

# Gideon Part 1: Faith and Fleeces

## Intro:

Today we are going to start a mini-series on one of the most famous and well known judges in the bible, this judge has often inspired many men and women to stand up for God, take a leap of faith, or work through a season where they are struggling to trust in God. He is the golden boy of the judges, most people's favorite judge, today we're going to be talking about Gideon.

However this story of the seemingly timid wheat farmer turned valiant warrior has a dark side which not many people know about. I believe Gideon's story is a commentary on the tendency of people to exalt leaders and influencers into the position of a king or god. This story is about just how easily, despite the best attempts and purest motives of leaders to get rid of idolatry, to become the very idols that they seek to destroy. The story of Gideon, as we will see, is more about idolatry than it is about faith. Though I don't think we should let that deter us from being invigorated by the power that this story has for the timid and weak in faith.

Today, we are going to walk through the rise of Gideon, or as I like to call him "The Axe of Ophrah". At the heart of this Judges' origin story is what seems to be a field manual on how to discern God's will when your faith is tested. Today we're going to be talking about Faith and Fleeces, here we go.

I would like to start out this podcast by giving my thesis statement from the Gideon story. If you remember back to middle school or high school, your teacher may have made you write a thesis statement when you started a paper. A Thesis statement is a short statement, usually one or two sentences, that summarizes the main point or claim of an essay, or research paper.

At the time I hated thesis statements, but now, I actually find them really helpful to summarize what I'm going to talk about. Okay, so this is my thesis statement; I believe that Gideon's story is actually not primarily about faith, but rather idolatry and what you do with power and influence.

Now, this may seem outright wrong to many people. After all, this is Gideon we're talking about, he's probably one of the first characters from the bible that comes to mind when most people hear the word "Faith".

Worry not, we are going to talk about Gideon's faith and the signs that he asks God to perform for most of this podcast. However, the next two podcasts are going to be about what Gideon and his son will do with all the fame and power that was won through his faith. That's because a bulk of the text about Gideon is actually not about his battle with the Midianites and his famous requests for some signs from God, but rather most of Gideon's story is about what happens after the battle with the Midianites and what Gideon's son, Avimelech does after Gideon's death.

Okay, with that being said, we are actually going to be talking about faith and asking for signs today. So, let's jump into Gideon's origin story, or as I like to call him "The Axe of Ophrah". I'd like to start out with some trivia and some facts about Gideon. First, Gideon is from the tribe of Manasseh. Manasseh was like the state of Virginia in that it was split into two regions, Manasseh East of the Jordan and Manasseh West of the Jordan, Gideon was probably from West Manasseh. The Manasseh in the promised land.

Did you know, that Gideon was most likely an adult when he was called by God? Most likely he also has a wife (or a concubine), and he was probably in his 30s during his initial calling. I say this because he has a child that shows up at the end of his battle with Midian who seems to be traveling with his army. Gideon is also probably fairly well off. I say this because he has ten slaves who help him cut down the family Asherah Pole; and slaves at this time were not cheap.

You may have noticed in the intro that I called Gideon “The Ax of Ophrah”. That’s because his name, “Gideon” means something like “To hack, to Hew, or to cut down”. I should note here, that Gideon’s name does not point to his battle with Midian, or any of the signs that he asks for, instead his name seems to refer to the time when he cut down his Fathers’ Asherah Pole. As a side note here, I thought about trying to give Gideon a nick name like the Hack Ringing, no sorry, the Slack Hinging, no, it was the Hash slinging Slasher from SpongeBob. But I thought that might be a bit corny. So, I opted to nick name him “The Axe of Ophrah”.

Now, Gideon has an actual nick name that he is given in the bible, which is probably better than what I like to call him, and that is JeruBaal, or Yeru-Ba’al. Yeru-Ba’al means “Let Ba’al” contend. Gideon is given this nickname because, again, when he cut down his fathers’ Asherah pole he also tears down an altar to the Canaanite god, Ba’al, and when he does this, his father keeps the whole town from killing Gideon. His father tells the towns’ people, “Will you contend for Baal?” and “If he (That is Ba’al) is a god, let him contend for himself.”

So, again, both of Gideon’s names, his real name and the nick name, surround the cutting and tearing down of his families’ idols, not his defeat of Midian or the times he asked for signs from God. This should, in my opinion be very telling to us about what Gideon’s story is about. If you couldn’t tell already from listening to this podcast so far, names in the bible are really important and often times very symbolic. And both of Gideon’s names, point not to his faith in God, or asking for signs, but rather, to the cutting down of idols.

One more tangent before we get into Gideon’s story. Something else that is very symbolic and prevalent throughout Gideon’s story are the numbers 3 and 2. Numerology or the study of numbers, in the bible can be really important to understanding many stories in the bible. Just think about what comes to mind when you think of the number 3, Jesus rose on the third day. What about the number 6? Probably the devil or Satan. 10 alternatively, probably brings to mind the 10 commandments or the 10 plagues.

Numbers in Gideon’s story will be very prevalent and pretty important. Gideon’s story will go from a curious amount of sets of 3 to a lot of pairs of 2. Here, I would like to lay a bit of ground work involving the symbolism of the numbers 3 and 2 before we jump into Gideon’s story. This will help us for the next 2 podcasts as well, because I believe these numbers 3 and 2 are very symbolic and representative of the messages in those parts of the story.

