

In the book of Judges in chapter 6 we learn that the people of God are in hiding. God lead them out of Egypt and into the promised land, but they chose to live recklessly and wildly. So God turned them over to that lifestyle and allowed neighboring nations to invade them. The Midianites have run God's people out of their own land. In Judges 6 we learn that God's people are actually living in the mountains and caves- in remote places. So, God reaches out to a man named Gideon and says, "I'm going to use you to drive the Midianites out of this land and you're going to save Israel!" Gideon's response is so telling. Gideon says, "Lord how am I going to rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest of all the tribes and I am the least in my entire family!" Gideon has come to believe something about himself that isn't true. People who have a flawed view of God have an incorrect view of themselves. A small view of God always leads to a small view of oneself.

This misperception, it's so troubling that Gideon actually argues with God. "I can't do it, God. I'm not qualified." He's not the first to do this. Moses was even more reluctant. "Lord I am slow of speech. You've got the wrong guy!" So I guess, Gideon is just following in the tradition of reluctant leaders that God chooses to use throughout history. "I'm from the weakest tribe in Israel, and I'm the least of my family."

So Gideon is no superhero. He's not Superman or Batman or even Antman. He's no action hero. He's more like an accident waiting to happen. He's an unlikely leader. He has a small view of himself. He does not believe that he's capable of doing what God has asked him to do. And I love God's response to Gideon. God simply says, "I will be with you." God with His great power is getting ready to invade Gideon's small thinking. He's getting ready to move Gideon from where he currently is to where he's always wanted to be but never knew how to get there.

The Israelites are living on the run and running is not living. Hiding is not living. God looks at the way His people are living and says to Gideon, "I want to change your circumstances." And when the God of the universe tells you that He will be with you, that not only means He's going to be with you- it also means that you get to be with Him. Whether you realize it or not, that's where your heart has always wanted to be.

The reason I'm telling you all of this is: **No matter what direction your life is headed being with God is where your heart wants to be.** Right now you might be chasing a career. You might be running hard after a relationship. You might be pursuing an education, (and there's nothing wrong with any of these pursuits) but I can promise you this: those things- in and of themselves- will not satisfy the deepest longing of your heart. Here's why. You were made for something more.

Those things aren't the final destination of your life- they're not the end outcome. I think that's why, in Scripture, one of the words used for "heaven" in the New Testament is "God." One of the Greek words translated as "heaven" is "God" and that's because heaven is more than just a place. God is the desire of our hearts- us with Him and Him with us- and nothing else can ever satisfy us like Him. Being with Him is not only what our hearts want, it's what He wants too.

Let me explain this in another way. I want to ask everyone here, if you're able, to stand up. I know some of you were just getting comfortable... Please stand up. Place your arms at your sides. I'm going to have you close your eyes. If you're able, I'd like you to shift all your weight over to one foot and lift the other foot up into the air. Don't open your eyes. Keep them closed. I wish you could see what I'm seeing. I'm seeing a room filled with imbalanced people. Some of you are a little tipsy- a little wobbly. Okay, I'll stop the cruelty. You can open your eyes. Feel free to take your seats again. That was a test so that I could see who's been doing yoga.

All of us go through seasons in this life when things get stressful. We get pushed to the brink.

Schedules get out of control. All of a sudden life gets out of balance. We're out of sorts. What happens in those seasons is we reach for something to stabilize our lives. For each of us it's different stuff. For you it might be your work. You might just pour yourself into your job hoping that will bring some balance to your heart. Others of us use food. Some of us sleep. Some of us use alcohol. For others it's recreation. It's exercise. All of us have a "go to" that when life gets tough, we reach for it to find balance and to stabilize ourselves. The problem is when we don't feel good enough; pretty enough; wealthy enough; smart enough (whatever the "enough" is) and we reach for these things to stabilize our lives these solutions don't last. They are a temporary fix.

God wants to be the stabilizing factor in our lives. He wants to be our "go to"- the One we reach for to bring balance to our lives. He wants to be our anchor- the Rock that we're tied to when the waves start crashing in.

The Old Testament writers have a word for this. It's the Hebrew word: Shalom. When translated into English it's the word "peace," but it literally means, "equilibrium." That's what "Shalom" means. God brings "Shalom" to our lives- this cosmic, eternal balance to all living things.

