

Chapter One



Gideon

An Ordinary Man with an Extraordinary Purpose

In 1924, English artist William Wolcott came to New York City to record his impressions of that great metropolis. One morning he was visiting in the office of a former colleague when the urge to sketch came over him. Seeing some paper on his friend's desk, he asked if he could use it.

His friend pointed out that the paper he wanted to use wasn't sketching paper. It was just ordinary wrapping paper.

Not wanting to lose that spark of inspiration, Wolcott took the wrapping paper and pointed out to his friend that nothing is ordinary if you know how to use it.

Then on that ordinary wrapping paper Wolcott drew two sketches. Later that year one of them sold for \$500, and the other for \$1,000—princely sums in 1924. Ordinary wrapping paper in the hands of a great artist became a great masterpiece.

The life of Gideon bears out that truth as well. A friend of Frank Minirth once remarked that Gideon was really just an ordinary person whom God used to do the extraordinary. This remark motivated Frank to study Gideon's life in the biblical record. And the more he studied this man, the more he realized that his friend was right.

When we first meet Gideon in Judges 6, the Midianites were plundering Israel. This had been going on for seven years. Midian was one of the six sons born to Abraham who had been sent east so that only Isaac would inherit the land (approximately seven hundred

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years earlier). Yet each year about harvest time, Midian's descendants would sweep through Israel, stealing the crops and destroying the people's homes. Conditions had become so bad that the Israelites had taken to living in caves. They were scared to death.

In Judges 6:10 we see the root cause of their predicament. God said through one of his prophets, "Also I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; do not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed My voice."

In the book of Judges, we see Israel obeying God for a while and living in happiness and prosperity. Then they would become disobedient, which caused them to end up unhappy and in desperate straits. The Israelites repeated this pattern over and over again: obedience would elevate them; then disobedience would throw them into a tailspin.

Gideon lived during one of these tailspins. The Israelites feared for their lives as well as their livelihoods, and Gideon was right in there with the rest of his people. Judges 6:11–12 says, "Now the Angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth tree which was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon threshed wheat in the winepress, in order to hide it from the Midianites. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him, and said to him, 'The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!'"

Man of valor? Hardly! Here was Gideon, hiding out in a winepress, a depression about three feet deep in a large stone where the grapes were smashed to make wine, hoping to save a little bit of his crops and all of his skin. At this point he could be considered the epitome of human frailty.

But aren't we all? That's the kind of person we can identify with. And that is why God gave us this story of Gideon, an ordinary man, yet one the Lord would make into an extraordinary masterpiece.

Yet the process was not without its challenges. Gideon faced some major roadblocks in becoming the person God intended for him to be, just like many of us do. Let's examine those roadblocks.

Roadblock Number One: Fear

Thirteen-year-old Natalie Gilbert was thrilled to be asked to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at a nationally televised NBA Western Conference playoff game. It was a dream come true. On April 25, 2003, Natalie stood alone at center court in Portland’s Rose Garden Arena, poised to sing. All around her stood a capacity crowd waiting for her to complete this familiar song so that they could get on with the game. Suddenly, she froze. Her mind blanked. Fear left her wordless. Closing her eyes and shaking her head, she appeared on the verge of tears.

Gideon found himself in the clutches of a similar fear. When we first meet him, Gideon is shaking in his sandals down in a winepress. Paralyzed by the threat of the Midian invaders, the best plan of action Gideon could come up with was to hide and hope his enemies would overlook him.

So why did God choose this ordinary man immobilized by fear? Because that is God’s way. We read in 1 Corinthians 1:26–31:

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.”

But what about Natalie? The story goes on. As she stood frozen at center court, Maurice Cheeks, the head coach of the Trailblazers, had pity on her. Quickly, he stepped to her side, put his arm

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around her, and began singing with her. “I didn’t even know if I knew all the words, but as many times as I’ve heard the national anthem, I just went over and continued to sing,” Cheeks told CBS *SportsLine*. “The words started coming back to me and I just tried to help her out.” And he did. Together they made it all the way through, to “the home of the brave.”¹

That’s what God does! When he calls ordinary people to do extraordinary tasks, God does not expect them to do these things on their own. Instead, he comes alongside them in the person of his Spirit and empowers them to do it. It’s as the angel reminded Gideon, “The LORD is with you” (Judges 6:12). What God calls us to do, he empowers us through his presence to complete. He breaks through the paralysis of fear and allows us to make it all the way to “the home of the brave.” He did that for Gideon; he’ll do it for you.