Okay, so let’s start by fleshing out what the numbers 3 and 2 symbolize in the bible, so that we can apply them to this story. Here’s a few instances where the number 3 comes up in the bible. Adam and Eve have 3 children, Cain, Abel, and Seth. Noah also has 3 children, Shem, Hem, and Japheth. Jonah spent 3 days in the belly of a fish. The Israelites ask Pharoah to spend 3 days in the wilderness to worship Yahweh, and that act of asking Pharoah to worship their God is like a test for Pharoah. When they do get to the Desert, the Israelites almost immediately spend 3 days without water before they unfaithfully test God, and are given water from a rock by God.

After Israel leaves Mount Sinai, 3 day’s journey, they start to complain. Samson gives a parable to his in-laws that stumps them for 3 days. The Israelites have 3 sacred festivals that require them to go to Jerusalem; Unleavened bread (Passover), Pentecost, and the festival of Tabernacles. In

the new Testament, Jesus was tempted 3 times by Satan in the desert. And most famously, Jesus rose from the dead on the 3rd day.

Okay, that was a lot of 3's, so what does the number 3 in the Bible represent? Well, first, I believe it represents the inheriting of promises, salvation, and completeness. If you noticed it was usually the 3rd generation, and the third child that brings salvation; Abraham and Isaac were faithful and had kids, but Jacob is the one with 12 kids and was the one whom the nation of Israel was named after. Additionally, Adam and Eve have Cain and Abel, both of whom do not carry on their line, but rather, it is through the line of their 3<sup>rd</sup> child, Seth that the nation of Israel comes.

Also, deliverance is brought about on the 3rd day; most famously Jonah spends 3 days in the belly of a fish before being delivered out of the fish and the depths of the waters. Jesus also rises again on the third day.

However, 3 is also a number of testing, Israel goes 3 days without water and then they famously test God by asking Him for a sign at a place called Meribah, which means testing. Jesus is also tested 3 times by Satan in the wilderness. And, very poignantly here, Samson gives his in-laws a riddle that stumps them for 3 days, but then at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, they threaten Samson's wife and pass the test of the riddle.

3 in the story of Gideon will symbolize both Israel's salvation and also the tests Gideon will be given by God and the tests Gideon will give to God in order to obtain that salvation.

Okay, so where does the number 3 pop up in Gideon's story? First, there isn't just one oppressor who torments Israel, but actually 3, Midian, Amalek, and the sons of the East. These oppressors are said to take 3 types of farm animals from Israel, "sheep, oxen, and donkeys". Israel would hide in 3 kinds of places; dugouts, caves, and strongholds. Gideon brings with him 3 extra tribes initially to attack his oppressors; Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. God then whittles Gideon's men down to 300, and Gideon also divides these men into 3 groups of 100. All those men have three things in their hands; a ram's horn, a clay pot, and a torch.

Importantly for our discussion today, there are 3 signs given to Gideon by God, and a corresponding 3 commands given by God to Gideon. Gideon will have "contention" or trouble with fellow Israelites 3 times, and two of those times he will get revenge on his fellow Israelites. Lastly, Gideon while he has 70 sons, only 3 of them are named, and the 3<sup>rd</sup> son who is named will give an important speech of blessings and curses.

So, that was 3, now what about 2? Let's start with Adam, he is the first human but is split in half and becomes 2 people, those 2 people, Adam and Eve then become 1 in marriage. Abraham and Isaac have 2 sons, both of whom will bring familial quarreling. Abraham has Isaac and Ishmael, while Isaac has Jacob and Esau. In both of these cases and throughout the bible the second born not the first gets the inheritance. Almost every single time there is an issue of inheritance, it is usually the second born that receives the blessing from God, and this will in some way or another bring about some kind of quarreling, sin or jealousy.

Additionally, two siblings throughout Genesis are usually found fighting each other, Cain versus Abel, and I already mentioned Isaac versus Ishmael and Jacob versus Esau. Jacob also has 2 wives who are sisters, Rachel and Leah. These 2 sisters will also fight and quarrel constantly. Additionally, Jacob steals the birthright from his brother Esau twice. Then when Jacob flees from Esau he ends up serving Laban, his uncle for 20 years, and will end up bickering and quarreling with that family member too. When Jacob returns to the promised land with his two wives, he divides his family into 2 camps before meeting his estranged brother Esau. And in fact before Jacob meets Esau he names the place he is at, "Mahanayim" which means "two camps".

Some more instances of 2 in the bible, you need a testimony of 2 people to convict someone of a crime. Noah takes 2 of each animal into the Ark. 2 Angels are sent to Sodom and Gomorrah but 3 men appear to Abraham. Lot has 2 daughters that he offers up in place of the 2 angels.

That was a lot, so 2 in the Bible represents both family and unity, but it also represents sin, strife, quarreling and dissention. In the Garden it is not good for Adam to be alone, and the 1 must become 2 in order for things with Adam to become good. Here the theme of marriage where 2 become one, symbolizes unity and family.

However, after this Cain kills Abel, Esau wants to kill Jacob, Rachel and Leah quarrel, as do Sarah and Hagar, whom I forgot to mention, are the 2 primary wives of Abraham, and the list goes on. Siblings and rival wives are usually in pairs of 2, and those pairs of 2 often times symbolize quarreling and strife within a family. Gideon in the second part of his story where there are many pairs of 2's will quarrel and contend with his own family and countrymen numerous times.

