

Heroes of the Faith: Gideon – “Strength in Weakness”

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Judges 6:1-16, Judges 7, 2 Corinthians 12:9

Many of you may remember the movie *“The Blues Brothers.”* John Belushi and Dan Ackroyd played a couple of ex-convict wanna-be musicians who were trying to raise money for an orphanage that was threatened with closure. Whenever they were asked about their work, they had a standard response: *“We’re on a mission from God.”* And they always said it like they believed it. The central joke of the movie was the very idea that these two crazy, inept people could, in any way, be on mission from God and accomplish something really significant – and of course that’s exactly what they do in their bumbling way.

This is our story. The fact is, you and I are on a mission from God. God has called each of us to serve him in some pretty significant ways. And the amazing thing is that He wants to use the likes of us, weak and inept though we may be.

What is our mission from God you ask? Well, it’s both general and specific. Generally, you and I called to follow Jesus and be like him. We are to live under the rule of his love. We are called to proclaim his love in word and deed, living in such a way that others will be drawn to him and become citizens of his kingdom. That’s our general mission in life, and that is a pretty high calling.

But God also gives you and me specific mission assignments, and those assignments depend upon our gifts, our personalities, our interests, our stage in life, and the particular situations in which God has placed us. So many of us struggle and even agonize trying to figure out what God wants us specifically to do at a given moment. We wish God would speak audibly to us so that there is no doubt what our personal mission is to be. We wish there was some sort of sign from heaven or some great vision or dream. We wish an angel would drop down from heaven and tell us what to do.

Actually, I think we make the process of discerning God’s call upon our lives too mysterious and complicated. Pastor John Ortberg suggests we think of the discernment of God’s call this way: *“God’s call on my life occurs where the interests, talents and personality God has given me intersect with the needs of the world.”*

I think if we are at all listening to God and listening to our own lives, prayerfully, God will make it clear what he wants us to do. God’s call will not necessarily come in a supernatural way. More often than not, that call will come as an inner compulsion or special burden or some great passion he puts on our heart. It may be a particular person we need to serve, or a problem we just have to solve, or an issue that just has to be dealt with, or a relationship that must be repaired, or a cause that powerfully draws our participation. God’s particular call is an inner compulsion - *“that thing we just gotta to do.”* For us to properly respond, the timing has to be

right in our life. I believe we will know when it's time to act; the opportunity will present itself at the opportune time – the right doors will open.

It is also important to realize that God's call will often come to us as a "God-sized" task – that is, it will be something that we cannot possibly accomplish alone in our own power and strength.

Henry Blackaby writes, *"I have come to the place in my life that, if the assignment I sense God is giving me is something that I know I can handle, I know it is probably not from God. The kind of assignments God gives in the Bible are always God-sized. They are always beyond what people can do, because he wants to demonstrate his nature, his strength, his provision, and his kindness to his people and to a watching world."*

Gideon was given just such a "God-sized" task. In his case, an angel did in fact, drop down from heaven and tell him what to do (yes – he had a big advantage over us). And the task seemed overwhelming. He was charged with leading an army against a very powerful foe. His initial response to this mission assignment is very instructive.

Let's visit the story. It was a moment of crisis for Israel. Because of their disobedience to God, the people of Israel were losing their power and their grip on the land. They were constantly being oppressed by the Midianites - a desert people descended from Abraham's second wife, Keturah (which makes them Israel's cousins). The Midianites took advantage of Israel's weakness at every turn, raiding their villages, carrying off their animals and cutting down their crops. Israel's life was miserable and uncertain, but - praise be to God - God was gracious and merciful and chose to come to Israel's aid and bring their suffering to an end.

So God initiated his plan to deliver his people from their suffering by sending an angel to a fellow by the name of Gideon. The angel greeted him with the words: *"Hail Mighty Warrior!"* This is actually pretty comical, for Gideon was anything but a mighty warrior. He was a man who, like the other Israelites, was living in fear, trying to keep his food and his belongings away from the enemy. He was hiding out in a winepress, hidden from view, lest he be discovered and lose everything and be killed.

"Hail, Mighty Warrior! The Lord is with you, and you are going to save your people from Midian's hand."

And Gideon, said, *"Yeah, right!"*

Just about anybody at the time would have said the same. "Yeah, right." A very unlikely choice to be sure: a poor, frightened farmer from a little-regarded family with no military experience appointed to lead an army to save his people! The Blues Brothers might have been a better choice!

It is very telling how Gideon responded initially to his mission assignment.

The first thing he did was to blame God for his predicament and for the plight of his people. *“So the Lord is with me? Where was God when I needed him? Where has he been all my life? How could he have allowed me and all his people to suffer such misfortune? What happened to all the signs and wonders the Lord used to perform on our behalf? Did he go into retirement? Did he stop caring? How could he abandon us like that?”* These, of course, were all very human questions, for which we don’t always get a satisfactory answer. What we don’t often realize is that we human beings are often responsible for bringing down upon ourselves our own suffering when we choose to ignore God’s commands – which was in fact the case with the Israelites. But then, it’s easier to blame God.

One response to God’s call upon our lives, therefore, is to throw up our hands in despair and blame God for all our problems. We can choose to complain about the state of the world instead of listening to God and doing something about it. We can choose to curse the darkness, instead of lighting a candle. We can play the blame game and never heed God’s call to take action. Lots of people choose just such a course. They are whiners and not much more.