Roadblock Number Two: Doubts

In 1993 FBI agents conducted a raid of the Southwood Psychiatric Hospital in San Diego, which was under investigation for medical insurance fraud. After hours of reviewing medical records, the agents had worked up an appetite. The agent in charge of the investigation called a nearby pizza parlor to order a quick dinner for his colleagues.

According to snopes.com, a Web site dedicated to sleuthing out urban legends, the following telephone conversation actually took place.

Agent: Hello. I would like to order 19 large pizzas and 67 cans of soda.

Pizza man: And where would you like them delivered?

Agent: We’re over at the psychiatric hospital.

Pizza man: The psychiatric hospital?

Agent: That’s right. I’m an FBI agent.

Pizza man: You're an FBI agent?

Agent: That's correct. Just about everybody here is.

Pizza man: And you're at the psychiatric hospital?

Agent: That's correct. And make sure you don't go through the front doors. We have them locked. You'll have to go around to the back to the service entrance to deliver the pizzas.

Pizza man: And you say you're all FBI agents?

Agent: That's right. How soon can you have them here?

Pizza man: And everyone at the psychiatric hospital is an FBI agent?

Agent: That's right. We've been here all day and we're starving.

Pizza man: How are you going to pay for all of this?

Agent: I have my checkbook right here.

Pizza man: And you're all FBI agents?

Agent: That's right. Everyone here is an FBI agent. Can you remember to bring the pizzas and sodas to the service entrance in the rear? We have the front doors locked.

Pizza man: I don't think so.

[Click.]²

Circumstances have a way of creating doubts in our minds. They certainly did for Gideon. The angel had just told him, "The LORD is with you" (Judges 6:12). Gideon surely looked down at the paltry sheaf of grain that he held in his hand; he probably looked over at the shallow hole in the stone where he'd been trying to hide. It's totally understandable that he said: "O my lord, if the LORD 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 not

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the LORD bring us up from Egypt?” But now the LORD has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites” (6:13).

God understands about circumstances. That’s why Gideon was not fried to a crisp by a heavenly lightning bolt. The angel didn’t even rebuke Gideon for his lack of faith. God is open to our doubts. There is no better place to express our doubts than in his presence.

But notice that God also has a solution for our doubts. The Lord replied to Gideon, “Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?” (6:14). Circumstances are open to interpretation (or misinterpretation, as the case may be), but facts are not. No matter what the situation looked like, God had spoken, and that was a fact. Gideon might appeal to circumstances, but God appealed to the facts: “Have I not sent you?”

When faced with doubts, don’t look at your situation, look at what God has said—those are the facts. You might feel unloved, but look at the facts in Romans 5:8 (“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us”). You might worry about the future, but look at Jeremiah 29:11, where a promise to Israel of old applies to you today: “For I know the thoughts [plans] that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” You might be wondering if your needs are going to be met, but consider the facts in Philippians 4:19: “And my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Doubts are built on circumstances; faith is based on facts. Look to God’s Word for the facts.

Roadblock Number Three: An Inferiority Complex

You may have heard the story of the man who paid a visit to his local psychologist. When the doctor asked him what had prompted the appointment, the man said, “I’m suffering from an inferiority complex.” In the ensuing weeks, the psychologist put his new patient through an intensive battery of tests. Next came the long wait while the test results were tabulated and appropriate correlations

were made. Finally, the doctor called the man and asked him to return to the clinic. "I have some interesting news for you," the doctor began.

"What's that?" asked the man.

"It's no complex," the psychologist retorted. "You are inferior."

Feelings of inferiority cause a person to focus upon himself or herself. As a psychiatrist, Frank Minirth has seen this with many clients over the years. This is exactly what we see with Gideon. In Judges 6:15 he says: "O my LORD, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." Gideon felt inferior, and he was right. He had all the facts down pat. Indeed, he *was* the least member of his family; his clan *was* the least clan in their tribe; and their tribe *was* the least tribe of Israel. Gideon wasn't suffering from the wrong perception; he was suffering from the wrong perspective. He saw things as they were, but he failed to see them as they could be with God.