So, where does these pairs of 2's pop up in Gideon's story? Well, after his victory over Israel's oppressors, Gideon will pursue 2 Generals, named Wolf and Raven, and then after them, he will pursue 2 kings name Zebah and Zalmuna. Gideon will punish 2 Israelite towns, Succoth and Penuel for not helping him during his pursuit of his enemies. These are two towns that Jacob founded (and when Jacob founds these towns, 2 is a prominent number in their stories as well). Gideon will try to get 2 children to do his bidding. First he captures a child and forces him to write down the names of the elders of Succoth that he is angry with, Gideon wants to track these elders down because they didn't help him when he was in need. And then he tries to get his own son, Yether to kill the two kings, Zebah and Zalmuna that he captured. As you can see, these are not very noble moves on Gideon's part.

They're also moves that display Gideon's disunity with his fellow Israelites and his family. Lastly, the 3 armies I mentioned earlier become 2. After Gideon's initial victory, only the sons of the east, and those two Midianite kings are said to remain when Gideon pursues the survivors of the battle. It is very ironic then, that Gideon pursues both these "sons of the East" who represent Exile, and these 2 kings, who I think represent glory and prestige. It is like Gideon will exile himself in the pursuit of his own glory.

Like I said earlier, Gideon's story will go from sets of 3 to pairs of 2, mirroring how Gideon and Israel will go from salvation by testing, to familial quarreling and fighting. Gideon goes from testing God and passing God's tests, from saving Israel by faith, to fighting the very people he just fought to save.

Today we are going to focus on Gideon's origin story and the 3 tests that Gideon gives God and which God also gives to Gideon. With all of that being said, let's finally jump into Gideon's origin story.

## Judges 6:1-7

Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of Yahweh, and Yahweh handed them over to Midian for seven years.

The hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of Midian, the sons of Israel made for themselves the dens which were in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For whenever Israel had sown, the Midianites would come up with the Amalekites and the sons of the east and march against them. So they would camp against them and destroy the produce of the land as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel, nor a sheep, ox, or donkey.

For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, they would come in like locusts in number, and both they and their camels were innumerable; and they came into the land to ruin it. So Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh.

Now it came about, when the sons of Israel cried out to Yahweh on account of Midian, that Yahweh sent a prophet-man to the sons of Israel, and he said to them, "This is what Yahweh, the God of Israel says: 'It was I who brought you up from Egypt, and brought you out of the house of slavery. And I rescued you from the hands of the Egyptians, and from the hands of all your oppressors, and I drove them out from you and gave you their land, and I said to you, "I am Yahweh your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live." But you have not listened to My voice.'"

Okay, let's stop there, first I'd like to take a bit of time to talk about the 3 bad guys in this story, Midian, Amalek, and "The Sons of the East". Let's start with Midian, this nation comes from a guy named "Midian". Midian was one of Abraham's sons by one of his side wives, Keturah. Midian means "strife" in Hebrew. You may have heard of this people group before, that's because back in Exodus, Moses' wife, Zipporah is also a Midianite. It is interesting then that even though Zipporah whose father was a priest of God most high, seemed to be allies with Israel back in Exodus they are now oppressing Israel. I think Midian is supposed to be like a close relative and an ally with Israel, which makes the Midianites aggression with Israel a bit of a family affair.

Next, there's the Amalekites. These guys come from someone named Amalek, who was the Grandson of Esau. Amalek means something like "valley dweller". Their tribe occupied the land just south of Israel. These guys are most famous for attacking Israel in Exodus 17, this is the story where Moses lifts his hands and Israel starts winning, and when he lowers his hands they start losing.

After that battle, this is what Yahweh tells Moses to write down about Amalek "I will utterly wipe out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." Moses goes on to say that "Yahweh will have war against Amalek from generation to generation." So while Midian is like a family friend that has turned on Israel, the Amalekites are like a perpetual enemy who consistently stands in the way of Israel inheriting God's promises. Think of these guys being like the Fire Nation from Avatar the Last Airbender or the 1st Order from Star wars. They're the token bad guys of the bible.

Lastly, there's "The Sons of the East". This one is a bit stranger; for sure "the sons of the East" were not an actual nation in the bible. These guys seem to be tapping into the direction "East" in the Bible, which is almost always associated with exile and moving away from God.

So, the Garden of Eden, was actually a garden in a land called Eden, and when it is introduced in Genesis 2, it is said to be in the East of Eden, then Adam and Eve are driven further

East away from the Garden. Cain too, when he is exiled away from the land of Eden, goes to a land called “Nod” or “Wandering”, and Nod is also said to be a land “East” of Eden. The people who build the tower of Babel are said to build it on a plain in the East, when Lot and Abraham separate Lot goes East, to a place that is well watered like the Garden of Eden, and that place happens to be Sodom and Gomorrah, which is not a good place. Abraham sends the sons of his concubines, including Midian to the land of the East. When Jacob has to flee from his brother Esau, he also is said to live in the land of the East.

So, the Eastern land and the Eastern people are then a clear reference to the exiled peoples. In the story of Gideon, Israel is not sent Eastward, like Adam and Eve, or Jacob or Cain, but rather the Eastern dwelling people’s come into and plunder Israel. It is then like the Proverbial direction of Exile, East comes into Israel instead of Israel going East into Exile.

Okay let’s put all of this together, the Midianites, Amalek, and the sons of the East all plunder Israel. This conglomeration of nations seems to me to be a combination of people groups who represent Exile coming down upon the Israelites. Amalek is a people group that Israel finds in the wilderness wandering years and a people that tries to keep Israel from getting into the promises of God. Midian is a place where Moses is exiled to when he flees Egypt. The land of the East is directly correlated with Exile in the Bible. These nations are a 3 fold Exile that forms a perfect and complete plundering of Israel. And very fittingly, they do this for 7 years, and 7 is a number of completion in the bible.

