

Called

THOUGH GIDEON CONSIDERED HIMSELF INADEQUATE, GOD CALLED HIM TO DELIVER HIS PEOPLE FROM THE MIDIANITES.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, U.S. military intelligence operations had no doubt another attack would be coming, but they were not sure where it would happen. By listening to coded Japanese messages, they narrowed it down to two possibilities. The most likely spots were the Aleutian Islands near Alaska and Midway Island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Officials in Washington felt sure that the area near Alaska would be the target. The Navy intelligence crew, however, felt sure that the target would, in fact, be Midway Island. They had managed to decipher some of the Japanese military's code words, and the results suggested that the central Pacific was the next point of attack. The parts of the messages that they had decoded were not enough to make them completely sure though. Washington D.C. was calling the shots and had serious doubts that Midway Island was the target. If the U.S. Navy made a mistake about the location of the next attack, Japan would win another big victory and put the United States in an even more precarious position. To prevent this possibility, it became crucial for the U.S. government to identify the location of the next attack.

The Navy decoders decided to craft a test that would help reassure those who doubted that the target was Midway. They knew that the target of the next attack was called "AF" in Japanese code. They therefore broadcast a message on an unencrypted channel that the U.S. military base at Midway Island was having trouble with its water supply. (The water supply was fine, but the Japanese wouldn't know that.) Eventually the plan came to fruition. The U.S. listening station picked up a coded Japanese message that stated that "AF" was having trouble with its water supply! This sign was enough to decide the course of action. As a result, the U.S. Navy was waiting for the Japanese Navy when it attacked Midway Island. The resulting battle was a victory for the U.S. and a turning point of the war in the Pacific. One little sign—a decoded word—was enough to allay doubts and to change history.

In the passage for this week's session, we will see that God called Gideon to deliver His people from the Midianites. God allayed Gideon's

doubts by assuring Gideon that He would be with Him and giving Gideon two signs of further assurance.



Judges 3:7–6:40

This week's session picks up after a few cycles of Israel struggling with the Canaanites and being delivered from their oppressors by God-ordained judges. The first of these judges identified by name is Othniel (Judg. 3:7-11). His story is relatively short and sets the pattern: (1) Israel committed evil. (2) God sent judgment via a foreign power oppressing Israel. (3) The Israelites cried out for deliverance. (4) God provided deliverance through the leadership of a judge (3:7-11). Othniel was an exemplary judge, but as the cycle repeats throughout the book, the judges become less noble in character. While the Lord delivered the Israelites from foreign oppressors, He did not save them from their own worst enemy—their own.

The next judge is Ehud from the tribe of Benjamin (vv. 12-30). This tribe had the distinction of being mostly left-handed. This aided Ehud in his deliverance of the Israelites from the domination of the Moabites, Ammonites, and Amalekites (vv. 12-30). Because Ehud strapped his blade to his right thigh under his clothes, it was not noticed by the Moabite guards. Thus, Ehud could kill Eglon, the Moabite king, and help deliver Israel. Next comes one of the minor judges: Shamgar (v. 31). "Minor judges" refers to the amount of time the book spends on their stories rather than to their significance. Shamgar received only one verse but is credited with providing deliverance from the Philistines. The later judge Samson would get four chapters but be less successful; he is described as only beginning to deliver Israel from the Philistines (13:5).

Next are Deborah and Barak (4:1–5:31). The people came under the dominance of the Canaanites. In this context we meet Deborah, a prophetess, and Barak, a military leader. Barak illustrates the lack of confidence in God that seems to have plagued all Israel. He refused to go into battle without Deborah. He wanted assurance of success and did not take God at His word (4:6-9). Despite this lack of trust, he and Deborah were successful in casting off the yoke of the Canaanites. As with the stories both before and after the focal passage, the ongoing, undeserved mercy of God is set against the consistently unfaithful response of the people.

Oppression (Judg. 6:1-4,7-10)

We can be tempted to think that God doesn't really care when we do wrong. This attitude characterizes Israel throughout the book of Judges. Yet rarely does God remain passive when His children move away from Him in sin. Throughout Judges, God allowed His people to go through seasons of oppression because of their disobedience and unfaithfulness until they turned back to Him. We see a similar pattern throughout the Bible: He chastises His people in some way and rescues them when they call out to Him in response. So too, we can expect God to pursue us when we stray and rescue us when we call out to Him.