The angel didn’t answer Gideon’s theological questions about God’s seeming absence. To his credit, Gideon was willing to entertain the notion that God was up to something. Maybe God hadn’t abandoned his people after all. But surely, God had the wrong man! *“Surely Lord, you can’t mean me. My clan is the weakest in the area, and I am the least in my family.”*

Given the nature and size of his mission from God, Gideon was only too aware of his weaknesses and his limitations, and he began to make excuses why he the Lord could not use him. *“There’s got be someone else, Lord, I’m no mighty warrior.”*

This is yet another possible response to God’s call upon our lives, when it becomes evident what we are supposed to do. We can think of all the reasons why we are not the people for the job: we don’t know enough, we are not smart enough, we are not rich enough, or influential enough, or strong enough. We don’t have enough faith. We just don’t have what it takes. So aware are we of our own inadequacies, we may fail to heed the call; we may miss the opportunity to make a difference; we can become disobedient servants. Like Jonah of old, God calls and we run away. How many opportunities for service have God’s people missed and dismissed, because of feelings of inadequacy? Because of excuses?

But Gideon, again to his credit, did not run away. And after he pointed out all his weaknesses and limitations and inadequacies and explains why he can’t do it, the angel says, *“Of course you can’t. But God can!”*

The Lord says, *“I will be with you.”*

And that makes all the difference in the world. Because you see, *it is not so much who you are, but who you are with.*

When God calls us, it is always God and us doing it together. We are not called just to work *for* God. We are called to work *with* God. And God offers his strength in our weakness and enables us to do far more abundantly than we ever dreamed possible.

It's interesting that when God gives someone a mission assignment, the call almost always goes out to those who are weak and lacking in self-confidence. Think about it. Take Moses for example. When God called to Moses out of the burning bush and told him to go to Pharaoh, Moses was anything but self-confident. He gave one excuse after another as to why he was not the man for the job: *"I stutter too much. Send my brother."* But God assured him of his presence and gave him strength even in his weakness.

Jeremiah was given an assignment to speak a prophetic word to the kingdom of Judah, but Jeremiah complained: *"I don't speak very well and I am too young."* And God said, *"I am with you and will rescue you."*

The Lord called his disciples to carry on his mission – those followers of his were basically a rag-tag bunch of nobodies. They, too, were anything but self-confident – that is, until the day of Pentecost when God's Spirit fell upon them and gave them extraordinary power in their witness. That could only have come from the Lord.

The Apostle Paul rightly points out that this is a cause for wonder:

^{1Co 1:26} Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

^{1Co 1:27} But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

^{1Co 1:28} He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,

^{1Co 1:29} so that no one may boast before him. . .

"Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

Even the Apostle Paul, who seemed so full of himself before his conversion – so proud and self-confident, had to be thrown off his high horse and humbled and made aware of his weakness, before God could use him. Indeed Paul had his own challenges – health challenges it seems – that kept him continually dependent upon God. He learned that God's strength was made perfect in his weakness, and if he had anything to boast of, it was God's power, not his own.

You see, God is not looking for people who are unusually gifted and naturally strong and self-confident and full of themselves. He is looking for people, who, though weak, are above all willing to be used by God. They are willing to trust God to give them the power and strength they need to accomplish the mission given to them by God. They are willing to walk with God.

And that is incredible good news for people like you and me – people who don't necessarily have everything all together -people who are not super-extraordinary in their abilities and skills and have tons of self-confidence. He is looking for people, who, though weak and limited in

their abilities – and who know that to be so - nevertheless believe in God, and believe God will give them everything they need to fulfill their mission.

That was the great thing about Gideon; while owning his own weaknesses, he made himself available to be used by God and was willing to move beyond excuses to action, trusting God's power and provision.

To be sure, that trust had to be developed over time. Gideon was always asking the Lord for signs; he was always asking God to prove his presence with him. But the Lord very patiently worked with him, but his faith grew and he became a very effective servant.

In fact, Gideon became a hero – written up in the hall of faith in the book of Hebrews – having won a very impressive victory for God's people. That story is well-told in Judges, Chapter 7. Briefly, God asked Gideon to pare down his army to 300 soldiers – which he did, using a very interesting method – which you can read about. And then, equipped with jars and trumpets and torches, the 300 surrounded the Midianite camp in the dark of night. When, at the signal, they all sounded their trumpets and shouted in unison and broke the jars and waved their torches, they caused such surprise and confusion that the Midianites fell on one another's swords and those that escaped fled for their lives.

Only God could have made that possible. Only God could have brought that victory about. The people of Israel had no reason to boast. It wasn't their cleverness or the cleverness of Gideon that won the day; it was the power and strength of God.

Can you identify with Gideon? I certainly can. I look at my calling from God and my natural inclination is to focus on my weaknesses, my ineptness, my fallibility, and my general inadequacy. But the good news is that in spite of all that, God can indeed use people like me. Our strength is in God, not in ourselves. All we need do is trust God. And if we do, God will use us to accomplish extraordinary things. We learn that his grace is sufficient for us; and his strength is made perfect in weakness.

It's not so much who you are, but who you are with. We have a mighty God whose power is limitless, and who is calling each of us to mission. God wants to partner with us. The Lord is with us. Do we believe that?

Gideon's trust in God and his willingness to take action made him a hero in the eyes of all people of faith. But the true hero of the story is God himself, who make all things possible for those who believe in him.

You and I are on a mission from God. Live by faith, and God will lead you from strength to strength. Amen.