Also, notice how these threefold oppressors are more like a plague on the land than they are foreign invaders who oppress the people of Israel. Their threat is more to the land of Israel, and less to the Israelite’s themselves. They don’t leave any livestock, they are said to be like locusts, they are also said to “come up to the land to destroy it”, so they destroy the land and not just the Israelites, and, as if that were not enough they destroy the crops and the farm animals of the land too.

I find that really fitting, because it shows that Exile can come into your life in very unexpected ways. Gideon himself will soon go from saving Israel to being proverbially exiled from his own people after this salvation he brings about. And he will be the one who partly, brings this exile upon himself via his acts of vengeance and quest for glory.

I would also like to point out that after this plundering and exiling of sorts of the land of Israel there is this strange “Prophet-man” who is sent to Israel to give them a message, but then we are not given any rebuttal by Israel, or any circumstance or situation in which this message is given. Actually, this prophet-man gives this message to Israel after they cry out to Yahweh because of their oppression. So this message is like God’s response to Israel’s crying out for help. I find this a little weird, like we are just given two sentences of the message from this un-named prophet-man to the people of God. I think what’s going on here is that this prophet is giving us a window into how God feels about Israel. And the emotions sound more of an angry spouse, or a frustrated parent to me.

I should also point out here that this is a prophet-man, again, there is a word in Hebrew to denote a male and female prophet, but the authors have added in the word “man” in Hebrew here. I think this is similar to our previous story with Deborah who was called a “prophet-woman” instead of a prophetess. Whereas in Deborah’s story her being a “woman” was drawn to our attention, here the authors are drawing attention to this prophet being male.

I should note also the message of the prophet-man here is about how Yahweh saved Israel from Egypt and commanded them not to worship the gods of the land they are living in. I interpreted this whole interaction as God venting to the Israelites. It is almost like the Israelites are a child that has broken a rule, yet again, and have hurt themselves because they broke that rule. When

they go to God, He sounds like an angry parent that reminds them why they are in pain, because they broke the rule.

But here, I should note that the very next verse is going to be about Yahweh sending His angel to Ophrah, to raise up Israel's next savior. So, while the prophet-man's words for God are very angry, and laced with frustration, God's actions show His compassion and love for Israel. Again, let's remember the number 3 here, it is about both testing, and salvation. And through this prophet-man's message we can see that Israel has failed the test, in that they have not listened to the voice of God. But we also see God raising up a savior to rescue His people, despite the fact that they have failed the test.

So that is Gideon's enemies, and the set up to the story, what about Gideon's calling?

#### Judges 6:11-24

"Then the angel of Yahweh came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Yoash the Abiezerite, as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites.

And the angel of Yahweh appeared to him and said to him, "Yahweh is with you, valiant warrior." Then Gideon said to him, "O my Master, if Yahweh is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did Yahweh not bring us up from Egypt?' But now Yahweh has abandoned us and handed us over to Midian." And Yahweh turned to him and said, "Go in this strength of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?"

But he said to Him, "O Master, how am I to save Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house."

Yet Yahweh said to him, "I will certainly be with you, and you will strike Midian as one man." So Gideon said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, then perform for me a sign that it is You speaking with me. Please do not depart from here until I come back to You, and bring out my offering and lay it before You." And He said, "I will remain until you return."

Then Gideon went in and prepared a young goat and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour; he put the meat in a basket and the broth in a pot, and brought them out to him under the oak and presented them.

And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so. Then the angel of Yahweh put out the end of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire came up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. Then the angel of Yahweh departed from his sight. When Gideon perceived that he was the angel of Yahweh, Gideon said, "Oh, Master Yahweh! I have seen the angel of Yahweh face to face!" But Yahweh said to him, "Peace to you, do not be afraid; you shall not die." Then Gideon built an altar there to Yahweh and named it Yahweh is Peace. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezerites."

#### Bible Conspiracy Theory

Okay, first of all did you catch the set of 3 here? Gideon gives the angel a 3 course meal as a sacrifice; meat, bread and broth. Secondly, I would like to point out, as many people have, that the

Angel of Yahweh begins His conversation with Gideon by addressing Gideon's identity before addressing Gideon's calling.

This brings me to our Bible conspiracy theory of the week (Cue conspiracy sound), here's my bible conspiracy; What if the Angel of Yahweh went to Gideon, of all people, because he knew that Gideon was already toying with the idea of a rebellion? What if the Angel knows that Gideon is wanting to attack the Midianites, what if He's trying to nudge Gideon along to get him to do what he wants to do, but has been too afraid to go through with?

Here's my reasoning for this theory, The Angel walks up to Gideon and just starts talking to him with no introduction what so ever, He just says, "Yahweh is with you mighty warrior". And Gideon's response is even more telling, instead of asking who this guy is, or why he would possibly call him a warrior, Gideon says "if Yahweh is with us, then why has all this happened to us?" Gideon protests and struggles with the idea that Yahweh could possibly be with him and his people if they are going through such a hard time.

I think Gideon's response betrays what is actually on his heart, not the fear of the Midianites, or his ineptitude as a warrior, though it does seem like he feels inept, but I think primarily Gideon is struggling with why it feels as though God has abandoned His people. Gideon's primary struggle isn't his identity as the least of his family, but rather it is His faith and trust in God.

