

Courage Under Fire: Gideon's Journey

Intro Passage: [Deuteronomy 8:11-18](#)

Introduction

Summary: In [Judges 6-8](#), we have the account of Gideon. God calls on Gideon to lead Israel against the Midianites who have been oppressing them for 7 years. We'll see how God empowers ordinary people to achieve extraordinary feats. Gideon's journey from doubt to decisive leadership showcases the challenge of stepping out in faith, despite overwhelming odds. But then we'll also see how Gideon's success quickly gets the best of him and spirals into sin.

God's Call to Gideon

Let's begin by reading from [Judges 6](#)

English Standard Version Chapter 6

6:1 The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years.

2 And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds.

Skip down to v7

English Standard Version Chapter 6

7 When the people of Israel cried out to the LORD on account of the Midianites,
8 the LORD sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery.

9 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.

10 And I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' **But you have not obeyed my voice.**"

Why were the Israelites being oppressed? (v10)

Let's continue as God calls up Gideon

English Standard Version Chapter 6

11 Now the **angel of the LORD** came and **sat under the terebinth** at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son **Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress** to hide it from the Midianites.

12 And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, “**The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.**”

13 And Gideon said to him, “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.”

14 And **the LORD** turned to him and said, “**Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?**”

15 And he said to him, “Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, **my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.**”

16 And the LORD said to him, “But **I will be with you**, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.”

Before we go too far, **who is Gideon?**

We know from the text he is from the tribe of Manasseh (Joseph’s son), the clan of Abiezer, and the youngest son of Joash. He is the 5th judge listed in the book counting Deborah and Barak as one and including Shamgar (who only got 1 sentence in the book).

When we first meet Gideon he’s beating out wheat in a winepress to hide from the Mideanites. That struck me as odd because you don’t typically think of a winepress as a place to hide. Normally, they would beat out wheat near the top of a hill where the wind could carry away the chaff. Instead he is in the pit of a winepress. Now a winepress in Gideon’s day typically consisted of a place where the grapes could be squished and then the juice would flow down into a pit hewn out of rock. So he was hiding down low in the pit so that hopefully the Midianites would not see him and take his wheat. I point this out because the angel of the LORD addresses him in v12 as “O mighty man of valor” but he is hiding in this pit.

So, what is this angel of the LORD? Is he different from a regular angel?

- **Angels** are created, spiritual beings. They are servants and messengers of God (the word *angelos* literally means "messenger"). Examples include Gabriel and Michael—who are the only two given names. These two angels alone appears numerous times. Gabriel appeared to Daniel in [Daniel 8](#) and 9 and to Zacharius and Mary separately in [Luke 1](#). Michael appears in [Daniel 10](#) and 12, [Jude 9](#) and [Revelation 12](#). There are plenty of other places where other angels appear.
- **The Angel of the Lord** is uncreated or divine. In the Hebrew text, this angel is often identified directly as **Yahweh**. He speaks in the first person as God (“I am the God of thy father”) rather than as a third-party messenger (“The Lord says...”). These appearances are called Theophanies or sometimes Christophanies depending which person of the Trinity is involved but I am not going to get into which it is here.

The angel of the Lord is mentioned about 50-60 times total but there are only about 35-40 distinct appearances. Notable appearances include: **Hagar in the Wilderness:** ([Genesis 16](#) and 21),

Abraham & Isaac: ([Genesis 22](#)), **Moses & the Burning Bush:** ([Exodus 3](#)), **Balaam and the Donkey:** ([Numbers 22](#)), then of course **Gideon and Samson** in [Judges 6](#) and 13 just to name a handful. Now, if you notice here in v14 the text seamlessly switches from “the angel of the LORD” to simply “the LORD” and he also talks in the first person.

So, I want you to also notice that we first see this angel of the LORD sitting under a **terebinth tree**. Terebinth trees are seen throughout the old testament. Their roots go deep so they are seen as symbols of strength and are often associated with sacred landmarks. Terebinths are also frequently mentioned in relation to important events. For example, **David fought Goliath** in the Valley of Elah. Elah means terebinth. **Absalom** met his end by getting his hair caught up in a terebinth. And in [Isaiah 6:13](#) God equates **the stump of a terebinth** with “**the remnant**”. So this is a clue that something important is about to happen.