VERSE 1

The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD handed them over to Midian seven years,

The story starts out with the now familiar refrain of **the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD**. It is easy to glide over this statement, but it is important to slow down and to look more closely at the language here. *The Israelites did what was evil*. The Hebrew verb means to act, create, or actively do something. It is very much an action. Thus, the concern was not that the people were lapsing in their theological beliefs (although that was undoubtedly true as well), but that they were actively seeking out and engaging in things that were evil.

In the sight of the LORD is equally important. We may be tempted to think of *evil* as an independent idea—something objective. Throughout the book of Judges, however, committing evil has a very personal or relational element. The English word “LORD” represents the divine name of God Yahweh, the name that is most closely associated with the covenants. In other words, the evil committed by the Israelites was personally offensive to God. Their evil behavior wasn't just generally bad or looked down upon by society. No, their evil was a personal betrayal of God.

As a result of the Israelites' sin, God **handed them over to Midian**. Handing someone over expresses the idea that God actively put Israel under the power and authority of Midian. Yet there could be no doubt that the Israelites were under the power of Midian because of their own evil. The disasters that came upon Israel were of their own making, and God was the one sending these calamities as a punishment. God was against Israel.

The Midianites were descendants of Abraham from one of his concubines. They have a mixed history with Israel. They were involved in the purchase and sale of Joseph (Gen. 37:25-28). They provided shelter to Moses when he fled Egypt after murdering the Egyptian (Ex. 2:14-22). God also called Moses while he was dwelling with the Midianites (3:1-4:23). Moses even married a Midianite woman (2:21), and his father-in-law had a role in helping Moses with governing the tribes (chap. 18). After the Sinai period though, the relationship with the Midianites deteriorated, and there was war between Midian and Israel (Num. 31). Here in Judges 6, they were the ones oppressing Israel.

VERSE 2

and they oppressed Israel. Because of Midian, the Israelites made hiding places for themselves in the mountains, caves, and strongholds.

The oppression of the Midianites was somewhat different than other oppressors in Judges. Due to the fact that the Midianites seem to have been nomadic and migratory, they did not conquer and rule over an area in the same way as a more stationary people. Instead, they raided and took what they wanted as spoils of war. As soon as the Israelites recovered from a raid, the Midianites would raid again or just remain in the area so they could take whatever they wanted whenever they wanted. As a result, the Israelites **made hiding places for themselves in the mountains, caves, and strongholds**. The Israelites did not feel safe dwelling in the open places and on plains or near fields. Hiding from the Midianites came with a cost however; those hiding would not have had much to eat, and life would have been very difficult.

VERSE 3

Whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites, Amalekites, and the people of the east came and attacked them.

The Midianites were not alone in their oppression of Israel at this time. When the Israelites **planted crops**, the **Midianites** and their allies the **Amalekites** and **the people of the east** would attack them. The *Amalekites* were descendants of Esau (Gen. 36:12) and had a history of attacking God's people (Judg. 3:13). The identity of *the people of the east* is more difficult to pin down, but most likely refers to another nomadic group, such as the Kadmonites who dwelled to the east of Canaan, who used raids to supplement their needs. In effect, the people

of Israel were living in an almost constant state of siege that went on for seven years (Judg. 6:1).

VERSE 4

They encamped against them and destroyed the produce of the land, even as far as Gaza. They left nothing for Israel to eat, as well as no sheep, ox, or donkey.

When the Midianites and their allies attacked Israel, **they encamped against them**. There were extended periods in which the Midianites would simply stay and use the resources of Israel for themselves. The Israelites planted crops, raised livestock, and generally prepared for survival during the winter season, only to have the Midianites invade, chase the Israelites into the hills, and then settle down to profit from Israel's hard work. The Israelites could only hide until the Midianites left. To make matters worse, the invaders would leave nothing behind when they departed, thereby keeping Israel weak and impotent. Indeed, the Midianites were like locusts that ate everything in their path (v. 5).

VERSES 7-9

When the Israelites cried out to him because of Midian, the LORD sent a prophet to them. He said to them, "This is what the LORD God of Israel says: 'I brought you out of Egypt and out of the place of slavery. I rescued you from the power of Egypt and the power of all who oppressed you. I drove them out before you and gave you their land.'"

The Israelites, tired and hopeless, **cried out** to God for deliverance from their suffering. Note *cried out* to God should not be equated with repentance on the part of the people. They only sought relief from the oppression. Their heart problems remained.