Okay, that was my Bible conspiracy theory of the week; as we continue to walk through this story, we are going to see Gideon begin to come up with his plan of how to attack Midian. And it looks like God gives Gideon some of the seeds for His battle plan. But He will never tell Gideon how to actually attack the Midianites. So, as we go through the rest of this story, look out for the things that God leaves up for Gideon, and the things that God specifically commands Gideon to do. In other words, God will at times be very specific in how Gideon is supposed to do something, like how he is supposed to whittle down his troops; And at times, God will be very vague in what He commands Gideon to do, like here when He simply tells Gideon to strike down the Midianites.

That's enough conspiracy theories, let's get back to the story at hand, I would like to point out that both Gideon and the Prophet-Man cite the Exodus narrative. The Prophet-Man cites the exodus narrative as the reason to see God's continued faithfulness toward Israel, and almost like an incriminating proof as to why Israel should not have followed after other idols. Gideon however, cites the exodus narrative as a reason why God is not faithful toward Israel.

Gideon sees God's past faithfulness and concludes that since his life does not look like the Exodus from Egypt, God must not be faithful. It is ironic then, that the Angel is essentially putting the onus on Gideon to be faithful towards God before he can see God being faithful towards Israel. In other words, Gideon is pointing the finger at God, and asking why He isn't saving Israel, but God is pointing the finger right back at Gideon and calling him to be Israel's savior.

My take away for this is to be careful how you interpret history, and how you see the stories of the bible. Sometimes, if your life doesn't feel like the bible, it may not be God's fault, but rather your own sin in the way of God's promises.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Sign: 3 course meal

So, after Gideon protests that God seems to have abandoned Israel, the Angel only now commands Gideon to go in his own strength and attack Midian. I should note here, that the Angel doesn't give Gideon a plan, nor does He promise to have some men meet up with him, or tell him to rally some troops; He simply tells Gideon to attack Midian, not how to go about doing that. I think, this is because the Angel knows that Gideon is able to come up with the plan, to figure out how to attack

Midian, and to lead Israel in war, and I believe the Angel thinks that Gideon just needs the belief in himself to do so.

And now this brings us to the beginning of Gideon's 3 signs, and the corresponding 3 commands that God gives Gideon. Most people know that Gideon asks God for a sign of the famous fleece, where Gideon asks God to make a fleece that he lays out wet and the ground dry, and vice versa. But, I didn't know until studying this story out that Gideon asks for 2 more signs. And it seems like every time Gideon asks God for a sign, God correspondingly commands or requires Gideon to do something with each of these signs.

So, this first sign that Gideon asks for is to give a sacrifice to this angel. I should admit that this is a bit of a strange sign. It seems more like Gideon is asking to talk to this stranger over a meal. However, before he goes and prepares this meal, he asks the Angel to "Perform for me a sign that it is You speaking with me."

So, what is this? A sign, an offering to God, or a hospitable gesture? Did Gideon expect the Angel to burn up this meal in a pillar of fire? Or was he just trying to sit down and have a meal with this stranger to ask him how he should go about attacking Midian? Well, I don't know, but here's my best guess; I think that we can conclude from this that Gideon is needing some sort of confirmation or sign that this stranger he's talking to, really is speaking on God's behalf. Let's remember here that Gideon gives the angel 3 things in his meal, and that 3 symbolizes often times, tests and testing. This I think informs us that at the very least, this meal could be a test from Gideon, to see if this stranger he is talking to, really is speaking on behalf of God.

And here is where I think we can begin to glean some wisdom from Gideon's signs, they seem to be, in my opinion asked out of a heart of Gideon's weak faith, but it also seems to me like Gideon asks for them because he is unsure if God is really the one telling him to do these things. They are, in fact mini tests' which Gideon is giving to God.

I should note here, that Gideon's story feels a lot like Moses' calling at the burning bush. Moses also was given many "signs" by God when he is called, Moses is also very unsure of himself and his ability to liberate God's people. In fact, in Moses' story, Moses is given signs and those signs seem to be a gracious concession from God. But when the Israelites ask God for a sign, their requests for a sign are painted as a sin, and as them collectively testing God.

Similarly, here Gideon asking God for a sign, while it may be implied to be Gideon testing God, it does not, in my opinion, seem to be viewed negatively by the authors, at the very least it seems neutral. Neither sinful nor righteous. But, I will say that Gideon only asks God for those signs, when God has commanded or is about to command Gideon to step out in faith.

So, it feels like Gideon's requests for signs are a way of God meeting Gideon where he is at. And Israel's requests for signs are a way of them refusing to meet God where He is calling them to go. I think the wisdom to be gained here is that you can either ask God for signs out of a desire to be more faithful and ultimately to obey Him; or you can ask for a sign out of a desire to refuse to believe in God and out of refusal to obey Him.

It's almost like Gideon is telling God "I want to believe in you, I just need some help." While, the Israelites in the desert were saying "We will only believe in you if you meet our requirements." It's also worth noting here that, while Gideon does seem to test this stranger and to ask him for a sign, the Israelites test God after they have already seen multiple signs from Moses and God. They should already know to trust in Moses' words and God's direction. In other words, Gideon asks a stranger for a sign before God has given Him any confirming signs, so I do think there is merit in Gideon testing Him to see if He is from truly God or not. Whereas the Israelites test God after they have been given multiple miraculous signs. That is at least how I read this text.

