

Time of Grace Ministry  
**That's Messed Up: Press on in Faith"**  
Judges 6 and 7  
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*Pastor Mike Novotny*

The Bible lied to you. At least, this version did. Any of you ever read a cartoony kids Bible before? If you have, you might not know that these kind of Bibles lie to children in almost every story. It's not that they don't tell the truth about God; it's that they rarely tell the whole truth.

The kid's Bible never tells you the whole story. Now, maybe it's because kids don't get the nuance of it, right? They want good people and bad people; they want heroes and villains. But when you actually read the Bible, the people that you think are the heroes aren't actually the heroes; they're flawed, they're failures, and they're sinners. And in fact, what you learn is sometimes their biggest sins happen right after their greatest success, which is what I want to talk to you about today. Because as I look out at all of you, as I think about all the people who might come across this message on the internet or on TV, I think there are some people that God has blessed in incredible ways. I mean, when some of you came to church today, you weren't desperate and broken. If you thought about your life, you'd have to admit God's been pretty good. Maybe financially, maybe in your family, maybe in a relationship, maybe with your faith, some of you have experienced the goodness of God and you could give me 10,000 reasons why. God wants to give you even more. Maybe he won't give you the perfect family or tons and tons of money, but God wants to bless you in profound ways. He's not done with you yet. He wants to give you more peace in your life, more contentment, more spiritual happiness, more joy, more self-control, more love in your family. God wants tomorrow's blessing to blow today's situation out of the water.

And that's the reason why I want to tell you this story because as we learn from the book of Judges - just like from Peter and Noah and Jonah and David - just because things are great today doesn't guarantee that they will be tomorrow. Today, I want to share kind of a messed up heartbreaking story with you from the book of Judges. This is about a man named Gideon and maybe you haven't heard his name before but if you grew up in the church, you probably have but I'm guessing you haven't heard the whole story. You probably heard some cute story about a special fleece, a miracle of God, a miraculous victory with 300 men with trumpets and torches in their hands but today I want to tell you the whole story because the story is a warning for all of us not to be complacent and the story's especially a reminder that as hard as we try, we need to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus; the only hero of all of human history. So if you have a Bible with you or a device or you just want to follow along on the screen, we're going to jump to the book of Judges 6 and we're going to read the story of Gideon.

Here's how the story starts. It says, "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and for seven years, the Lord gave them into the hand of the Midianites. Midianites so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help." Now if you know the book of Judges, this is

the exact same thing, right? God has blessed them, he has delivered them, and they go right back to doing the same thing; they do evil in the eyes of the Lord. In fact, in the original Hebrew of this story, it doesn't say they did evil; it says they did "the evil." Like the number one thing that God couldn't stand; they spiritually cheated on God. They said that they were going to worship God but then they set up idols right next to God and he became not their one and only but their one of many. And God said, "I'm not into an open door relationship. You worship me alone or you can't have me at all." And they didn't want him and so God put his hands up and he said, "Fine. Here's what you get when you don't have my protection, my blessing, and my defense." The Midianites come rolling in from east of the Jordan River and Israel's so impoverished that they have nowhere to turn. They're starving, they're dying, and finally, they cry out to God for help. And because God does not believe in karma, because God is crazy, loving and merciful to messed up people, he helps.

Look what happens in Judges 6; here's how God helps. It says, "The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon, he said, 'The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.' The Lord turned to him and said, 'Go on the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?'"

So the angel of the Lord shows up. Now, if you're new to the Old Testament, the angel of the Lord is normally a nickname for Jesus. This is not God the Father; this is Jesus before he comes in human form as a baby in Bethlehem. This is God appearing to a guy named Gideon. And he shows up in Ophrah. Now, if I offered you \$100 right now, could any of you tell me where Ophrah is? . This is nowhere in Israel; this is not a big city. It's a dinky little village. And if I asked any of you who the Abiezrites were, could you tell me for a hundred fifty? I didn't think so; the money's staying in my pocket. These are nobody's from nowhere and, in fact, Jesus is appearing to the nobodiest of them all. When he says, "Go, the Lord is with you, mighty warrior," do you want to know what Gideon says in response? I'll show you guys; it's in the next verse. "Pardon me, Lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family." He's saying even here in Ophrah, I'm kind of a nobody. I was voted least likely to succeed at Ophrah High. Like the Abiezrites, the family of Joash? Me? God with me? A mighty warrior deliver Midian? And he's so unsure of himself and he's so scared to be honest, he's so desperate, that he asks Jesus to work a miracle and Jesus does.