Why is it a big deal that the angel of the LORD visited Gideon instead of say, Gabriel? If Gabriel had visited, he would have had to say something like, "The Lord says to you..." But since it is the angel of the LORD, **God is personally calling on Gideon**. This is crucial because Gideon's first task (which we'll see in a few minutes)—tearing down his father's altar to Baal—is a capital offense. He needed more than a "message" from heaven; **he needed a personal encounter with the Living God** to give him faith.

So let's read on...

English Standard Version Chapter 6

17 And he said to him, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me.

18 Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you.” And he said, “I will stay till you return.”

So Gideon goes off to prepare a meal for this angel and when he returns the angel has him put it on a rock under the tree.

English Standard Version Chapter 6

21 Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes. And fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight.

22 Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the LORD. And Gideon said, “Alas, O Lord GOD! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.”

When he says “Alas!” it's like saying “Oh my Gosh! I've seen God, I'm gonna die!”

English Standard Version Chapter 6

23 But the LORD said to him, "Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die."

24 Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and called it, The LORD Is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites.

Note that even though the angel vanished the LORD keeps talking to him. Now he get's his first assignment.

Gideon's First Assignment: Destroying Idolatry

English Standard Version Chapter 6

25 That night the LORD said to him, "Take your father's bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it

26 and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down."

27 So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.

In v25, God commands Gideon to take two bulls to tear down (his father's) altar to Baal and the Asherah and replace it with a new alter to God. Note Gideon built two different alters. The first one under the terebinth that was a memorial to the LORD. The second was here on the high place is a replacement for the alter of Baal. And God told him to use two bulls to tear down the old and dedicate the new. Note that the second bull is 7 years old, likely representing the 7 years of oppression.

I want to dive into Baal and Asherah for a minute. Baal and Asherah were first mentioned back in [Judges 3:7](#) during the time of Othniel.

Who were the Baals and the Asherah (or pl Asheroth)?

In the Old Testament, "the Baals and the Asheroth" is shorthand for the entire system of Canaanite worship that competed with the worship of Yahweh. "Baal" is a title meaning "Lord" or "Master" There are many Baals. But Baal by itself usually refers to "the storm god" that controlled the rain.

In Canaanite mythology, Asherah was the consort of the chief god, El, and she was revered as a goddess of motherhood, fertility, and the sea. Central to this was that she birthed 70 sons that governed the supernatural world. Scholars often note a striking parallel between the "70 sons of Asherah" and the "sons of God" mentioned in [Deuteronomy 32:8](#). This number—70—also matches the total number of nations listed in [Genesis 10](#). And because "Baal" simply means "Lord", the early Israelites sometimes used the title "Baal" to refer to Yahweh, leading to a blurring of lines between their monotheism and the Canaanite's polytheism.

This reminds me of the similarities between Christianity and Mormonism. They both use the same vocabulary but the meanings are very different. Similarly, the Israelites were frequently pulled toward Baal worship because it felt familiar—it used the same "70 sons" framework and "Lord" terminology—making it easy to blend Yahweh's worship with the local fertility rituals of the Canaanites.

Why is this important? I think there is a lesson here. We need to know what we believe and why we believe it so that we don't get swept away like it says in [Ephesians 4:14](#) "so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

Let's continue on. Gideon broke down the altar of Baal and made a new altar to God and offered the bull as a sacrifice. When the townsmen saw it they looked for who did it.

English Standard Version Chapter 6

30 Then the men of the town said to Joash, "**Bring out your son, that he may die**, for he has broken down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it."

- Asherah pole—a carved wooden pole or a tree near the altar. It is similar in nature to what we think of as a totem pole. Only, these were actively used in worship where totem poles usually represented historical records.

English Standard Version Chapter 6

31 But **Joash said** to all who stood against him, "**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."

32 Therefore on that day **Gideon was called Jerubbaal**, that is to say, "**Let Baal contend against him,**" because he broke down his altar.

They wanted to kill Gideon. But Joash, defended his son (instead of defending Baal). He basically said, if Baal is really a god he can take care of himself, noting that Baal hadn't taken any action against Gideon.

A similar thing happened in [1 Kings 18](#) when Elijah had a showdown with the prophets of Baal. They built an altar and waited for Baal to consume the sacrifice but he never did... [1 Kings 18:27](#) "And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.'" Point being, Baal is nothing.

Preparation for Battle

Now we're getting close to the military encounter where Gideon gets his next assignment.

English Standard Version Chapter 6

33 Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.

34 But **the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon**, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him.

35 And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them.

Notice he calls Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali but not Issachar. Why? Because the valley of Jezreel is in Issachar so likely they can't respond. The result was 32,000 men came out for battle.