Okay, let's keep going, because there are still two more commands and two more signs to go.

Judges 6:25-35

“Now on the same night Yahweh said to him, “Take your father’s bull even a second bull seven years old, and tear down the altar of Baal which belongs to your father, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it; and build an altar to Yahweh your God on the top of this stronghold in an orderly way, and take a second bull and offer a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down.” Then Gideon took ten men from his servants and did as Yahweh had spoken to him; and because he was too afraid of his father’s household and the men of the city to do it by day, he did it by night.

When the people of the city got up early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal had been torn down, and the Asherah which had been beside it had been cut down, and the second bull had been offered on the altar which had been built.

So they said to one another, “Who did this thing?” And when they searched and inquired, they said, “Gideon the son of Joash did this thing.” Then the men of the city said to Joash, “Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has torn down the altar of Baal, and indeed, he has cut down the Asherah which was beside it.” But Joash said to all who stood against him, “Will you contend for Baal, or will you save him? Whoever will contend for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, since someone has torn down his altar!” Therefore on that day he named Gideon Jerubbaal, that is to say, “Let Baal contend against him,” because he had torn down his altar.

Then all the Midianites, the Amalekites, and the sons of the east assembled together; and they crossed over and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. So the Spirit of Yahweh clothed Gideon like clothing, and he blew a trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called together to follow him. And he sent messengers throughout Manasseh, and they also were called together to follow him; and he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they came up to meet them.”

Notice that, while I said Gideon’s story will go from sets of 3’s to pairs of 2’s, this section has a few 2’s in it. Gideon is told by God to take “a second bull”, whatever that means, and sacrifice it on a make shift altar to Yahweh. Additionally, Gideon tears down 2 things, an Asherah Pole and an Altar to Ba’al, before building his altar to Yahweh on top of it. Let’s remember that 2 usually represents unity and division in the bible, and this command from God creates contention and division between Gideon and his own home town.

Also notice how Gideon takes liberties to obey God in his own way here, God is, yet again, pretty vague in what He commands Gideon to do, He does not specify if Gideon should do this by himself, nor what time of day, nor how to do it. Gideon gets help via 10 extra servants, and he chooses to do this by night, because he probably knew how scandalous this act would have been.

This brings me to my next point, why does Gideon have to cut down the Asherah Pole before going to fight Midian? This wasn’t in God’s original command. Originally, God simply commanded

Gideon to defeat the Midianite oppressors. Why include this act, which, by the way could have turned Gideon's tribe against him.

When you think about it, this move is not the best way to start raising support for men to go risk their lives with you. Gideon is taking, a very, very unpopular and frowned upon political position. I say political, because Gideon is essentially infringing upon his fellow Israelites' freedom of religion. This would be akin to Gideon turning his local family pagan temple into a church, overnight. Then, all of the pagan worshippers who would normally go to worship there would wake up the next morning and see a cross where their pagan idols should be. Today, if a Christian did this, I think other Christians would be angry with Gideon!

That's because Gideon is essentially forcing his family, and also his town to not worship the pagan gods of Ba'al or Asherah. And, he is also limiting their worship to Yahweh alone, essentially without anyone else's consent.

Now, let's answer that question, why did God command Gideon to tear down this pagan altar and set up another one to Yahweh in its place? I think it is because God was wanting Gideon to take a very public stance on whom he worshipped. I also think, this was to sift out anyone in his family and hometown who was not totally committed to the worship of Yahweh. After all, many of these men may have been the first recruits to go to war with him.

Now, I think it's important to point out that it is only after Gideon cuts down the Asherah Pole, that the Spirit comes on him like clothing and only now does he also rally the troops. I believe there's a lot of wisdom to be found here in how one receives the Holy Spirit. A great bible study that I would recommend would be to look up every single instance where the Spirit comes upon someone in the bible, and to ask what did that person do to get the Spirit come on them.

You will notice very quickly, that though there are some commonalities, it is all and all pretty hard to find an easy formula. That's because the Spirit often times comes on people in many different ways. I think that's because what it looks like to trust in God looks very different for each person. What I may need to do in order to place my trust in God and receive His Spirit looks really different than what my roommate or my pastor may need to do.

For Gideon, it seems like God knows that he needs to take a public stand for Yahweh, to go against the grain and put some skin in the game before he can have the confidence to assemble an army. Which, did you notice, is not something that God commands Gideon to do. We should remember that God told Gideon to strike down Midian, but then, later that same night, God comes to Gideon again and gives him his second command, to cut down this pagan shrine. It almost feels like God knows Gideon may be delaying, or second guessing himself. I imagine that he may have been on his bed, or pacing his house, trying to rack his brain on how to assemble his army. But, then God comes to him in some sort of vision and tells him to focus on the Spiritual, and gets to the heart of the matter. This command, I believe is more for Gideon and his confidence, than it is for God.

Lastly, I would like to point out that the Spirit is said to "Clothe Gideon like Clothing". If that sounds, redundant it's because it also sounds redundant in Hebrew. I find it interesting that the way to describe the Spirit in relation to Gideon here is in the metaphor of his clothing, his outward appearance. I thought the Spirit is something that we normally think of as something that works internally? But here, it is primarily an external metaphor that is used, after Gideon has publicly taken a hard stance for God.

I think that some people may need to make a public declaration, and statement for God before they can receive His Spirit. Some people may need to publicly put skin in the game, and their reputation on the line before they receive the Holy Spirit.