Gideon goes and he gets some food and he brings it out and he puts it on a rock and Jesus pulls like the first ever Burger King commercial. He flame broils the meal on top of the rock and then as the smoke is going up, he disappears and he flies back to heaven and Gideon realizes that God is with him. And he builds an altar and he calls the altar, "The Lord is Peace." He said, "I saw the Lord. That was God, face to face, with me and he didn't kill me. He must be peaceful. He must be merciful. He must be good." And Gideon starts to get his courage.

But then the Midianite's show up; 135,000 strong. Israel on its best day could get an army of about 32,000; they're outnumbered four to one and so Gideon, his courage goes out the window and so he asks Jesus for a second sign; another miracle. He gets this fleece, this piece of

sheepskin, right, with wool on top and he said, "Okay, God. If you're really going to help me then I want you to make this wool wet but I want the ground all around it to be perfectly dry. And so Jesus does it. Gideon wakes up, the fleece is wet, and the ground is dry. But Gideon is still scared so he asks for a third miracle, a third personal sign. He says, "Okay, Jesus, would you flip it? Would you make the ground wet and would you make the fleece dry to prove that you're really with me?" And he wakes up and guess what? That's exactly what happens. Three personal miracles for this scared, insecure, follower of God. And so, here are the Midianites and Gideon's starting to get his courage. He has an army of 32,000, it's one to four, but God is with him.

Except God knows he can't bless his people just yet. See, he knows Israel's heart a little bit too well that if they fought one verses four - 32,000 to 135,000 - after the victory was won, do you know what they would do? "Oh man, Gideon, did you see what I did? It was like me, one on four, and I was like William Wallace and I started chopping them down, man after man." And the next guy says, "Yeah, me, too! I was surrounded and I did one of those sweet things with the sword," and every guy would have thought it was him and his strength and his courage and his bravery. God knows that if he blesses them with an incredible victory, they're going to worship themselves. And so God does something crazy and if you've been to Sunday school, you know the story, right? He whittles down the 32,000 to 10,000 and the 10,000 to 300 people.

So Gideon grabs a trumpet and a torch in his hand. At night, they surround the camp of Midian but first God gives a fourth miracle. He knows Gideon is still scared; he is still insecure. There's no way he can do it by himself and so God has Gideon sneak down into the camp of the Midianites and he overhears a dream that God planted in a Midianite's mind. And in the dream, Gideon and his army demolished the army of Midian. They were so scared and terrified of Gideon and his men and Gideon finally finds his courage; four miracles, four signs, for the scared disciple. And then finally, the battle happens - well, it's not exactly a battle. Here's exactly what happens in Judges 7: "When the 300 trumpets sounded," Gideon and his men, "the Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. The army fled to Beth Shittah towards Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath." And eventually, they pursue them, they drive the Midianites back east to their homes, and Israel is safe from its oppressor.

And Gideon goes back to Ophrah. He snuggles into his bed. He says his nighttime prayers, he cuddles up with his magical and miraculous fleece, and Gideon lives happily ever after, says the kid's Bible. Now do you want to know how this story really ends? It's pretty messed up. God saves Gideon and his whole family and here's what we find at the end of Judges 8: "The Israelites said to Gideon, 'Rule over us - you, your son and your grandson - because you saved us from the hand of Midian.' But Gideon told them, 'I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you.'" And we'd say amen but he's not done. And Gideon said, "I do have one request; that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder. (That was the custom of the Ishmaelites or the Midianites to wear gold earrings)." It continues: "Gideon made the gold into an ephod," like an apron used in worship, "which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there and it became a snare to Gideon and his family."

