



SESSION OBJECTIVE: JUDGES 6:1-40

To learn about Gideon, and the reality that skepticism doesn't disqualify you from being used by God.

Names Mean Something

One of the difficulties of engaging with Scripture is that we are approaching an ancient, foreign culture from a modern, western perspective. There are so many differences that seem strange to us, but were totally normal to the people in the Bible stories we read and study. One common and yet very important difference is the significance of names. In our culture, names don't hold a lot of deep meaning. We choose names that we like based on how they sound and who they are associated with. In the biblical world, however, names translate to mean something of value. For example, Adam's name in Hebrews (אָדָם) means, "ground," which is significant because Adam is made from the ground (Gen. 2:7). Jacob's name in Hebrew (יַעֲקֹב) means, "one who follows at the heel," which is significant because Jacob was born second, holding on to the heels of his firstborn brother Esau (Gen. 25:26). Jacob's secondary position plays a prominent role in the way Jacob's narrative develops as the heir of Isaac's blessing.

In Judges 6, we have another example of a name that is significant to the story. Gideon in Hebrew (גִּדְעוֹן) means, "one who cuts or hacks." God refers to Gideon as, "O mighty man of valor" (Jdg. 6:12). One might think that Gideon is someone skilled with a blade, brave, and ready for war, and yet what we find in Gideon is someone who is unsure, in need of multiple confirmations, and timid. Gideon is also interchangeably referred to in the book of Judges as Jerubbaal which means, "Baal contends," after he tears down the altars of Baal and the Asherah (Jdg. 6:32). When you read Gideon's story, it's important to remember that he might be

referred to as either name, and that both names are significant to who he is and what he has done.

The Context

Gideon's rise as a judge is almost no different than any of the other judges we have examined thus far. Israel, yet again, falls into sin and idolatry: "The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (Jdg. 6:1). This is a repeating pattern throughout the entirety of Judges. The only difference in this instance is who God is allowing to come and oppress Israel. In the previous story, it was the Canaanites that antagonized the people of God, and prior to that we saw Eglon, the Moabite king. Shamgar faced the Philistines. This time, it is the Midianites that fill the role of the enemy of God's people. They, "made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds," (Jdg. 6:2), and would come out of them and destroy the crops and livestock of the Israelites. The bondage under the Midianites lasted seven years, which is not as long as the Canaanite occupation (Jdg. 6:1). The oppression was enough, as it usually was, to bring Israel to a point of crisis: "Israel cried out to the LORD on account of the Midianites" (Jdg. 6:7). While the pattern thus far of sin, judgement, and repentance are identical to the previous accounts of judges, the response of God is different this time. Upon crying out to God, God sent a prophet to declare to them the works of God from Egypt up until the present age, and that in spite of all of that, the people had been disobedient" (Jdg. 6:8-10). This shows that God is growing more and more impatient with the repeated propensity towards idolatry.

Gideon Introduced

It is in the context of the Midianite occupation that Gideon is called as a judge. God comes to him while he is beating out wheat in the winepress, which is a strange place to perform such a duty until you realize that he was having to keep it hidden lest the Midianites come and destroy it (Jdg. 6:11). God calls Gideon through the angel of the LORD, and it is in this moment that we learn some key things about Gideon, namely that he is highly skeptical of the work of God.

THE REASON FOR HIS SKEPTICISM

Gideon is not ready to trust God right off the bat, and the reasoning for his skeptical nature is outlined in verse 13: "Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian." Gideon has lived a life that, thus far, has not reflected the rich blessing that history says the Israelites should be experiencing. The stories of Moses and Joshua are stories of blessing and conquest, and yet Gideon is situated in a time of rebellion and discipline. It's easy to give Gideon a hard time for his insistence that the LORD essentially prove that He is who He says He is, but this is not a time in Israel's history that would cultivate deep and abiding faith.

THE REQUIREMENTS OF HIS SKEPTICISM

As a result of his skepticism, he is reluctant to do what God calls him to do immediately, but asks for a sign (Jdg. 6:17). The sign is strange but effective. Gideon prepares a variety of different foods and a broth, and God instructs him to place the food before the LORD, and pour the broth over it, and when he does the food is consumed by fire (Jdg. 6:19-21). This is a satisfactory sign resulting in Gideon's willingness to do what God asks of him. God asks him to go and destroy the town altars of Baal and Asherah, and Gideon obeys, although he does it by night so as to not be noticed by the people in his town (Jdg. 6:25-27).