God sent Israel an unnamed **prophet**. Speaking in God's name to show that the message was directly from **the LORD God of Israel**, the prophet began with a reminder that the Lord brought the Israelites **out of Egypt and out of the place of slavery**. The prophet chastised Israel by reminding them that God had delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery and brought them into the promised land. God had delivered them from the exact same situation they now found themselves in as slaves to the whims of another people. They were freed; how did they wind up as the prisoners of the Midianites? The implied answer is that they were in this difficulty because they did not stay true to their God. In sum,

the Israelites should have responded to God's past redemption with obedience, but they were treacherous instead. The text drives this idea home even further by stating that God rescued the people from both **the power of Egypt** and **the power of all who oppressed** them. In other words, while the people remained faithful to God, they had no need to worry about those who opposed them; God had demonstrated His power and trustworthiness many times in the past. Indeed, the very existence of Israel was the result of God's saving acts. Therefore the current oppression of the people by foreign nations was their own doing.

VERSE 10

“I said to you: I am the LORD your God. Do not fear the gods of the Amorites whose land you live in. But you did not obey me.”

The LORD emphasized that His very nature and the relationship He had with Israel should have been enough to motivate obedience. This is a relational statement that implies that the people should not worship any other gods (Ex.20:2-5; Deut. 5:1-10). It was on the basis of who God was to them and what He had done for them that He commanded them, **“Do not fear the gods of the Amorites whose land you live in.”** The Hebrew word for *fear* here means both “fear” and “revere” with the connected idea of worship or respect. Thus, when God told the people not to fear the gods of the Amorites, He was instructing them to neither fear the power of those gods nor worship them (Josh. 24:15). But the Israelites **did not obey** God and in fact did exactly the opposite of what He told them. Thus, to call on God for deliverance now was ironic given the fact that they had turned away from Him to worship other gods. How could they expect a rescue, considering their guilt?



Explore Further

Read “Evil” on pages 520–521 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. How does the definition of and reasons for evil relate to the Israelite's sins and the reason for God allowing them to suffer in Judges? What does God's repeated rescue of the Israelites illustrate about God's grace?

Commission (Judg. 6:11-14)

The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon as he was threshing wheat in a winepress, hiding from the Midianites. Gideon questioned why the Israelites were being oppressed, believing that God had abandoned them. Through the angel, the Lord called and commissioned Gideon to deliver His people.

VERSE 11

The angel of the LORD came, and he sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash, the Abiezrite. His son Gideon was threshing wheat in the winepress in order to hide it from the Midianites.

While the Israelites had no right to expect God to rescue them, He would do so. Without any further discussion, the words of the prophet of God come to a close and are followed by God's means of deliverance: **the angel of the LORD** coming to meet with Gideon.

The angel of the LORD was a messenger who often spoke with the very voice of God. (See Gen. 22:11-18; Ex. 3:2-4.) A good example of this is evident in the episode of the burning bush in Exodus 3. *The angel of the LORD* set a bush on fire with a miraculous flame that did not consume it. Once Moses approached to examine the wonder more closely, God Himself spoke to Moses through the burning bush/angel.

The angel sat under **the oak that was in Ophrah**. Oaks were significant trees in the land as they often stood alone and were places under which meals were shared and deals were made. (See Gen 18:1-8.) In this way, the text indicates that God was about to make an agreement with someone in the vicinity. The area belonged to **Joash**, but the focus quickly shifts from him to his son, **Gideon**, who was nearby **threshing wheat** (separating the edible portion from the stalks) in the **winepress**. Usually, the grain would be threshed in a more open area in which the wind could be used to separate the grain from the chaff. The winepress would have been more enclosed and therefore hidden, but would also have made the separation of the grain more challenging. Much like his fellow Israelites, Gideon was hiding the food from the Midianites in the hopes of preserving some for himself and his family.

VERSE 12

Then the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said, "The LORD is with you, valiant warrior."

The angel greeted Gideon with the words, **“The LORD is with you, valiant warrior.”** The narrative does not tell us directly how Gideon responded to the compliment about his bravery as a fighter, but he seems to have brushed it off. The comment by the messenger may have been a flattering address or a foretaste of the message to come. In other words, Gideon was going to be a warrior in the future because God was about to command it. There is likely some irony in play here, though, as Gideon was, after all, hiding from the Midianites at this point.

VERSE 13

Gideon said to him, “Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened? And where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about? They said, ‘Hasn’t the LORD brought us out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and handed us over to Midian.”

