, but his actions betray him. He collects a treasure chest from the spoil of the battle, a treasure chest fit for a king. Here's the one that really takes the biscuit. This is amazing. He calls his son a bimaalek. You know what bimaalek means? It means the meaning of his son's name is my father is king. That's the name of his son, my father's king. So he acts like a king. He wants to be king instead of God. And we finish there. We're not finished there.

[25 : 30] We take it the final step. He takes the treasure chest. He makes a gold idol and he fought an Israel whore after it. Verse 27, it becomes a snare to Gideon and his family. The very thing that Gideon destroyed in chapter six that you heard from Corey last week, Baal worship, worship of false good, he reconstructs. Just listen, just do a summary. He thinks so, so he thinks he's a somebody instead of a nobody. That's where it starts. He changes God's plan. He flatters those he fears.

He tortures those he looks down on. He executes with a revenge. He desires to be king instead of God in the institutes pagan worship. It's catastrophic. It is car crash leadership.

And you think, hang on a minute, am I, you listen, I can, I'm reading, I'm doing this, like preaching this to you. And I'm thinking, is this the same sermon as the first half?

You remember Gideon from verse 15, he's worshipping. And now we've got Gideon who's instituting pagan worship. Is this the same guy? The victory that God gives Gideon and Israel is supposed to bless them and him. But the blessing ends up being Gideon's greatest trial.

What will Gideon do with the victory, with the blessing? Will he continue with obedience to God? He takes the glory for himself and Israel is in a worse state than before he came. He goes from being a nobody to thinking he's a somebody and success goes to his head. The real danger is not in the battle. It's what Gideon does afterwards. When the victory, the blessing has been secured.

[27 : 24] Seeing Gideon's heart, the admiration of the world and the devil's whispers, the biggest trial when you least expect it, it's an ambush. Plays right into the enemy's hands, you take your eye off the ball and you're a sitting dog ready to be taken out. That's what happens to Gideon.

Can I give you a warning? I want to give you a warning that if things are all good in your life, if you're feeling on top of the world, it can happen in lots of ways. And we praise God for when God gives us blessings. If you've got a job promotion, you've just got married or finished your degree, you've received blessings from the living God. The great things we thank God for them, we praise God for when God gives us blessings. Spiritually, maybe you're just every morning having great times of prayer. You're on a hot streak of spending time with the Lord in your Bible.

And you seem to have the energy and time to bless others in a church led ministry. Or even you've just managed to, a victory by putting a persistent sinful character trait to death.

Praise the Lord for those blessings in our lives. And hear me rightly, hear me rightly. Of course we want to know God's blessings. We pray that we would experience those blessings in our lives in the

absolute fullness of His goodness, of course we do. But remain alert. At those times is where we're most vulnerable to listen to the lies of our deceitful hearts, the evil one and what the world has to offer. And if we're not alert in those moments, we'll be like a sitting duck.

That's what Gideon did. And it can be funny, Kai, you read it, you hear Gideon here, you think about what Gideon does. And the temptation is when I'm reading, I can be tempted to think, oh Gideon, he's such an idiot, isn't he? He's just, what a waste, he's such an idiot.

[29 : 33] But if that's your response, if you hear, if you read this story and you're thinking, Gideon, what an idiot? We've kind of missed the point. Because the truth, the right response is, if it can happen to Gideon, it can happen to me. Gideon is God's man. He's the chosen judge.

He's called to deliver Israel. If it can happen to Gideon, it can happen to you and me. So stay alert in the blessing. Don't let it go to your head. Be full of gratitude and praise and thanks. Jesus is the one in control. He's the king, not you or me. And everything you have is a gracious gift. You haven't earned it. It's a gift. Remember that you, even you being a follower of Jesus falls into that category, you didn't earn it. It wasn't given to you. Don't think for a minute that you earned this. Don't let it go to your head. Two very different sides of this man.

What are we supposed to think of him? What are we supposed to make of Gideon's rise and his fall? Do we just throw him out and say, forget Gideon? Well, no, he don't because of the book of Hebrews.

The book of Hebrews is a famous chapter, a big long chapter of all the heroes of the Old Testament and Gideon is listed there as a hero of the faith. Gideon is an example to the New Testament believers of a hallmark of faith, which means that everything Gideon did when we saw his downfall, Jesus atoned for. Isn't that incredible? Isn't that amazing that when Gideon decided to go his own way and be disobedient to God's plan, Jesus atoned for his sin. He took on the punishment for Gideon's being disobedient. When Gideon tortured his own men, his own people, it was Jesus who was punished for Gideon torturing those men. When Gideon executed people, Jesus atoned for Gideon's sin. When Gideon wanted to be king instead of God, Jesus atoned for Gideon's sin. And even when Gideon instituted worship of a false God, Jesus atoned for Gideon's sin. Which means that no matter what we've done in our lives, no matter how there is no person who is too far gone that can't be rescued by Jesus Christ, there is no one. Because look at Gideon here, you think at the end of chapter eight, you think, man, this guy, what's happened to him?

[32 : 44] But Jesus rescued him. He saved. I started with that thought. Mother Teresa, at the end of her life, she said that she struggled to see the difference between a trial and a blessing. God turns trials to blesses. And when we receive blessing, be alert, cling to Jesus, still cling to Jesus when things are rosy and sweet. It is Jesus who went through the biggest trial, death and a cross, so that in your trial, you wouldn't face it alone. But you face it in relationship with it.

Let me pray. Almighty God, we thank you for your word to us. And we thank you that you don't hold back about the real things of life that people go through. We thank you for this example that we see. And it's amazing how you've worked through the church, Lord, that you work through weakness and through examples that would look like desert barren wastelands. And I pray that you would use us in our weakness, that your grace is sufficient for us, and so that the power of Christ rests upon us in our weakness, that we would be strong in you. And that in our weakness, we would cling to you, and that we would know your goodness and mercy and grace to us. But Lord, I do ask also that when my blessed that you would give us the heart of gratitude, that we would never go from being a nobody to thinking that we're somebody. But we would know that everything is of grace.

And so bless us and help us to stay alert. I thank you for the church community that we have, that we live in relationship with you and with one another, and help us also to be alert, to strengthen one another when we're going through trials, and when we're experiencing blessings, to always be pointing one another back to you. So we commit ourselves and we commit one another into your hands and pray for your blessing upon each one of us, we ask in the name of Christ, Amen.