Let's get back to Gideon. Gideon is like, "Ok God, you want to be with me. That sounds great, but I'm not totally convinced." So Gideon puts God to the test. Are you like Gideon in this? You want to believe that He's with you, but you need Him to prove it? Here's what he does. He tells God, "Ok, I'm going to take my living room rug and I'm going to unroll it in the front yard. I'm going to leave it there for 24 hours and God, if you're truly the one communicating to me, then when I wake up in the morning the rug will be wet but all the ground around it will be dry. That will be the sign."

So Gideon lays out the rug and when he comes out the next morning the rug is soaking wet, but the ground around it is dry. But Gideon is still not convinced. Are you anything like this? So he says to God, "Ok, I'm going to leave the rug out again for another 24 hours, but this time if the rug is dry but the ground around it is wet, then I'll know it's You."

What's going on here? It's this very human tendency- this song and dance between fear and faith. And it's real. I read recently about some scientists that are working to map the genome. It's a human genetics study, and they've discovered what they refer to as the "fear gene." It's the worry gene. This is what they're learning. There is a gene within the genetic gene pool (it's something like SOY17Q) and if you have the short version of this gene you are more prone to worry. You are more prone towards fear than other people. Now that you know this, how many of you are afraid you might have that gene?

You see, Gideon in fear, tests God, but God's going to give it right back. God challenges Gideon.

Having decided that God would indeed be with him, Gideon amasses an army to go up against the Midianites. 32,000 men. That sounds impressive, but on the other side of the battleground is the Midianite army of over 135,000 men- all of them seasoned soldiers. They know how to fight, and Gideon's men do not. The Israelite forces are outnumbered 4 to 1. That's a bad fight waiting to happen. And God says to Gideon, "You've got a numbers problem." And Gideon is like, "Yeah, I know! Can you help me out?" And God says, "Here's what we're going to do, Gideon. Tell 22,000 of your men to go home." Um...

Gideon says, "Hold on, God. I'm into addition not subtraction! Help me understand." God says, "You don't need those men. Send them home." Honorable discharge.

Gideon obeys and 22,000 men pack their bags. Now they're outnumbered 13 to 1 and God comes back to Gideon and says, "You know I've been thinking, you've got a numbers problem." And Gideon says,

“Yeah, we’re good. God, you just go on, alright? We’ve got this under control.” God says, “Take your 10,000 men down to the river’s edge to get a drink of water.” In verse 5 of Judges chapter seven God says, *“Divide the men into two groups. In one group put all those who cup water in their hands and lap it up with their tongues like dogs. In the other group put all those who kneel down and drink with their mouths in the stream.”* So Gideon does this and only 300 men drink the water by cupping it with their hands and lapping it up like dogs.

There is a historical note to pay attention to here. In the Old Testament, when dogs appear it’s usually in a derogatory sense. In our culture we love dogs, right? We feed them and care for them- they’re a part of our families. In Israel’s day, they were seen as dirty, unclean animals. Historian Douglas Steward says, “The men who lapped water like dogs were probably the uneducated men of the army.” So basically God’s given Gideon the knuckleheads to go to war with. Not the Spartans of Leonidas- it’s Harry and Lloyd.

“Go fight, Gideon! So you’re saying there’s a chance.”

300 men against 135,000- now the odds are 450 to 1 and God says, “I like this. This is an army I can use.” Don’t you see? **What is unimaginable to you becomes unstoppable when God is with you.** When God is with you, you are never outnumbered. When God is on your side and in your corner the odds are always in your favor. Always.

Let’s stop here, because I want to talk about our lives for a moment. Scripture teaches us that our lives are not temporary, like we are inclined to believe. We were created for eternity. Our souls don’t have an expiration date. And what we lose sight of in the day to day, is exactly what Gideon lost sight of. The amount of our lives that we spend here, like *this*, is just a blip on the radar screen compared to the amount of our life that we will spend with God. And the Scripture is clear that we can live for one of two things during this short period of time that we walk around this earth. We can live for regret, or we can live for reward.

The apostle Paul described life like a race. In Philippians 3 he wrote, *“Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.”* I love that metaphor. Paul is saying, “I’ve got my eyes fixed on the finish line. I’m trying to block out all the regret that would otherwise distract me so that I can get the reward at the end. What was the reward? What was the prize that Paul was straining to win? The presence of God. God with us, us with God. It’s what our hearts long for.

The Bible uses this incredible idea- it’s philosophical- it’s the Greek word *teleios*. All of creation, Scripture says, is being drawn- it’s being pulled- to a final conclusion; a destination; an end point. It’s as though God has tied a rope around your waist and you are being powerfully tugged toward Him. Most people resist this tug. The question for you and I today is, what are we going to do with this part of our lives? Are we going to live by fear in the day to day, or are we going to live by faith? Do we believe in a big God who can go into battle with 300 men, or do we believe in a small god who needs to go toe to toe, 1-on-1 with everybody? Please don’t forget, that what is unimaginable to you becomes unstoppable when God is with you.

