

Lessons From the Flannelgraph

I'm In The Lord's Army

If you missed last Sunday morning, we began a sermon series called Lessons From the Flannelgraph. We are looking at some of the great characters of the Old Testament. These are some that captured my imagination as a boy in Sunday School. I loved those pictures the teacher put on the flannelgraph each Sunday as she told us the stories of the bible. So we are recapturing a bit of that for the next few Sundays.

Turn with me in your bible to **Judges 6** as we take a look at Gideon's army of 300. As you are turning there, let me give you a little background. The nation of Israel had settled into the promised land, but they had turned away from the Lord and had begun to worship the idols of the Canaanite peoples who lived in the land. Baal, El, the goddess Asherah (Asherah poles that stood guard), Anat, the goddess of war and passion.

Because Israel had turned to such sin and idolatry, God "gave them into the hands of the Midianites." God's hand of protection had been upon Israel, but when they rejected God and began to walk in disobedience and sin, the good hand of God was lifted and they found themselves in the hands of the enemy.

The Midianites were a nomadic people from Syria. There was a long history between Israel and the Midianites, atrocities on both sides (Numbers 38), so the Midianites took particular delight in inflicting pain on Israel.

For seven years the Midianites had marched through the land of Israel at harvest time, pillaging and plundering, raping and killing, they showed no mercy and stripped the land. It was a scorched earth policy. Notice the first six verses of this chapter... (Judges 6:1-6)

As the oppression worsened, Israel cried out to God for deliverance and help. The lord first sent a prophet who explained to them the reason for the oppression – they had turned away from God! This is what you get when your god is an idol - when you worship something made by your own hands - when you worship your gold or silver.

But God showed mercy and sent a deliverer. At this time there was no king in Israel and the scripture says that every man did what was right in his own eyes. So God sent judges, (shofets). These were not guys in robes that heard disputes like our judges. These were individuals God chose to bring military relief and the man of the hour in this story is Gideon.

Remember the story? God chose Gideon to lead the fight against the Midianites. He was reluctant, insecure, and so he asked God for a sign. In fact, he asked God for more than one sign. You can read about the fleece he laid before God in the last part of chapter 6.

Obedying God, Gideon blew a trumpet and called the men of his tribe Manasseh, as well as men from neighboring tribes to come and fight with him. An army of 32,000 men gathered but they were still vastly outnumbered (remember the description of the Midianite army from the first verses of chapter 6). Gideon is feeling a little uneasy about the small number when God tells him his numbers are too large. “You have too many men for me to deliver you from the Midianites. If you do it now, Israel will think they did this in their own might. Tell everyone who is afraid to go home.” 22,000 men went home.

God said, “10,000 is still too many. Take them to the water and have them drink. Everyone who kneels down to drink, send them home and keep the ones who bring the water up to their mouth with their hands and lap it like a dog.” 300 men brought the water to their mouth and God said, that’s the army I want. **300 against a vast army. That’s the kind of odds God likes!** If you feel outnumbered and out-manned in every area of your life, if the odds against you are outrageous, if it looks like there is no way to win or to be victorious, be encouraged. You are the very person God is looking for! **He loves to do the impossible with the unlikely.** It’s why I like the story of Gideon. If God would use him and to the miraculous with him, there is still hope for an unlikely schmuck like me!

Here was the plan: take the 300 and divide them into three companies of 100 each and put them on three sides of the Midianite camp. Don’t give them weapons, just give them trumpets and empty jars with a torch inside. When Gideon gives the signal, blow your trumpet, smash your jar, wave the torch and shout “A sword for the Lord and for Gideon.”

They did exactly as the Lord told them. Standing still in their positions they broke the jars, waved the torches, blew the trumpets and shouted. The suddenness of the sounds and the torches through the enemy into panic. With multiple armies in the camp and in the panic and confusion, they began to turn on each other with their swords. The Israelites pursued them and joined by additional tribes God gave them a great victory! The result was 40 years of peace with their enemies gone.

It’s a powerful lesson, similar to what we learned last Sunday, that God can deliver by the

many or by the few. He can use a boy with a sling to bring victory, or 300 guys with jars, torches and horns. The battle is the Lord's and the victory is ours! But let's go back and let me show you a couple of other things you need to see about this story.

The story begins with Gideon threshing wheat in a winepress near his home. Obviously he was hiding from the Midianites. He had already lost two brothers to the Midianites and he was frightened. All of Israel was hiding in caves and strongholds, just hoping to escape with their lives. Suddenly a man appears to Gideon and declares, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior!" Gideon had to be thinking, "boy have you got the wrong guy! The last thing I am is a mighty warrior. Or didn't you notice I'm threshing wheat in a wine press, scared half silly that the Midianites will take the last of our grain and kill me or make me a slave."