Jerubbaal

After the people of the town discover that Gideon was responsible for the destruction of the idol altars, the people call for his life. However, his father Joash responds to them, “Will you contend for Baal? Or will you save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down” (Jdg. 6:31). His response reveals a lot about his character. Joash has lost a bull in the sacrifice to the LORD (Jdg. 6:25), and he now stands to be condemned for his son’s actions unless he agrees to their wishes, but instead he vies for the life of his son regardless of the potential cost. It seems like he is a good father. His appeal also shows a strong commitment to theological reasoning. If Baal is truly a god, surely he can defend himself and bring recompense against Gideon for destroying his altar? His message forces the people to either act rashly in defense of Baal, which reveals they don’t actually think Baal is capable of contending for himself, or to allow Gideon to live and know that nothing will be done about the smashed altars. It’s a good show of wisdom for Joash.

The chapter closes with the Midianites and the Amalekites coming together to prepare for war, and Gideon calling the Abiezrites as well as the men of Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali to come meet and prepare to fight. However, again Gideon’s skepticism shows itself and he again asks for God to demonstrate to him that He is with him and will fight on his behalf. The first night, he asks God for the fleece of wool that he puts down to be wet from dew in the morning, with the surrounding ground dry. After that happens, he asks again for the next night to produce the opposite; dry fleece and wet ground. Both happen exactly as he asks, proving that God is with him (Jdg. 6:36-39). This sets up the reader for the events that will begin in chapter 7.

What About Now?

Gideon’s story is particularly helpful for people who struggle with skepticism that is born out of difficult or even seemingly unfair life circumstances. Society almost expects people who have experienced higher than normal levels of trauma to be more reserved, drawn inward, and untrusting, and yet, the church views any form of skepticism as an almost cardinal sin. Gideon’s narrative provides a space for Christians to consider that harmful events that have led to skepticism don’t disqualify them from being used by God while coming to terms with the fact that skepticism isn’t in and of itself, good. Faith, or taking God at His Word, is difficult when you’ve been burned by that level of trust in other people, and yet faith is the only means by which we are not only saved, but sanctified. Gideon’s story brings comfort to us that skepticism isn’t a deal killer for God and at the same time challenges us to be more willing to trust God in the future.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Judges 6:1-6. What did the Israelites do, and what was God's response to this? How did the Midianites attack the Israelites? What methods did they use? How did the Israelites respond?

2. Read Judges 6:7-10. What did the LORD do in response to them crying out? What did He say to them through the prophet?

Day Two

1. Read Judges 6:11-18. How did the LORD come to Gideon? Where was Gideon, what was he doing, and why was he doing it there? How does God refer to Gideon? What does God ask Gideon to do? What does Gideon ask of God before he will act?
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2. Read Judges 6:19-24. In your own words, describe the process that Gideon goes through in order for God to prove He is really with Gideon. What did Gideon do in verse 24, and why?
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Day Three

1. Read Judges 6:25-27. What did the LORD command Gideon to do? Did Gideon obey? What time of the day did Gideon do what God asked him to do, and why?
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2. Read Judges 6:28-32. What was the response of the men in the town? What did they propose regarding Gideon? How did Joash, Gideon's father, respond to the men of the town? Why is Gideon sometimes called Jerubbaal?
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Day Four

1. Read Judges 6:33-35. Who began to camp out in the Valley of Jezreel? Who did the Spirit of the LORD clothe? What did Gideon do? Who did he call to action?
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2. Read Judges 6:36-40. What sign did Gideon ask of God? Describe it in your own words.
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Week 5 Discussion: Dealing with Doubt

One of the things that Gideon demonstrates to us is that skepticism and doubt are sometimes found in even the most prominent people that God uses to accomplish His purposes. This might come as a shock given the taboo nature of doubt in the modern church. Talk as a group about doubt, how you may or may not struggle with it, and why the story of Gideon brings a little bit of comfort to you given his own struggle with it, and how we as a body can better address it.

1. Icebreaker: Do you ever struggle with doubt?
2. Is there any trauma in your life that makes it more difficult for you to trust God? Have you worked through that trauma in a formal setting (e.g. Freedom Group, counseling, etc.)
3. Why do you think doubt is frowned upon in the church today?

4. How can doubt actually strengthen your faith? Can it?
5. Do you believe that God can handle your doubt?
6. How can the church do a better job of providing a space to express doubt without condemnation?

Takeaways:

1. Gideon is called by God to judge Israel and redeem them from the Midianites.
2. Gideon struggles with doubt, requiring God to do multiple things before he will fully trust Him.
3. Gideon is sometimes referred to as Jerubbaal because he tore down the altar of Baal and the Asherah.

PRAYER REQUESTS: