

# Trouble with Idols

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Date: 08 September 2002

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 8th of September 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Trouble with Idols and is based on Judges chapters 6 to 8.

And you may like to have open from the Bibles on page 194 from the book of Judges chapter 6.

And this is continuing our sermon series from this book of the Old Testament, the third week out of verse 7. And let's pray. O God, our Father, we thank you that you reveal yourself to us in various ways through the Scriptures.

And we pray that you'll reveal yourself now to us, that we may know you better and serve you better for your glory and credit's sake. Amen. The story of Gideon is one of the most popular not only in the Old Testament but in the whole of the Bible.

[ 1 : 0 9 ] A young man, weak and fearful, who becomes the mighty hero of the nation. First glance it looks a little bit like those nice feel-good films and stories.

Oliver Twist or Billy Elliot or Shine or something like that. But the trouble is it's not quite so simple and it's not quite such a feel-good story. For in the end, in fact from beginning to end, Gideon is a hugely compromised hero.

His story really begins at the beginning of chapter 6. The downward spiral and recurrence of events starts a new phase, a new cycle at the beginning of chapter 6.

We've already seen the last two weeks how Israel would give up on God. They would end up in oppression to an enemy. They'd cry out to God. He would rescue them with a deliverer or a judge as they're called in this book.

That would bring them victory and rest for a while and then when the judge died, the cycle would continue again, but each time getting worse than before. And that cycle begins again at the beginning of chapter 6.

[ 2 : 1 4 ] The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. So now the enemy are the Midianites, who later on we're told are joined by the Amalekites and other peoples from the east of the land.

The description that follows in the next few verses shows a very severe oppression indeed, probably worse than what has already been the case earlier in this book.

So we're told in verse 3 onwards, whenever the Israelites put in seed, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the east would come up against them, that encamp against them, destroy the produce of the land as far as the neighbourhood of Gaza, and that's way to the west of the country, so it's as though they've come in from the east and crossed the whole of the country in this little invasion and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey.

So it seems that every year at harvest time or even two or three times during the year at the different harvests, inward come the Midianites and Amalekites from the east, go through the country, taking off all the seed and the animals, leaving no sustenance in the land of Israel and then they'd go back to their own land again and then they'd come in at the next harvest time and off they would go again.

This is oppression that is leaving Israel impoverished and probably undernourished and yet it still takes them seven years to cry out for help. That's the bad state that Israel's got themselves into.

[ 3 : 45 ] When things go bad, they don't suddenly read the signs and recognise their own evil in the eyes of the Lord but they continue on in their evil time and time again until finally, at last, they cry out to the Lord and they cry out to Him for rescue.

In verse 6, the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help. But unlike what has already happened in this book, when the Israelites cry out for help, God raises up a rescuer for them, that's not what immediately happens here because the response initially by God to their cry for help is the bringing forth of a prophet and the prophet's words are not especially encouraging.

Verse 7 or verse 8 onwards of chapter 6, the Lord sent a prophet and the prophet says to the people, thus says the Lord God, the Lord, the God of Israel, I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery and I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you and drove them out before you and gave you their land and I said to you, I am the Lord your God.

You shall not pay reverence to the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live but you have not given heed to my voice. Well, there's the hub of the problem for Israel.

Well, they've been rescued by God from Egypt. They've been brought to the promised land. God's done everything they need for them but they have not heeded the voice of God and in particular that means here they've gone after other gods and worshipped other gods.

[ 5 : 28 ] So the prophet's words are a fairly condemning indictment on the sins of idolatry of the people of God, ancient Israel. That's the answer to their cry for help at least initially.

It doesn't look as though God has got much patience left. It's part of the downward steps in this book as God is getting in a sense more and more fed up with the idolatry of his people.

But God hasn't done with his people yet and now comes the raising up of the rescuer, Gideon and that comes in verse 11 onwards as we heard in the first reading.

Now Gideon is a very unlikely hero. He is particularly fearful and weak and we see that time and again through his story.

So he starts, we're introduced to him when he's beating out wheat in the wine press. Now you make wine in a wine press, you don't beat wheat in a wine press.

[ 6 : 36 ] You beat wheat outside on a threshing floor where the wind will be able to blow the chaff away. But out of fear for the enemy, Gideon, maybe like most of the Israelites, is hiding away with his wine press trying to beat out wheat.

So the first picture we get of him is somebody who is afraid of the enemy and it continues through this paragraph. The angel of the Lord addresses him in verse 12, the Lord is with you, mighty warrior.

Now it's hard exactly to know how we should read that address, mighty warrior. But given the character of Gideon that we see described here, it's very easy to see that there is a sense of mocking tone.

How a mighty warrior. You, the weakling, the one who's fearful. And then that fear of Gideon is brought out in the verses that follow again.

Gideon's response is, well if the Lord's with us, why has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us? Saying, did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?

[ 7 : 45 ] But now the Lord has cast us off and given us into the hand of Midian. You see, God's raising up a deliverer here who doesn't actually trust God. A deliverer who thinks that God has abandoned his people or that God is just the stuff of ancient legend like so many people in our own society.

That really the God of the Bible, the God of Israel, is a God who acted a few hundred years in the past, but he's gone, he's off the scene. He's abandoned his people.

So this is the sort of person that Gideon is, fearful and not believing or trusting in God. One who thinks that God has just abandoned the people. And then after the angel says, go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian in verse 14, Gideon's response is, well how can I deliver Israel?

My clan's the weakest in Manasseh and I'm the least in my family. In effect he's saying, I'm nothing, I'm pathetic, I'm just a weakling and a fearful one at that. How on earth are you calling me to deliver Israel?

And then the angel responds saying that God will be with you and then Gideon's response to that is not to trust that word but to say, well if now I found favour with you then show me a sign.

[ 9 : 04 ] Here is a fearful man wanting every little ounce of reassurance that something is actually happening here from God. And the sign is, just dropped my water, the sign is performed, the animal is burnt up by God, Gideon recognises that that is the case and that God is behind the sign but still he's afraid.

He says in verse 22, So help me Lord God for I've seen the angel of the Lord face to face. So here is a man who is like Moses before him timid and fearful, not trusting in God, doubting that God's even there in the first place and this is the man that God is raising up.

The first task that is given by God is not to in fact fight the enemy but rather to start in his own household to tear down the idols of his father in his father's household.

And again, the fear of Gideon is portrayed here. He decides out of fear he's going to do it at night when it might be a bit safer and moreover he gets ten people to help him because he's afraid of doing it by himself.

But nonetheless, he destroys his father's altar, the altar of Baal verse 25 says, that is, Baal is the name of the gods of Canaan around about and he also cut down the sacred pole that's beside it like a totem pole that has probably some pictures of the gods or the female gods on it as objects of worship.

[ 10 : 42 ] So here is a man chosen by God who is afraid, who is weak, who doesn't trust God, who comes from a family that has idols of other gods and he thinks that God is, the real God has abandoned his people and this is the person that God is raising up.

Now this first task of Gideon here is important to grasp because it is getting to the heart of the problem. The problem you see is not the Midianites, that's what Gideon thinks is the problem, that's what the Israelites think is the problem.

The heart of the problem is the idolatry of God's people. They have abandoned God despite all the things that he's done for them in the past and they're now going after other gods and the spiral is going down and down throughout this book as Israel becomes more and more idolatrous as the book continues.

Israel ought to have known the reason behind the Midianites oppressing them. It's there in the early bits of the scriptures in the end of Deuteronomy for example that if they turn away from God and worship other gods and they commit evil in the eyes of the Lord then God will hand them over to their enemies.

It's very clear earlier on but you see these are people who have not heeded the voice of the Lord. They've not listened to his word written down for them from the early books of the Bible and they've not listened to the voice of the Lord as it's been spoken to them through prophets and through judges in their more recent history and we may well think how can God deal with this people that are so bad and so idolatrous and yet there is warning here for us too that it is all too easy to turn away from the living God and worship gods that are made up in our own imagination.

[ 12 : 31 ] Time and again Christians do that. The gods of our society maybe not with totem poles the idolatry of wealth and pleasure and so on consumes us and draws us away from the living God.

How can that be when this God is the real God and his has done such great things and even more for us in Christ? But of course people are always wanting gods that make them comfortable make them enjoy things perhaps a bit more than they ought wanting a God who is less demanding because not only is the living God a God who has done extraordinary things for his people but he's a holy God who demands absolute allegiance and all too often our itching ears are looking for other idols that we can go after as well.

Well having destroyed the altar and the the pole the wooden pillar or pole for the bals now comes the main task Gideon is to go and confront the Midianites the enemy who keeps sweeping into the land and near the end of chapter 6 in verse 34 we're told that the spirit of the Lord took possession of Gideon and he sounded the trumpet and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him and others as well in the next verse and all of a sudden it looks as though this fearful weakling has become indeed a mighty warrior blowing the trumpet rallying the troops getting set to go off in leading the people to battle it looks like he's a changed person and the reason for the apparent change at first is that the spirit of the Lord has taken possession of Gideon now God's spirit has a couple of functions here that are consistent with how God's spirit acts for Christians today firstly

God's spirit empowers those whom God calls for a particular task so if God calls Gideon to lead the people into battle against the Midianites then God's spirit will give him power to do that in the New Testament we see time and again the spirit of God is a spirit of power giving power to God's people to preach the gospel to be witnesses for Jesus Christ and so on in this world he's a spirit of power but secondly and related to that God's spirit strengthens God's people to resist the enemy so for Gideon the spirit of the Lord coming upon him gives him power to resist the enemy and so too in the New Testament do we find that the spirit of the Lord strengthening even Jesus and the apostles strengthening them to resist the enemies of God strengthening us to do the same as we read for example at the end of Ephesians so weak and fearful Gideon is an encouragement to us because basically in our human nature there are elements of weakness and fearfulness in us as well when God calls us to tasks but the story of Gideon is not of an example to follow but an encouragement that God could even take a weak and fearful person like him to use him for mighty tasks transformed by God's powerful spirit so if God calls us to something we ought to be encouraged by this story that God will empower us as he did Gideon for that task and yet when God's spirit takes possession of God's people it doesn't mean an obliteration of our personality it doesn't mean we become robotic clones of God in some way we're still us with all our personality and so Gideon though possessed by the Lord still it seems is fearful and afraid at times because having rallied the troops to get ready for battle we might expect verse 36 to say they went into battle and had a great victory but at the last minute

Gideon shies away from battle again and this is the famous story of his fleece his security blanket if you like Gideon wants more reassurance before he goes into battle and so he bargains in effect with God in verses 37 onwards or verse 36 onwards in order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand as you said I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing floor if there's dew on the fleece alone and it's dry on all the ground then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand as you have said and it was so when he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water then Gideon said to God do not let your anger burn against me let me speak one more time let me please make trial with the fleece just once more let it be dry only on the fleece and on all the ground let there be dew and God did so that night it was dry on the fleece only and on all the ground there was dew now ironically this story of Gideon's fleece has often led

[ 17 : 40 ] Christians astray on the issues of guidance that is we can easily interpret this fleece of Gideon as a means of detecting God's guidance I said last night to a couple of people that I wasn't sure that I wanted to preach today so I thought I'd put a fleece outside and if the fleece was wet and the ground dry or vice versa then I didn't think I'd preach today as though that'll be God's test to guide me into what I should do and often Christians do that sort of thing oh if it's fine tomorrow then I think it's God telling me that I should do such and such rather than this or if it's wet tomorrow if somebody rings me then this is God's guidance for A or B now sometimes those sorts of things do happen and God can somehow lead us through circumstance but the fleece of Gideon is not actually about guidance Gideon knew what he had to do he even admits that twice in these verses verse 36 at the end in order to see whether you'll deliver Israel by my hand as you have said the end of verse 37 the same

I'll know that you'll deliver Israel by my hand as you have said Gideon's not putting out a fleece for guidance he knows what God is guiding him to do that is to fight the Midianites and lead the Israelites in battle Gideon's issue is reassurance Gideon needs some sort of sign in fact double sign to be reassured that God is calling him to this battle against the Midianites now God here is extremely patient with fairly faint hearted Gideon and Gideon himself knows he's overstepping the mark because after the first sign of the fleece being wet comes true then he says in verse 38 don't let your anger burn against me he knows he's almost treading on dangerous ground with God he knows that he should be reassured but he's not he says let me speak one more time let me please make trial with the fleece just once more he knows that he ought to be reassured by this point but he's not and God is extremely patient with him but this is not

I think a model for how we ought to be when God calls us to something it's actually a warning not to be like this I think if God calls us to a task he will empower us and Gideon is not a model to follow at this point what God wants from us is obedience and not a fleece we might well ask them well why doesn't God choose somebody a bit better than Gideon after all in all of Israel surely there was somebody who was actually strong somebody who really was a mighty warrior somebody who could command a presence and lead Israel into battle with some charisma and skill why does God pick such a weak and cowardly fearful person like Gideon when I interview people who are applying for ordination in my role as an examining chaplain in the diocese I would probably say no to somebody who comes across like Gideon somebody who's cowardly and fearful somebody who's looking for lots of signs to see whether

God is actually reassuring them along this path it's tempting to look for people who've got a lot of natural ability and skill now it wasn't that God slipped up with Gideon it wasn't that somehow he got the wrong name out of the hat you see Gideon is actually part of a pattern of the sort of people that God chooses to do his business in this world he picked Moses who was ineloquent he picked Jonah who was timid he picked Gideon who is fearful he picked a saviour who died weak on a cross you see God consistently chooses those who are weak often despised in our world why?

to show his own strength and glory more evidently that was Paul's argument at the beginning of 1 Corinthians it's the same you see today God chooses even you and me to be his light and salt in this world and he chose a person like Gideon so that God's own glory would be seen more evidently we see that explicitly early in chapter 7 verse 2 the Lord said to Gideon the troops with you are too many for me to give you the Midianites into the hand too many he's got 32,000 but there's 150,000 against him he's outnumbered four to one how can it be too many but God says it's too many because then Israel would only take the credit away from me saying my own hand has delivered me and those words of God to Gideon here are words that in the end Gideon fails to heed the issue in the battle that follows is not victory over the enemy so much as whose credit is it for the victory that follows

[ 22 : 52 ] God decides to prune the army not because of a defence spending cut but rather because the army's too big and it would take pride in itself so the too many being 32,000 he says anyone who's afraid go home and over two thirds of them went home 10,000 are left then what happens still too many for God so he says we'll go and drink from the spring of Harod where they are nice picnic spot today with beautiful water flowing out of the spring still today so they go and drink 9,700 of them kneel down scoop up water in their hands and bring up the water to their mouth 300 lap the water like a dog with their tongue God says I'll choose them the 300 send the other 9,700 off I don't think it's because they lapped water in the right way or the wrong way it's just because God was finding an arbitrary test to prune the numbers and now we're down to 300 less than 1% of what

Gideon started with so now they're outnumbered something like 400 to 1 in battle the idea being that when the victory comes it will be apparent to everybody that God is the victor now the lesson here is an important one and it's one that we fail to learn in our lives too often we rely on our own human ability and experience our own strength our own skills and aptitude and God wants us to rely on him and often in our life when we might say things go wrong what God is doing is testing us or training us to rely on him and not those other resources that somehow have just disappeared from our lives whether it's financial or personal resources or whatever too often we claim credit for our inverted commas successes because our pride is so pervasive in our life

God wants the credit to belong to him still Gideon is fearful we can understand it I suppose when he's down to 300 men he's probably wondering what trick God's got next to leave him with just a couple of people but God graciously reassures him yet again this time the initiative it seems comes from God not from Gideon so God says to Gideon if you're still afraid if you're still afraid go over tonight and spy on the enemy camp listen to what they say so he goes over that night showing that he's afraid and he hears one of the enemies saying that he's had a dream and the interpretation within the Midianite conversation is that the dream means that Gideon is going to rout the Midianites and there ironically on enemy lips finally Gideon is reassured that God is actually going to do this bring victory over the Midianites and so what follows in the verses that follow chapter 7 verse 13 14 15 is that finally