And you want to say, wait, what? The problem that Israel had was worshipping other gods, like spiritually prostituting their soul out to idols. God works four miracles, a fifth if you count the battle, and how does this story end? He takes this gold and it's crazy - it's just beyond logic - he builds an ephod and people worship it like it's saved them from their enemies. And for no one does the story end happily ever after. This is the end of Gideon; he dies just as much an idolater as his parents.

That's messed up. But do you know what I noticed about the story? There's something missing in the last chapter: A scared Gideon. For the entire story, Gideon was so insecure, right? Some Bible commentators actually say Gideon had so little faith - I mean, how many signs, how many miracles do you need from Jesus, man? He's so scared, "I can't do it. God, you've got to help me. God, you've got to give me another sign. We can't do this just yet." He's so desperate and weak and self-aware of his weakness but not here. Now in chapter eight, Gideon's the man! He's the general. He's a man who was strong and he doesn't need another fire show, another dream, another fleece that's wet or dry. He's completely fine on his own and what happens? This tragic fall.

What does this story teach us? It teaches us unlike many kid's Bible version, it's not just you have this great moment and then your faith goes up and to the right. If you're taking notes in your program, here's what I want you to remember: That success can lead to sin. Sometimes the most tragic fall happens after the biggest blessing. Sometimes the greatest danger to our faith is not our weakness, our cancer, our struggle, the mess at home. Sometimes the biggest danger to our faith is our strength and the blessing of God. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul said it this way in 1 Corinthians 10. He said, "So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." If you think you're good without God's help, if you think you don't need to pray, if you think you don't need to be on your knees, on your face, begging God to bless you and keep you strong in the faith, be careful, Paul said, that you don't fall. Noah fell. Gideon fell. Jonah fell. David fell. Solomon fell. St. Peter fell. Be careful that you don't fall.

It makes me think of the story of two women that I know. When I was a brand new pastor, I became the pastor of about a 20 year old girl who shall remain unnamed. This girl grew up with a ton of Jesus. She came from a Christian home, her parents brought her to church Sunday after Sunday. They even paid for her Christian education, which meant not just every Sunday, but Monday through Friday she got the Bible and Scripture and worship and song and chapel. For two decades, she was blessed with boatloads of Jesus. But when I showed up to be her pastor, I rarely saw her. Church wasn't her weekly habit; it wasn't even her monthly habit. Maybe once a quarter she would show up and I remember a conversation once I had with her. She didn't say, like most people say, "I'm sorry, Pastor. Life's been busy and I know, I really got to get back." You know what she told me? She said, "I need a break." She didn't lose her faith, she wasn't denying Jesus. She just said, "I've heard the stories and I kind of know the big idea. My faith's going to be fine. I just need a little break."

Now, I'm not sure if any of you are like me. I say really, really, really smart things in my head after conversations are over. I think I just looked at her like an idiot; not quite knowing what to

say in the moment. But I wish I could have that conversation again because you know what I'd say? Before you decide about church, I want you to interview a married couple and I want you to ask that couple if tomorrow's love can be based on last year's effort. I want you to ask them if they were really serving each other and loving each other well 10 years ago, if that makes a bigger impact on today than last night. But do you know what happens if you don't try? If you don't work on it? Marriage can't be carried along by the inertia of the past. It's like a farmer who plants seeds and has this great harvest and he just assumes that next year's harvest is going to come even without the seeds. It's like a runner who trains all summer and has an amazing 10K and just assumes next year she can run just as fast if she doesn't train. And would it shock you to know this young woman, after about three or four or five years of kind of having this loose connection to Jesus, her life is a mess? She was giving into sin, she was falling into addiction, she was battling depression and she had no Jesus to give her peace and forgiveness and assurance. If you think you're standing firm, be careful you don't fall.