Gideon was given a derogatory nickname by his father here, but he also received the Holy Spirit. So, it is almost like Gideon got a bad name with men, and a good standing with God. Would

you be willing to be publicly shamed in order to receive the Holy Spirit? Maybe there are some public idols that you need to take a stance against before you can receive the Spirit? Some very difficult questions for us to ponder, as we go through this story.

So, we'll keep going, now we're getting into Gideon's second sign, and God's third command.

## 2nd Sign - The Fleece

### Judges 6:36-40

“Then Gideon said to God, “If You are going to save Israel by my **hand**, as You have spoken, look, I am putting a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that You will save Israel by my **hand**, as You have spoken.” And it was so. When he got up early the next morning and wrung out the fleece, he wrung the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water.

Then Gideon said to God, “Do not let Your anger burn against me, so that I may speak only one *more* time; please let me put *You* to the **test** only one *more* time with the fleece: let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground.” And God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground.”

## 3rd Command - Whittling Down the Army

### Judges 7:1-8

Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him got up early, and camped beside the Spring of **Trembling**; and the camp of Midian was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley.

And Yahweh said to Gideon, “The people who are with you are too many for Me to hand Midian over to them, otherwise Israel would boast against Me, saying, ‘My own **hand** has saved me.’

Now therefore come, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, ‘Whoever is afraid and **trembling**, is to return and leave Mount Gilead.’” So twenty-two thousand from the people returned, but ten thousand remained.

Then Yahweh said to Gideon, “The people are still too many; bring them down to the water and I will **test** them for you there. So it shall be that he of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall go with you,’ he shall go with you; but every one of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ he shall not go.”

So he brought the people down to the water. Then Yahweh said to Gideon, “You shall put everyone who laps the water with his tongue as a dog laps in one group, and everyone who kneels down to drink *in another*.”

Now the number of those who lapped, putting their **hand** to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people kneeled down to drink water. And Yahweh said to Gideon, “I will save you with the three hundred men who lapped, and will **hand** the Midianites over to you; so have all the *other* people go, each man to his home.” So the three hundred men took the people’s provisions and their trumpets in their **hands**. And Gideon dismissed all the *other* men of Israel, each to his tent, but retained the three hundred men; and the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.”

## The Fleece

Let’s start with Gideon’s test and famous request for a sign through this fleece; notice how the first sign Gideon asks for, the meal he gives to the angel, is implied to be a test, but this request for a sign is explicitly called both a sign and a test by Gideon. Gideon even asks God essentially, “please don’t be mad, but can I test you again?” It’s like he knows this is not a kosher thing to ask for, and that it would probably anger God. This, I think helps us set the context and frame why Gideon isn’t punished for explicitly testing God, even though almost everywhere else in the bible “putting the Lord your God to the test” is considered a sin.

While, Gideon isn’t punished for testing God two times with this fleece, I should note that God turns right around and tests Gideon’s men twice, by whittling down his army 2 times. So, it is almost like God is saying, “Okay Gideon, you can test me, but I’m going to test you right back.”

It should also be noted that Gideon was just endowed with the Holy Spirit, and he almost immediately gets cold feet and begins to doubt God, yet again, right before the battle.

Now you may have also noted that I have emended this translation, and actually translated what is normally called the Spring of Harod in most bibles. Harod means trembling if you couldn’t tell. And for some reason, it has been transliterated in most bibles, which just means the translators have spelled this Hebrew word with English letters.

The reason I have translated this word is because Gideon goes to this “Spring of Trembling”, and then God sends away all his men who are trembling. So, the obvious implication is that this is a place where a lot of Gideon’s men are afraid. This, I think tells us one more reason why God may have asked Gideon to whittle down his army.

Of course, God does tell Gideon that He is whittling down his men so that Israel won’t be able to say “My own hand has saved me”. A good practice when reading the bible is to learn how to spot and highlight key and repeated words as you read through certain passages. Here, in the PDF transcript for this podcast, which you can find in the link in the description on whatever platform you are listening on, you can see that I have highlighted the words “Trembling”, “Test”, and “Hand”. I believe these words all give us reasons as to why God whittles down Gideon’s army with this third and final command.

So, we talked about the words “test” and “trembling”, now what about hand? Well, the first time that “Hand” is mentioned here is when Gideon is asking God for the sign of the Fleece. He tells God to make the fleece wet and the ground dry “If You are going to save Israel by my **hand**, as You have spoken.” So, Gideon is concerned with God saving Israel by his own hand, but God is

concerned with Israel, and maybe by implication Gideon, knowing that it was by God's hand that they were saved.

Now, these weird tests God gives Gideon's men begin to light up; first God sends away all the men who are trembling. Then, there's this strange test where God has the men go down to the water, which, by the way was a stream which was probably coming from that spring of trembling which they camped next to, and he sends away any man who do not use their hand to drink the water. Out of this test, 300 men who used their hand to drink the water are chosen. Lastly, Gideon puts a trumpet into the hands of these 300 men.

So, what is going on with this use of the word "hand"? Well, I think the most plain take away is that God is whittling down Gideon's men so that they will not think that it was by their own hand that they were saved. But, ironically God seems to choose the men who drink water like a dog, by taking their hand, and lapping the water out of their hand. It is like the hand here is showing agency, the men who take agency in drinking their water are given more agency in holding a trumpet. But this whole ordeal and these tests are given so that Israel will know that it is not by their own power or agency that they will achieve military victory, rather, it is through God's agency and dominion that they are saved. I hope that makes sense.