Gideon decides, “I’ve got one life and I either trust in God or I don’t.” So he marched into battle with 300 men, and you can guess the outcome. Israel is victorious. Those 300 men defeat the Midianite army. It’s a crazy story. I don’t have time to read it to you so you’ll have to go home today and read the end of Judges chapter seven. Gideon wins. Why? Because God is with him.

My favorite line in the story is at the very end. It says, *“Throughout the rest of Gideon’s lifetime—about forty years—there was peace in the land.”* “Shalom!” The land and the people of God enjoyed equilibrium- balance in their lives- for 40 years, why? Because God was with them, in the same way

that God is with you and I, when we place *our* faith in Him. The same God that was on the battlefield with Gideon is with you today.

You want to know how I know this is true? I know a modern day Gideon. His name is Bob. Bob Devoe was a twice a year Christian before his diagnosis (Easter & Christmas), but his bout with cancer changed all that. His wife, Gretchen, faithfully prayed that her husband would one day come around, but she certainly wouldn't have asked for it to happen the way that it did. Bob was a general contractor, and he was incredibly successful as a young man. He grew his company to the point where he got himself and all his foremen brand new cherry red corvettes as a bonus one year. Bob had everything going for him, but that didn't prevent him from getting skin cancer. He had surgery to remove the cancer but it was in advanced stage and the doctors told him he might only have months to live.

Fortunately for Bob, two things happened- he beat the cancer, and his faith was awakened. He began to attend church regularly, but God was not content to allow that to be the extent of it. At a church social gathering, Bob found himself seated next to a missionary to Haiti who was visiting to share about his work. He explained that there was a real need for a hospital to be built, but though they had land and resources for the job, they did not know exactly how to proceed with building the structure. As a bit of a joke, Bob piped up and said, "Well, you've got all the people you need for that job right here around this table. I'm a general contractor... and he went around the table naming off an architect, a masonry worker and a steel fabricator. Bob thought it was less funny a month later when he landed in Haiti to survey the site. He ended up staying for several months to oversee the project, and the men seated at that table each came down to build the hospital, just like Bob had said they could.

When the hospital was completed, on the flight home, Bob told his wife that it had been good to finish the project but he was glad to leave Haiti and hoped never to return. Later that year Bob represented his church at the National Missionary Convention to explain some of the work that he had overseen while in Haiti. While there, he heard speakers & missionaries sharing around the theme, "Who Will Go?" The call to serve was very compelling, and at the end of one session several hundred people stepped forward to demonstrate their willingness to take the Good News wherever God might have them go. Bob was not one of them. He was driving home in his own bright red corvette, wrestling with what he had heard at the conference (the question, "Who will go?") and what he had seen in Haiti, and he heard a loud voice in the car. To his surprise, the voice was his own and he was saying, "I will do it!"

Bob sold his construction company and decided to pour all of his resources into establishing a mission in Haiti. Today, he and Gretchen live in Haiti ten months out of the year, and Lifeline Christian Mission feeds 50,000 Haitians a day, has established 14 churches where thousands gather each week for worship, & employs thousands of Haitians allowing them to make a decent wage for their families. But God was not content to allow that to be the extent of it. Lifeline is now established in Honduras, El Salvador, Cuba, Canada and currently is working with the Navajo Nation in Arizona.

Listen, I don't know what it is that God is calling you to do in faith. I don't know what it will look like for you to step out in faith and trust Him. It will look differently for you than it did for Bob Devoe, or for Gideon, but it might be no less challenging. Maybe God is calling you to step out in faith to pursue a change in the direction of your life. Maybe He is calling you to be generous and to trust Him with your resources and your time. Maybe He's calling you to speak on His behalf or trust Him with a big decision. I only know that our God longs for us to trust Him, to place our faith in Him, and allow Him to lead us.

If you've ever doubted God's intentions, if you've ever questioned how valuable you are in His eyes, you need only reflect back on last weekend. Jesus shows us the lengths that God is willing to extend Himself on our behalf. Jesus demonstrates the loving concern of our God. He walked a path of pain and suffering. He laid down His life so that we could have life. He gave everything, so that we could be with Him. Don't you see, His presence is not only what our heart's long for, but He longs to be with us too.

He is with us! Won't you trust Him?