Gideon goes to battle and they win a victory some of the Midianites flee they later on capture their army generals and so on and it looks as though there's been a great victory it's a feel-good story the weaklings become the hero God has brought the victory now Israel can settle down in peace and rest and everything's hunky-dory for a little bit longer but it's not quite the case because Gideon hasn't learned the lesson of to whom the credit belongs and though his strategy was cunning in attacking at night and having torches around that would confuse the Midianites he is compromised from the beginning so his battle cry in verse 18 of chapter 7 is for the Lord and for Gideon it ought to have been just for the Lord but he's compromised already as he leads the Israelites into battle and in verse 20 of the same chapter chapter 7 a sword for the Lord and for

Gideon and ironically it's God who brings the victory the Israelites don't even raise a sword because the Midianites kill themselves in their own panic that's God's doing not Gideon's and the battle is clearly won by God and not really by Gideon but it goes downhill from here as some of the army flee and the generals flee Gideon calls out some other tribes for help clearly he's not satisfied with the 300 whom God has given him he wants more and he's showing his lack of trust in God again the tribe of Ephraim whom he calls out to help and help they do are actually a bit disgruntled by the fact that they weren't part of it from the beginning and we're seeing here the disintegration of the nation of Israel as tribe is in rivalry with other tribes and then in chapter 8 verse 4 onwards Gideon calls two towns to help and provide hospitality for his army the towns of Sukkot and Peniel they decline again there's this disintegration within Israel and Gideon later wreaks his revenge against those towns for their lack of help and Gideon through chapter 8 drives his army on to capture the fleeing

[ 28 : 17 ] Midianite kings two of them and finally he captures them but even then Gideon's own son declines to kill them though Gideon asks him to the captured kings mock Gideon and so Gideon himself is finally forced to draw a sword and kill these two men a weakling to the end it seems now it looks like a great victory looks as though they've mocked up the kings and generals who fled but it's a disconcerting victory in chapter 8 there is no mention of God driving the affairs of Gideon or the Israelite army in chapter 7 chapter 6 God is actually clearly behind the scenes in every event but as Gideon goes in pursuit of those two kings he is clearly acting for his own glory and not for God at all and not even a shared glory as his original battle cry suggested and we see that clearly when the kings are actually captured in chapter 8 verse 18 onwards it is apparent why Gideon has pursued them so zealously because these kings had killed Gideon's brothers that is he is pursuing them not for

God's glory but for personal revenge because they killed his brothers as a result of all of this the people of Israel say to Gideon we want you to be our king and in an act of what I guess is probably false piety Gideon declines in chapter 8 verse 22 the Israelites said to him rule over us you and your son and your grandson for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian and Gideon said to them I'll not rule over you and my son will not rule over you the Lord will rule over you but I think it's false piety because immediately we or beginning of chapter 9 we see that Gideon's sons are ruling over Israel later in chapter 8 we realise that Gideon has many wives something that the kings often did later on and he lives like a king and he takes the booty from the battle to make an ephod to make an illegitimate shrine of worship in his own hometown an idol no less so here is

Gideon saying I don't want to be king but hand over all the treasure that you got from the battle and in effect he sets himself up as the king as the ruler of these people by committing idolatry and leading the people into idolatry he's thoroughly compromised he's not a great hero at all well the lessons from Gideon are these God empowers those whom he calls we ought then to be encouraged he calls even weak people and strengthens them so that God's own power is seen and again we ought to be encouraged but if he calls us to some task we must obey not throw out fleeces we ought to be obedient success and pride were a dangerous mix for Gideon we ought to be humble and we see in this story how strong a grip sin has on the people of

Israel and Gideon they did not heed the voice of God that is how we break the grip of sin by heeding God's voice so we are to be attentive be encouraged be obedient be humble be attentive meanwhile through the rest that remained for a few years after these events ancient Israel stumbled along continuing in its idolatry desperately in need of a better rescuer will the next one raised up by God be any better well stay tuned for Jephthah next week thank you thank you thank you too