The **Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon**. We also see this of Othniel in [Judges 3:10](#) and Samson in [Judges 14:6](#). This literally means the Spirit is empowering him to the task he is about to do but yet, but his faith is still weak. Thus the test of the fleece. We all know the story, he asks for a sign—for the dew to be on the fleece but not the ground and then vice versa—which in turn gives Gideon the faith and confidence to carry on.

I'm going to skim over most of chapter 7. But first we see God whittle down Gideon's army from 32,000 down to 300.

Why? [Judges 7:2](#) "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.'"

The Defeat of Midian

Gideon is down to 300 men and he is looking out over this army and he is afraid so God gives him one more sign...

English Standard Version Chapter 7

10 But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant.

11 And you shall hear what they say, and **afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.**" Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp.

12 And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley **like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance.**

He only has 300 men...but **he overheard the enemy recounting a dream where God had given Midian into his hand.**

English Standard Version Chapter 7

15 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.”

16 And he divided the 300 men into three companies and put trumpets into the hands of all of them and empty jars, with torches inside the jars.

17 And he said to them, “Look at me, and do likewise. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do.

18 When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the trumpets also on every side of all the camp and shout, ‘For the LORD and for Gideon.’ ”

So they did as Gideon said, chaos ensued and the Midianites fled. Gideon and his army pursued. He called for help from Naphtali and Asher and Manasseh and later Ephraim and they chased them all throughout the land of Manasseh and Ephraim. They (Ephraim) caught and executed two princes of Midian—Oreb and Zeeb.

Now picking up in [Judges 8:1-3](#)

English Standard Version Chapter 8

8:1 Then the men of Ephraim said to him, “What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?” And they accused him fiercely.

2 And he said to them, “What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer?

3 God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. What have I been able to do in comparison with you?” Then their anger against him subsided when he said this.

They are mad because he didn’t call on them in the beginning. But the Spirit of the LORD is still on Gideon so he is able to diffuse their anger tactfully saying you are the ones that caught Oreb and Zeeb. Who am I? in reference to then “gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim” in other words, we’re just paupers in your field.

Vengeance and the Final Pursuit

Now I feel like there is a gap here in the narrative between verses 3 and 4. There is no mention of the other tribes for the remainder of the account. Why? Remember [Judges 7:2?](#)

Why does he keep pursuing if they have already killed the princes Oreb and Zeeb?

Gideon doesn't want to leave the job incomplete. Oreb and Zeeb were just princes. Though important they weren't the kings. He is after a complete route of the Midianites.

Let's continue with 4-9

English Standard Version Chapter 8

4 And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing.

5 So he said to the men of Succoth, “Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me,

for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.”

6 And the officials of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?”

7 So Gideon said, “Well then, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.”

8 And from there he went up to Penuel, and spoke to them in the same way, and the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered.

9 And he said to the men of Penuel, “When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.”

What is significant about Penuel? ([Genesis 32:30-31](#)) “So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip.”

So what is going on here? **Why are these two cities in Gad reluctant to help Gideon?** It’s not real obvious from the text but it is there. How many men does Gideon have? (300). Look at verse [Judges 8:10](#).

Judges 8:10 *ESV*

Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about 15,000 men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East, for there had fallen 120,000 men who drew the sword.

How many men does Midian have left (15000)? How many had fallen (120000)? So you have 300 chasing 15000 (50:1), down from 135,000. (450:1) Then consensus is these cities were afraid to help because if they did and Gideon failed, Midian would likely retaliate against them. Well, it’s kind of ironic because that’s exactly what Gideon threatens to do to them when he returns because they are not helping him.

English Standard Version Chapter 8

12 And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic.

13 Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres.

14 And he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men.

15 And he came to the men of Succoth and said, “Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, ‘Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?’ ”

16 And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson.

17 And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

Now these are his own kin. Did God ever say anything about punishing his own kin in this process? Absolutely not! So at this point it seems that Gideon has crossed a line. He's taking things into his own hands. Let's read on because it gets worse.

English Standard Version Chapter 8

18 Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor?"

What? **Where is Tabor and who are these men that were killed?** Tabor is in the valley of Jezreel at the border of Zebulan, Naphtali and Issachar. Apparently there is an unrecorded battle, or perhaps even a massacre that happened there. So continuing and talking about the men killed there...

English Standard Version Chapter 8

...They answered, "As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king."

19 And he said, "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you."

20 So he said to Jether his firstborn, "Rise and kill them!" But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man.