"And about that comment, 'the Lord is with you.' If the Lord is with us, why are my brothers dead and why am I having to hide from our enemy and why are we in all this trouble?"

"I've heard about the miracles of the past and how God brought great deliverance, but now it looks like he doesn't do that kind of thing anymore. He has abandoned us and given us over to our enemy." Ever felt like Gideon? If God is with us, why is all this stuff happening?

It struck me how close Gideon was to a miracle when he said this. He had no idea he was about to be involved in the kind of thing that gets recorded in the Bible! He is hours away from a miracle and he is thinking, "God has abandoned us...there aren't miracles anymore....God doesn't do things like he used to do...we don't see great moves of God anymore." **If you've given up on God, you've given up too soon.** If you've decided he doesn't deliver or rescue or work miracles anymore, you've given up on him too soon. You may be hours away from a miracle. Don't give up!

Gideon was convinced that he was in a hopeless situation and there was no way out. The angel of the Lord said to Gideon, "**Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?**" What strength? Gideon didn't see himself as having any ability or strength so he begins to argue with the Lord.

"But Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family." We don't have time to talk about Manasseh this morning, but suffice it to say that tribe felt as if they had been overlooked and pushed aside from the beginning. Gideon is saying 'you've picked the wrong tribe - you probably want Ephraim instead, like always. And you've

picked the wrong clan and the wrong family and the wrong son. I'm the youngest. I'm the last guy that can lead an army or deliver anyone. I can't even get the grain threshed."

But God sees something in Gideon that Gideon cannot see in himself. I think the same can be said for all of us. **God sees something in you that you cannot see in yourself.** It's something he put within you. He knows the plan he has for you. Don't you think it's time you got in step with God's plans and purposes for your life? He sees something in you. That's why he brought you to this place, this opportunity in your life. Trust him.

Like Gideon, many of us ask, "But how can it be? How can God use me? How can I do anything? I'm nothing. I'm a nobody. I have no talent. I'm not worthy. I'm not strong enough. I'm not holy enough. I can't." Look at verse 16. Here is the answer: **"I will be with you and you will strike down all the Midianites together."**

You can't but God can! The Lord says he will be with us. Once again, the battle is the Lord's and the victory is ours, but we have to be willing to obey God. Come on Gideon - the Lord will be with you and because of that, you will strike down the Midianites. All of them. Come on David, the Lord is with you. You will strike down Goliath and the Philistines.

Come on, church. The Lord is with you. You can do this. You can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. You can walk in victory. You can conquer that habit in your life, you can pull down that enemy stronghold in your life. The Lord is with you. Go in the strength you have but understand the Lord is sending you and he is going with you. Go and the Lord will go with you.

Gideon says, "if I have found favor with you, give me a sign that it is really you talking to me." What a strange statement. If someone is talking to you aren't you pretty sure they are right there talking to you? Hello! But perhaps Gideon thought this was a dream. A mirage. He asks the angel to wait until he brings him a meal. It was part of expected Eastern hospitality.

The angel of the Lord waits while Gideon prepares a meal. This isn't fast food. He prepares a goat and bakes bread! Remember Gideon had asked for a sign. He brings the food and the angel of the Lord tells him to place it on a rock and pour the broth on top of it. The angel then touched it with the tip of his staff and fire flared from the rock and consumed the meat and the bread and then the angel disappeared. Gideon then realized it was all real and that wasn't just a prophet, that was the angel of the Lord and then he was afraid he would die and the Lord had to

speak to him and calm him down. “Peace! Don’t be afraid, you aren’t going to die.” Man up Gideon. And Gideon built an altar to the Lord there and called it “the Lord is Peace.”

Gideon is weak. Too young. Inexperienced. Frightened. Insecure. He can’t believe God would speak to him or call him or ask anything of him. He asks for a sign. And the sign the angel gave to him was not enough. So he asks for another sign. “if you are really going to save Israel by my hand, I’m going to place a wool fleece on the threshing floor and in the morning when I come here, if there is dew only on the fleece but the ground is dry, I’ll know you really spoke to me and you really will be with me. The next morning the ground was dry and the fleece was wet. He wrung it out and got a bowl full of water. But then he said, “Don’t be angry, but what if this was just a bizarre coincidence? So, could we try this one more time, but this time let the ground be wet with dew but the fleece dry? The next morning, the ground was covered with dew and the fleece was dry.