Which is why I want to tell you about a different woman; a woman who's actually here with us today. Let me show you a picture of her. This is Jeanette. Jeanette is the oldest member of our church family. Ninety-one, almost ninety-two. Jeanette is two and a half of me put together. And when I go visit Jeanette in the nursing home, do you know what I find? Roots. I didn't have to bring Jeanette that Bible to pose for a picture; that was hers. And there's a little Grace Moment's devotional book next to her bed. And she told me about prayers and spiritual conversations with the members of her family and how she would watch on TV or listen in online and you should not be shocked that she has incredible fruit. Despite the struggles with her health, despite her aging body, there's peace and she knows all about grace because she's close to Jesus.

I think of the story of Walter Maier. Walter Maier, in his age, was perhaps the most successful Christian pastor that had ever existed in human history. In about the 1920's, the radio was just being invented and Walter Maier, a Lutheran pastor, he jumped on the train early and he was so gifted that people were tuning in not just in his city or his state but across the world. Twenty million people at the peak listened to Dr. Maier. He was so famous that the journalists wanted to hear his story and on one occasion, a journalist came to the recording studio just before he was about to give his weekly message. And the host who brought the journalist there gestured towards where Dr. Maier was inside the booth and the journalist looked through the glass and was confused because no one was inside. And the journalist looked back at his tour guide and he was confused. He put up his hands and the tour guide just smiled and he did this. And the journalist took a step towards the glass and looked down and there was Walter Maier, the most successful evangelist perhaps in human history, on his face, begging God to bless his words. He knew that 20 million people cannot bless you without the blessing of God. In fact, people would flock to Dr. Maier; they would ask him to autograph his books. And he would smile and oblige. He would sign his name but then he would write, Romans 8:37 beneath his signature. And he would say way more important than that signature is that Scripture. And people would go home and they'd open their Bibles and they would read the words of Romans 8: "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us." He was desperate. And he knew it was only Jesus and his grace that would sustain him for the season to come.

And so that's my prayer for all of you today; that you would stay hungry. That you would have a plan. That the faith of your past would be celebrated but we would not assume that that would guarantee our faith in the future. That today we would put down roots. We would pray. We would fast. We would get into Scripture. We would read his word. Because it's not "nice;" it's what all of us need.

But we need, in fact, even more than that. You know, I'm tempted to say amen right now but if I did, I would assume that you can do better than Peter and David and Noah and Jonah and Gideon. I want you to have a plan. I want you to hunger and thirst for God but I know that as hard as we try, sometimes we're going to fall and we're going to fail. And so you need more than Gideon's bad example. You need the incredible grace of Jesus.

Did you think about Jesus as all as I was reading you this story? Because Jesus is the only person who experienced success in this life but didn't follow it with a catastrophic sin. In fact, if you would read the New Testament, there's something really fascinating. Jesus very, very early in his life - he's 30 years old - and he gets baptized and the heavens actually open up and the Bible says that God speaks these incredible words. He says, "This is my son, whom I love. And with him, I'm well pleased." Can you imagine if like the heavens open and God said that about you? This is as amazing as it can get for any person on planet earth. But do you know the very next story in your Bible? It's called the temptation of Jesus because the devil knows how this works. It worked with David, it worked with Gideon, it worked with Noah. It worked with Jonah. You wait until they're riding high, until they get complacent, and then you tempt them and they always fall. Except, this time he didn't. Jesus was so hungry he prayed and he fasted and he quoted Scripture and he walked out of the wilderness sinless. And that should make you so happy today because oh you know what that means for you? It means when Jesus died on a cross he wasn't just another sinner. He was a Savior. It means that when he gave his life on the cross, he was so perfect that he was willing to trade you for all the mess, all the assumptions, and he would give you his perfection. I think about all the details of this story; that Jesus would show up and he would say, "The Lord is with you." And because of what Jesus did, he would say the same thing to you. No matter how alone you feel, God is with you. You might have 135,000 sins in your past; all of these reasons that God should not say to you what he said to Jesus: "You're my son and my daughter and with you I am well pleased." But Jesus fought for you. Like Gideon stood there with his torch and just watched God fight his battles. When Jesus went to a cross, he fought yours. And every sin, everything that's messed up, everything you would be embarrassed to admit in church, he separated that from you as far as the east is from the west. And because he did, do you know what God says now? He says crazy things. I mean, Gideon was a nobody from a bunch of nobodies and he lived in nowhere. But when Jesus showed up, what did he say? "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."