21 Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength." And Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels.

Here's where things really start to go south. "As you are...(they) resembled the son(s) of a king." These guys just paid Gideon a huge complement by saying he resembles a king. In other words he has a very commanding presence just like a king. However, little did they know that the men they killed were Gideon's blood brothers. But Gideon makes a huge blunder by commanding his son to carry out the execution. By asking his son to carry it out he is in essence humiliating these kings. But they respond by calling him a coward and tell him to do it yourself. Which he does.

Why is this significant? It's subtle but it is significant. Gideon's motive for killing these kings has shifted from divine judgement to now vengeance for killing his brothers. [Romans 12:17-21](#) warns us not to repay evil with evil. For it is written, "Vengeance is mine. I will repay says the Lord."

So what about the crescent ornaments on the camels? Those are religious symbols. So he takes them. **But what does he do with them?**

English Standard Version Chapter 8

22 Then 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."

23 Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the LORD will rule over you."

24 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.)

25 And they answered, “We will willingly give them.” And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil.

26 And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 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 their camels.

27 And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.

28 So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more. And the land had rest for forty years in the days of Gideon.

Gideon’s Downfall and Legacy

The end of this account is complex. There is a lot under the surface. On the one hand Gideon seems to have his heart in the right place. But on the other hand not. When they ask him rule over them he says no. But then he makes this golden ephod.

What is an ephod? It’s a high priestly garment made of fine linen, gold thread, and blue, purple, and scarlet yarns. It held the Breastpiece of Judgment containing the Urim and Thummim, which were used to discern the will of God. [1 Samuel 23:9-12](#). However, this ephod is made entirely of gold (about 43 pounds worth from the Ishmaelites jewelry alone plus all the gold from the camels). In other words, it’s not something anyone is going to wear. It says he put it up in his city instead of at the tabernacle in Shiloh, so it is more like a statue or a shrine.

There is a lesson here about how we worship. Throughout the Bible, God is very specific about how He wants to be worshipped, and we have to be careful not to 'invent' new ways to approach Him. In [1 Kings 12:33](#), Jeroboam made two golden calves so the people could worship locally instead of traveling to Jerusalem. It seemed logical and convenient, but it wasn’t what God commanded. Similarly, in [Leviticus 10:1-3](#), the sons of Aaron offered 'unauthorized (or strange) fire.' They were the right priests in the right place, but they worshipped the wrong way, and the Bible says fire came out from the Lord and consumed them. Likewise, this ephod became a snare to Gideon and his family and all Israel.

Let’s finish out the last few verses

English Standard Version Chapter 8

29 Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house.

30 Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives.

31 And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech.

Abimelech means “son of a king”

English Standard Version Chapter 8

32 And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

33 As soon as Gideon died, **the people of Israel turned again** and whored after the Baals **and made Baal-berith their god**.

34 And **the people of Israel did not remember the LORD their God**, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side,

35 and **they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon)** in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

Lessons from Gideon's Life

So there we have it, he refused to be a ruler but he named his son Abimelech.

What happened as soon as Gideon died? They did not show love to Gideon's family, they forgot the LORD, they made Baal-berith their god.

Baal-berith means "Lord of the Covenant". By making Baal-berith their god, Israel has now sunk to new depths completely ignoring their covenant with the Lord God and making a new covenant with the Baals.

What can we learn from the account of Gideon?

There are at least three lessons here (besides the ones we've already talked about). First, Gideon got caught up in the circumstances and lost sight of God's plan. In doing so he repaid evil with evil instead of keeping a pure heart. We need to keep God and his will first in our lives.

Second, we need to be on the lookout for pride. Gideon successfully defeated the Midianites and then refused to rule over the people, but yet he apparently lived like a king (eg, he became quite wealthy and had 70 sons with many wives just like a king would) and he even named his son "son of a king". He's basically a hypocrite. When we meet success, we need to examine our own hearts. We need to be especially careful because success tends to breed pride. Do we give our successes back to the Lord or do we keep them for ourselves?

Finally, and most importantly, who is your "covenant" with? Is it with the Baals of the world around us? Or is it with the one, true God?

We started the service with [Deuteronomy 8:11-18](#). It's a warning to keep God's commandments and not to follow other gods. Those of you paying attention will remember these are the same verses we read a few weeks ago when we started the study of Judges but the warning is real. It applied to the Israelites before they entered the promised land, it applied to Gideon, and it still applies to us today.

Let's pray.