Now, we are going to move onto the last sign of this story, and this time, God is the one who voluntarily gives it to Gideon.

### Judges 7:9-23

"Arise, go down against the camp, for I have handed it over to you. But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp, so that you will hear what they say; and afterward your hand will be strengthened to go down against the camp." So he went down with Purah his servant to the edge of the army that was in the camp.

Now the Midianites, the Amalekites, and all the sons of the east were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

When Gideon came, look, a man was relating a dream to his friend. And he said, "Look, I dreamed a dream; and look, a loaf of barley bread was tumbling into the camp of Midian, and it came to the tent and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down so that the tent collapsed."

And his friend replied, "This is nothing other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has handed over to him Midian and all the camp."

When Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, he bowed in worship. Then he returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise, for Yahweh has handed over to you the camp of Midian!"

And he divided the three hundred men into three columns, and he put trumpets and empty pitchers into the hands of all of them, with torches inside the pitchers. Then he said to them, "Look at me and do likewise. And look, when I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. When I and all who are with me blow the trumpet, then you

also blow the trumpets around the entire camp and say, 'For Yahweh and for Gideon!'"

So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle night watch, when they had just posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands.

When the three columns blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers, they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing, and shouted, "A sword for Yahweh and for Gideon!" And each stood in his place around the camp; and all the camp ran, crying out as they fled. And when they blew the three hundred trumpets, Yahweh set the sword of one against another even throughout the entire camp; and the camp fled as far as the House of The Acacia toward Tsererah, as far as the edge of the Dancing Meadow, by Tahbat. And the men of Israel were summoned from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and they pursued Midian."

So this last sign, I think could be interpreted two different ways. First, I think you can interpret the Midianites interpretation of his friends dream as serious, and a reflection of how afraid the entire Midianite camp is of Gideon. Or, I think you could also take this Midianites interpretation of his friends' dream to be a sarcastic interpretation. Where the Midianite tells his friend, "This is nothing other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash," and "Surely, God has handed all of us over to him."

Either way, I think this is a pretty obvious sign to Gideon, what are the odds that of this whole camp, and all the men Gideon over hears, he would overhear the one guy who had a dream about him the night before, and that this guy's friend gives him such an obvious interpretation of the dream. We should also not forget here that dreams in the understanding of the biblical authors and really most ancient peoples were from the gods, dreams held much more weight and authority to an ancient person, than to us, who might just dismiss them as a sort of night time hallucination.

Also, like I said before, now God is the one who initiates this sign. He must know that Gideon is still afraid, and at this point you feel like God knows Gideon so well that He can sense when Gideon is beginning to doubt, and when He needs that extra little injection of faith. Also, as I've been saying God never tells Gideon how to fight the Midianites. He simply is telling him what to do and leaving the "how" up to Gideon. But, it should be noted that Gideon does have a very well thought out plan. Which is to essentially, pretend to be a bigger army than he really is. I also want to note here, that this plan is something Gideon would most likely not have come up with if God hadn't whittled his army down so much.

So, it's almost like God's commands to Gideon are both to help Gideon formulate a plan, and also to prepare Gideon's heart for the battle. It is like God is giving Gideon hints through His commands, but He still leaves the "how" up to Gideon. I really appreciate this because you can see in this story that God's commands are usually more about the "why", and that sometimes, God leaves the actual plan and the "how" up to us.

Gideon's final plan, when you think about it, is actually one of the best ways for him to defeat Midian. If he had tried to attack this big army head on, he would not have the advantage. But when Gideon is forced to use scare tactics, so to speak, probably because of a combination of that

dream he hears about, and God's whittling down of his army, he suddenly gains a big advantage that he wouldn't otherwise have.

## Take Aways

Okay, let's get into some takeaways and closing thoughts for this episode.

Sometimes I think God is more concerned with us going to battle in the right situations and not how we go to battle. I think that sometimes God wants us to come up with the plan, because all He cares about is us showing up to the battle and giving Him the glory. The commands for Gideon were to prepare his heart, the mind was already prepared. God's preparation for your battles are usually primarily spiritual and secondarily physical or intellectual. They are to ensure He gets the glory and that you are fighting for Him.

Gideon's origin story has been a source of hope and encouragement to those struggling in their faith for a very long time, it shows us that even when we are so weak in our faith that we try to put God to the test, He remains faithful to us. But it also warns us, that there is a test we are going to be put through, and if Gideon could pass that test, so can you.

Outro: That's all I got for y'all today. Next week, we are going to finish Gideon's story, that's right, his story doesn't end here, there's still a lot more left to go. Next time, the story will go from the number three which represents the testing of Gideon and God's salvation, to the number two, which represents unity, and sadly for Gideon's story, disunity, quarreling, and a lot of pettiness within God's family. Thanks again for listening, I'll see y'all next time!



3 signs and 3 commands in Gideon's story, seem to be paired with one another as well.

Command: "Go in this power of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian". -> Sign: Gideon offers a meal/offering, the angel burns it up in fire and leaves. -> Command: That same night God tells him to cut down his father's Asherah pole and build an altar to Yahweh in its place

Sign: Make the Fleece wet and the ground dry and vice versa. -> Command: Whittle down the army, twice, first sends away all the fearful men, and then all the men who don't drink water like a dog.

Command (kinda): God tells Gideon to go down to the valley, Sign: If he is still fearful, he is to take his servant and Puah, they overhear a soldier's dream that is interpreted to be about Gideon destroying their armies.