And if you could see Jesus right now, do you know what he'd say about you? "God is with you, mighty warrior. God is with you, bride of Christ. The Lord is with you, man of God. The Lord is with you, holy people. The Lord is with you, forgiven in love, saved, righteous and redeemed." And part of us, like Gideon, "Pardon me, Lord, but how?" And Jesus would say, "Because I fought for you. Because I'm the perfect deliverer. I'm the perfect judge. I am the perfect Savior."

So friends, stay desperate. Stay hungry for God. And when you fall, fix your eyes on Jesus; the only one who can deliver you eternally.

So let's pray.

Lord, you've been so good to us. When I think of all the faith in this room right now, all the people whose hearts you've touched and whose lives you've changed, when I think of all the husbands and wives who love and respect each other, when I think of all the kids who were baptized and they stayed connected to you in their twenties. When I think of all the self-control that you've given to us, what a messy bunch of addicts all of us would be with no hope and no peace and no grace. And you've forgiven us and you've helped us.

God, that's all from you. And Satan is a roaring lion and he would love to devour us as his prey. He wants to make our life a mess. He wants to steal, kill, and destroy but you didn't let him. You are our refuge, our fortress, and our strength and you protected us from a life that could have been 1,000 times more broken so thank you, God.

And now, I pray that throughout the rest of this week and so much further beyond that we would pray to you as people who need it. Keep us desperate, God. Help us to hunger and to thirst for you. Help us to believe that our families, our finances, and especially our faith would be nothing without you but with you, it can be everything and so much more. God, thank you for your goodness; thank you for our stories. We pray that in the years to come, we would bless you and find 10,000 more reasons to praise and worship your holy name. We pray this all to you today in Jesus' name - not our own - because it's because of him, the true hero, the perfect judge, the righteous redeemer, that we can come to you with such courage and such boldness. And all God's people who wanted to stay desperate for God, they joined their voices and they said, "Amen."



## TIME OF GRACE®

### *That's Messed Up: Press on in Faith*

#### Study Notes

#### *Summary*

Gideon seemed so good. The humble farmer who became a Sunday school hero. But the fame went to his head, and good ol' Gideon died as a spiritual adulterer and snare for his people. That's messed up! But the story reminds us to fight the good fight through the final round, run the race until the last step, and worship God until our final breaths.

- **Judges 6:1,6:** <sup>1</sup>The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. <sup>6</sup>Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.
- **Judges 6:11,12,14:** <sup>11</sup>The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. <sup>12</sup>When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior."  
<sup>14</sup>The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"
- **Judges 6:15:** "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family."
- **Judges 7:22:** When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords. The army fled to Beth Shittah toward Zererah as far as the border of Abel Meholah near Tabbath.
- **Judges 8:22-24,27:** <sup>22</sup>The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us—you, your son and your grandson—because you have saved us from the hand of Midian." <sup>23</sup>But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you." <sup>24</sup>And he said, "I do have one request, that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder." (It was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings.) <sup>27</sup>Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.
- Success can lead to \_\_\_\_\_.
- **1 Corinthians 10:12:** So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!



- \_\_\_\_\_ defends us from success.

### Points to Ponder

1. Jesus once said it would be hard for rich people to enter into the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:23). Why do you suppose financial success is one of the biggest dangers to your faith?
2. **Agree/Disagree:** The stories of spiritual failures like David and Peter are just as much of a comfort to us as they are a warning.
3. Study Paul's words in Romans 7:21-25. On a scale of 1 to 10, how desperate was Paul when it came to his spiritual life? What does that teach you about this upcoming week?

### Homework for Next Week

Read Judges chapters 19-21.

*"God never said that the journey would be easy, but he did say that the arrival would be worthwhile."  
—Max Lucado*