It's good to face the facts, but we always need to keep God in the perspective. None of us by nature has what it takes to do the extraordinary tasks God calls us to achieve. But rather than allowing that to give us a woe-is-me attitude, we should allow it to create a wow-is-God attitude.

Being inferior is nothing to get a complex over; we are inferior when it comes to the supernatural resources needed to accomplish God's purposes. But rather than focus on what we can't do in ourselves, we need to focus on what God can do through us. The Apostle Paul says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). We can say the same.

Roadblock Number Four: Testing God

In an interview with *Spin*, a music magazine, Scott Stapp, the lead singer of the musical group Creed, discussed the impact his strict religious upbringing had on his life: "I constantly found myself asking God to prove himself. . . . I'd lie in bed and say, 'God, if you're real, just make my light go off so I won't doubt it. I promise I'll be the best Christian in the world.'"³

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Perhaps the origin of such an idea can be traced all the way back to Gideon. Gideon asked something similar of God as well. Of all the stories in the book of Judges, the story about the fleece is one of the most familiar. In fact, the expression *putting out a fleece* has crept into English to imply setting up a test.

In Judges 6:25–27 God appeared to Gideon a second time, this time in a vision at night. God instructed Gideon to tear down his father’s altar to Baal and cut down the wooden image associated with it. In its place he was to build an altar to God and sacrifice a bull from his father’s herd, using the wood from the idol as fuel. Gideon did as told, although his fears caused him to do it at night rather than during the day.

Understandably, the townspeople were upset. To make matters worse, all the Midianites and the Amalekites gathered in the Valley of Jezreel to wage war against Israel (vv. 33–34).

Gideon rallied troops from the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and God promised to give him victory over his enemies. But he still wasn’t sure. Instead, he tested God, asking God to prove whether he was really with Gideon by leaving a wet fleece on dry ground. God knew how weak Gideon’s faith was, so God did as Gideon asked. But that one test was not enough for the fragile Gideon. He then asked for another test in which the fleece would be dry and the ground wet! God, ever patient, answered again (vv. 35–40).

Today we often follow the same path Gideon did. We throw out some kind of fleece. We do so by saying, in effect, “God, if this is your will, prove it to me by such and such.” In times of weak faith, this may be the best we can do. But a much better way is to find out what God’s Word says and place our faith in it. The Bible is far more dependable than some self-designated fleece.

Roadblock Number Five: Tested by God

Some years ago at Ohio State University in a huge lecture hall, approximately one thousand students were completing a calculus final. The calculus teacher was not well liked. He was one of those

people who would stand at the front of the class and yell out how much time was remaining before the students' doom was sealed. At the end he would have the students stack the incomplete tests on a huge podium at the front of the room. With a thousand students in the class, this made for quite a mess.

During this particular final, one student who took the test needed a decent grade to pass the class. His only problem with calculus was that he did poorly when rushed, and this instructor standing in the front of the room barking out how much time was left before the tests had to be handed in didn't help him at all. Wanting to assure himself of a good grade, he hardly flinched when the professor said, "Pencils down and submit your Scantron sheets and work to piles at the front of the room." Long after the test was officially over, as the professor prepared to pick up the test papers and leave, the student finally put down his pencil, gathered up his work, and headed to the front of the hall to submit his final.

"What do you think you're doing?" the professor asked as the student stood in front of him about to put down his exam on one of the neatly stacked piles of exams.

"Turning in my exam," retorted the student confidently.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you," the professor gloated, "your exam is late. You've failed it; and consequently, I'll see you next term when you repeat my course."

The student smiled slyly and asked the professor, "Do you know who I am?"

"No," snarled the professor.

The student looked the professor dead in the eyes and said slowly, "I didn't think so," as he lifted up one of the stacks halfway and shoved his test neatly into the center of the stack. Then he turned around and walked casually out of the huge lecture hall.⁴

Neither Gideon nor we have any such hope of anonymity. The Lord knows each one of us, and just as surely as God builds our faith through answered prayer, he will also test our faith. We see that with Gideon.