“Okay, Lord, I guess I can’t get out of this.” Talk about a reluctant hero. And then, one more time, before the battle, God knew Gideon was still too frightened so he sent him and his servant Purah down to the Midianite camp to hear what was being said. They overheard two men talking. One told of a dream and the other said, “that dream is about Gideon. God is going to give the whole Midianite camp into his hands.”

How many signs do you need? God has something for you. God wants to bring deliverance to you. It is for you after all. Deliverance was just around the corner for Gideon and he would be a part of it. Those miracles he had heard about from Israel’s past, he would be a part of a miracle himself. But first, there was something he had to do at home.

God spoke to Gideon again and said, “Before you are to go into battle, before I can bless you and bring this deliverance, there is something else you need to do. You have to get the idols out of your house and out of your life.” Look at Judges 6:25-26.

This was no small thing God was asking. God has a way of messing up our lives you know. He calls us to risk. The two bulls in the pen had perhaps been set aside for a special sacrifice to be offered to Baal. The people were perhaps hoping that with the sacrifice baal would save them from the Midianites. But God tells Gideon he will have to tear down the altar of Baal and cut down the asherah pole and then build a proper altar to God and offer the bull upon it.

God wanted Gideon to get rid of the idols in his life and this wasn't to be something done in the quiet of his heart. It was time for Gideon to make a public declaration, to take a bold stand. "I am going to serve the Living God and not baal. The idols are coming down in my life and in the life of my family." It was a bold stand against the values - the religion of his culture. It was standing against the tide, standing against family and friends and his town.

But understand, he couldn't lead the people to victory, he couldn't live in victory with a stronghold of the enemy so prominent and powerful in his life. Church, this is what this message is about for us today. God is calling us to action, to victory, but he is telling us the idols have got to go! We can't expect God's favor and his blessing to rest upon us in power while we are serving and worshiping the gods of this world. We can't expect to experience victory in our spiritual life when we allow sin to dominate our thoughts and our actions. God is calling us just as he called Gideon, to tear down the high places, to pull down the idols and chop them up. He is calling us to get serious about serving God and living for him.

And let me say it again, this was a public thing and it was no small thing. It couldn't be hidden. One baal altar found near Meggido was 26 feet across and 4 ½ feet high. Everyone in town would know about the baal altar being destroyed. It would be like God telling us to tear down the Golden Driller. Someone would notice don't you think?

Gideon took ten of his servants and did what the Lord told him to do. He tore down the altar of baal, cut down the Asherah pole, made an altar to the Lord, used the wood of the asherah pole for a fire and sacrificed the bull to the Lord as an offering.

The people came in a panic and began to investigate. Who could have done this? By one means or another, they discovered it was Gideon, the son of Joash who had done this. They came to Joash's house, ready to put Gideon to death. Dad may not have understood all the reasons behind his son's actions, but he was ready to defend him with great wisdom. He told the people, "If baal is truly a god of power, he doesn't need you to defend him. He will kill Gideon soon enough. Let baal fight his own battles."

The people agreed to let baal take care of Gideon, and they began calling Gideon, **Jerub-baal = "let baal contend with him"**.

Now look at verse 33-34. Look what happened after Gideon had responded in obedience to the Lord. ***"Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet,***

summoning the Abiezrites to follow him.”

I want you to see this. Gideon, in spite of his fear, his insecurities, his doubts and questions, his past or mistakes, in spite of it all, he believed God. He believed what God said to him was true. He believed and he was willing to trust God. Enough so that he risked it all to pull down the idols in his life. Enough so that he risked it all to go against his family and his friends when necessary to obey God. He believed enough to obey God, to lead a suicide mission against the Midianites that turned into a major victory and that led to 40 years of peace.

I believe God has something for you and he is calling you to a place of obedience and surrender. He wants your participation in a miracle. He wants you to be part of something beyond yourself, he wants to bless you and use you, but you'll have to agree to respond in obedience. You'll have to go in your strength believing that he will be with you. And you will have to pull down the idols in your life. You must tear down the strongholds in your life.

It was Ronald Reagan who drew that amazing line in the sand with those famous words, “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall.” May I say to you this morning, “Tear down this wall. Tear down that stronghold you've allowed the enemy to build in your life.” There is a miracle ahead for you, but you've got to get that stronghold down so you can be a part of what God has in store. Gideon would have missed the victory if he hadn't torn down the idols, because only then did the Spirit of the Lord come upon him.

Are you ready to tear down the strongholds and see God's Spirit bring the victory in your life? He's calling to you. It's God's time for you.