Gideon seems unaware of who the angel was. He addressed the angel as **“lord.”** The Hebrew word for *lord* can refer to anyone of respected status. While the term is often used to refer to God, Gideon was showing respect. It would only be later that he realized who he was really speaking with.

Gideon politely (**“Please, my lord”**) pushed back on the messenger’s assertion, and asked why the Israelites were in such a humbled state before the Midianites if God was indeed with them. Gideon took the angel’s message (**“The LORD is with you”**), which was aimed at Gideon, as a corporate statement applying to Israel, rather than to him alone. How could this be, he wondered, when it was clear that God **“has abandoned us and handed us over to Midian.”** In Gideon’s mind, these two realities were mutually exclusive. Compared to the wonders that God did for their ancestors, **the LORD** had clearly pulled away from Israel and left them open to subjugation by other people groups. Gideon was challenging the assertion made by the angel, while blaming God for the situation that Israel was currently experiencing.

VERSE 14

The LORD turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and deliver Israel from the grasp of Midian. I am sending you!”

The messenger did not address Gideon’s question but instead issued a command. Interestingly, the term “angel” is dropped at this point, and **the LORD** gives the command. Similar to Moses’s experience at the

burning bush, the fact that God was speaking through the angel became apparent. Instead of explaining how He could be with the Israelites while allowing them to be subjugated by the Midianites, God told Gideon to **“go in the strength you have and deliver Israel.”** God commanded Gideon to go and invested him with the strength to accomplish the task before him. Gideon would be the means by which this deliverance would take place.

Anticipating Gideon’s protest, God emphasized that He was the one doing the sending: **“I am sending you!”** Gideon now had the same choice that Israel had: would he choose to follow God’s command and trust Him or would he refuse? A lack of obedience to God put Israel into a desperate position. If Gideon would only obey, he could help redeem Israel. Gideon and his interactions with God are a microcosm of the interactions between God and the Israelites. An obedient reaction would take God up on His gracious offer to help. Gideon and the people of Israel were being given yet another chance to turn and trust the Lord.



Explore Further

Have you ever felt like God abandoned you? How did you respond to this situation? Even Jesus felt the loss of the presence of the Father while on the cross. Reread Judges 6:11-14 and Psalm 139. How does the interaction between Gideon and the angel of the Lord encourage you in knowing that God is with us, even when it doesn’t feel like it? How could this psalm help you pray when you feel abandoned by God?

Reassurance (Judg. 6:15-16)

Gideon reasoned that he couldn’t possibly deliver his people, since he was the youngest in the weakest family in Manasseh. The Lord assured Gideon of His presence.

VERSE 15

He said to him, “Please, Lord, how can I deliver Israel? Look, my family is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s family.”

In response to God’s command, Gideon, like Moses before him, resisted obeying the command by citing his weakness. God had called Gideon a “valiant warrior,” but Gideon did not share this estimation of his abilities. He stated, **“My family is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s family.”** Gideon countered God’s assertion about his abilities by pointing to his low social status. *Manasseh* was a large tribe with territory on both sides of the Jordan River. To be one of the more insignificant people in such a large group meant that you were at the bottom of the social ladder. However, it is unclear whether Gideon’s assessment was accurate here or if he was being falsely humble to avoid the God-given task. Joash, Gideon’s father, was the primary support behind a Baal cult site that included an altar of Baal and an Asherah pole that the whole town utilized (vv. 25-32). Additionally, Gideon himself had at least ten servants (v. 27). These are indicators of wealth and influence. Like Israel in general, Gideon questioned God’s choice and sought to avoid what God told him to do instead of simply obeying.

VERSE 16

“But I will be with you,” the LORD said to him. “You will strike Midian down as if it were one man.”

God offered two words of encouragement. First, He said, **“But I will be with you,”** answering all of Gideon’s concerns. If God was indeed with him, who could stand against him? Second, God promised an easy victory. Midian would be struck down **as if it were one man**. The task assigned to Gideon would not be a difficult one precisely because God was with him. As long as *the LORD* was with him, Gideon was guaranteed success. He need only believe what God had told him and act on it. God’s gracious presence was enough and always will be. The people of God need only take Him at His word.



Explore Further

Read the article “Presence of God” on page 1297 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Does the way that God interacts with His people change between the Old Testament and New Testament? If so, how? How does this impact your appreciation for the access you have to God when compared with Gideon’s access?