After all, Gideon was already outnumbered. The Midianites had perhaps 135,000 men in their army (Judges 8:10), whereas

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Gideon's army numbered about thirty-two thousand. The odds were four to one! However, it was possible even with those odds that people might say Gideon had achieved victory in his own strength. So God told Gideon to let everyone in his army who was afraid go home. Only twenty-two thousand men were left. That made the odds six to one. Most of us would have thought of leaving with that first group of ten thousand. The odds, however, still allowed for Gideon's soldiers to get the glory. So God told Gideon to test his men to see who would remain. Gideon led the men to a stream to get a drink of water. Those who lapped the water like dogs were told to remain; the rest were sent home (7:5–7). That left Gideon with an army of only three hundred. The odds were now more than four hundred to one—just God's kind of battle!

Don't be surprised if God tests you. We've seen that God comforts us when we are weak, yet he will also put us in circumstances that will test us and thus build us up. If you have a weak area in your life, be assured God loves you and will comfort you. But be prepared for him to test you as he takes you from being an ordinary person to one who can accomplish extraordinary tasks for him.

What Lies Ahead?

We have seen where Gideon came from. We've examined his road-blocks. Let's now consider his destination.

On a night in about 1400 B.C. we find Gideon's small band of soldiers on a hilltop surveying the Midianites' vast army. You would think that by now Gideon would have confidence in God. But this was not the case; he was still scared to death. God again showed tremendous love, patience, and understanding. He permitted Gideon to slip down into the Midianites' camp and hear a man relaying a dream to a comrade, one that assured Gideon of victory (see Judges 7:9–14 for details).

Bolstered by this assurance, Gideon gathered his men. He gave each a trumpet, a torch, and a pitcher in which to hide the torch. They surrounded the Midianites. Then under Gideon's direction,

they blew their trumpets in unison, broke the pitchers, held up their torches and shouted, “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon” (7:20). They must have appeared to number in the thousands. The Midianites were startled, and a mass suicidal and even homicidal panic ensued. Quickly, it was over. God had used the likes of Gideon—an ordinary man just like you and me—to accomplish an extraordinary purpose: the liberating of the people of Israel from Midianite oppression.

God desires to do the same for us today. He wants to put you and me on the hill, surrounding the Midianites, facing odds of four hundred to one.

How does God take ordinary people and have them accomplish extraordinary purposes for him? One of the keys can be found in Judges 6:34: “the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon.” Zechariah 4:6 states, “‘Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD of hosts.” This should cause us to take heart because God still does the same for us today. You see, it is not what we can accomplish for God; rather, it is what God can do through us. The same Spirit is as available to work through us today as he was in the day of Gideon.

The late Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, often told how he began his career as a “happy pagan, working to promote a food business that he had initiated.” But then God got hold of his life. In 1945 Dr. Bright gave his heart to Christ. By 1951 he and his wife, Vonette, knew God wanted to do something extraordinary in their lives. They drew up a contract joyfully renouncing their earthly interests in order to give themselves to advancing the “Great Commission” (God’s mandate to spread the message of Christ throughout the world). That was the beginning of what was to become the world’s largest Christian ministry, Campus Crusade for Christ, which now serves people in 191 countries with a staff of twenty-six thousand full-time employees. In 1956 Dr. Bright wrote a booklet entitled “The Four Spiritual Laws,” whose more than 2.5 billion copies have been printed in two hundred languages.⁵ In 1979 he commissioned the film *Jesus*, now the most widely viewed

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film in history, with more than 5.1 billion viewers in 234 countries.⁶ All this from an ordinary business man who became an extraordinary tool in God's hands.

Don't let the roadblocks become stumbling blocks. God can make something extraordinary out of you.

Gideon

Take-Away Messages from the Past

1. We all feel ordinary.
2. We are all afraid at times.
3. We all have doubts and questions.
4. We all test God at times. God also may test us periodically.
5. God can permit circumstances today in which the odds against you are four hundred to one.

Choices for Today

1. Even though you may be ordinary, how has God chosen you for an extraordinary purpose? What choices can you make today to further the fulfillment of this purpose?
2. Name one circumstance you faced recently when you experienced fear. What choice can you make today to decrease your fear?
3. What one choice could you make today to help you with your doubts and questions?
4. Do you feel like God may be testing you? How could you choose to cooperate with him and succeed in turning the test into a victory?
5. Can you name a specific circumstance today in which you took a stand for God and faced tremendous odds? Have you chosen, by his grace and in his way, to win?