

## **“A Sign On the Dotted Line”**

Judges

*Series: The Story Chapter 7. A Few Good Men and Women*

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I had been an Associate Pastor at Lenape Valley Presbyterian Church for seven years when I felt God tugging me toward a new challenge: to be the pastor of a church. At the time I decided to search for a new congregation, two friends offered to pray for me. They laid their hands on my shoulders and prayed that I would soon be crossing over the Jordan River into a new land. They had no idea about my decision. I took it as a sign from God to go ahead.

When you interview a new congregation, you are supposed to look for “red flags” – warning signs about troubles at the church. So, as I investigated churches all over the country, I used my radar for red flags. Eventually the Lord drew me to Woodside – a church only twenty miles away. Throughout the interview I listened carefully for any red flags. Yet God gave me only a green light. So we went to seal the deal with the Presbytery. That day I received two signs that shook me a little. First, I noticed there was a misspelling on the church stationary. It was the word: Presbyterian. The second sign came after we received Presbytery approval and signed all the papers. Someone called ahead to the church office with the good news. The office staff wanted to celebrate their new pastor. So they decorated the church. They covered all the windows facing the parking lot...with red flags!

Ministers often keep their search quiet to prevent any disturbance in their current congregation. Even my closest friends at Lenape Valley did not know I would be leaving soon. On a Sunday morning I preached and you voted me in as your new pastor. I returned home that afternoon excited and a little fearful. I remember thinking, "What have I done? How am I going to tell my friends? Lord, did I do the right thing?" Monday morning, I received another sign I will never forget. A dear friend who is deep in the Spirit called me at the office. "Doug, can you come over right away?" There was urgency in her voice. "Sure, what's wrong?" "I can't tell you over the phone. Just come over as soon as you can." "What's going on?" I asked. "While I was praying this morning the Lord told me that you have an announcement to make to the congregation. Do you know what that means?" That was the sign on the dotted line. In spite of the red flags, God gave the green light.

Our lives are ruled and defined by signs. Traffic lights tell us when to stop and go. Directional signs and GPS point the way to our destination. Corporations follow the stock market. Politicians read polls. Doctors study tests for signs of disease. All of us watch the weather reports and cry out, “How long O Lord!” These are the signs of our times. Some are trivial, others are urgent. They usually give you a hint of what's ahead. The message might be "Full steam ahead," "Proceed with Caution," or "Turn back before it's too late." Unfortunately, the signs are not always so clear and obvious.

Don't you wish God used signs to tell you exactly what to do? What if God were like a third base coach? Two hands mean hold up, don't make that move. A tug on the ear means your prayer is approved. A wave of the arms says go ahead. A kick of the dirt tells you to take the

new job or marry that person. A thunderbolt warns you to cut that out. These signs would make life so much easier. You would know when to stay put and when to go all out.

Gideon wants a sign from the Lord. Israel is in deep trouble. This is the chaotic age of the Judges. The nation of Israel has lived a few generations in the Promised Land. Moses and Joshua are long gone. Without a leader, the twelve tribes quarrel with one another. This puts them all at the mercy of marauding invaders. In Gideon's day hordes of Midian warriors devastate the fields of Israel and wipe out all their food.

The biggest threat to Israel is not from without but within. Again and again, God's people turn their back on the Lord and bow down to idols. A very predictable cycle develops.

1. Rejection - The Israelites turn away from the Lord, worship idols and fall into sin.
2. Release - The Lord lets them go by turning them over to these false gods. His punishment is to let them have their wish. They not only become slaves to these false gods but also to their enemies.
3. Repentance - The people realize they made a foolish mistake, turn around and cry out to the true God for deliverance.
4. Restoration - The Lord then raises up a Judge: not someone who sits on a bench with a gavel and a black robe but a charismatic leader who unites and rallies the people to drive out the invaders. Finally there is peace in the land for a generation. But at the death of the Judge, the cycle begins again. This cycle repeats at least six times in Judges.

We pick up the story deep in the fifth round of this cycle. The Israelites worship Baal and Asherah, two fertility gods of Canaan. Why did the Israelites, who saw the Lord lead them to the Promised Land with so many miracles, turn and bow down to the false idols of other nations? Before we judge them, remember that the Israelites were first slaves and then nomads. They had never been farmers. So when they try to farm the land they decide to ask the experts – their neighbors. The Canaanites tell them the way to have fertile fields, flocks, and families is to make offerings to the fertility gods – Baal and Asherah. “That’s the way you get things to grow in this land,” say their pagan neighbors. So instead of trusting the Lord who brought them there, the Lord who created the Sun, rain, fields and flocks, they turn and fall in lock step with what everyone else is doing. That’s the way to get success.

Sound familiar? Why do we worship our gods? That’s what we see everyone else doing. “If you want to get ahead, if you want to be successful you have to do this...” “If you want to be popular you’ve got to wear this, try this, act like this...” “If you want to fit in you have to stop believing that and start thinking like this...” Money, fashion, trends, feelings, opinions, substances, approval, desires. These are our gods. This is what we see everyone else doing. When we bow down and worship them, God does not smite us. He gives us over to them. He gives us our wish. Why does it take some people so long to turn to the Lord? Often, they will not cry out to God for help until their false gods fail them. Stubbornness and pride can be strong. Unfortunately they need to learn the hard way. Some people never learn.

The Israelites are learning their lesson. Midianite hordes invade from the east and wipe out every crop like a swarm of locust. The Israelites hide in caves and cry out to the Lord for deliverance. And the Lord answers their cry by putting out a call. One of those hiding is a young man named Gideon. He sifts kernels of grain in secret. Normally this job is done on a windy hilltop. But Gideon knows if they find his grain they will take it and his life. So nervous is he, the youth nearly jumps out of his skin when someone behind him says, “The Lord is with you, mighty man of valor” (Judges 6:12). Gideon turns to see a stranger sitting under his father’s oak tree. Angered by this interruption, Gideon begins to complain.

Pardon me, but if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our ancestors told us about when they said, ‘Did not the Lord bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian. (Judges 6:13)

If there is a Lord, why doesn’t He send us a leader to kick out these Midianites?” “All right,” replies the angel of the Lord, “I’ll send you.”

“Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” (Judges 6:14)

Now I imagine at this moment Gideon freezes with his mouth open. After he pulls his foot out of his mouth, he begins to backpedal a bit.

“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.” The Lord answered, “I will be with you and you will strike down all the Midianites.” (Judges 6:15-16)

Gideon learned an important lesson that day. He learned to keep his big mouth shut.

\ This is a classic example of how God **Calls** each of us to action. Notice that Gideon’s call does not happen during a worship service. Nearly every call of God in the Bible happens in the most unlikely places

- Sarah was in the kitchen laughing at God
- Jacob locked arms with the Lord in a wrestling match
- Moses was a fugitive from the law, running his father-in-law’s business
- Peter was returning from an unsuccessful all night fishing trip
- Paul was on a search and destroy mission to wipe out the church.

The call comes when they least expect it. Sooner or later, God will call you to get on board with what He is doing in your world. We often ask God to support our plans. All the while, God is calling us to align with His work. He probably will not ask you to fight a war or save a nation. It may be to end a family feud or stop a quarrel at the office. He wants you to share the Gospel with a friend or read the Bible to your child. He might be calling you to turn your back on an addiction, to stand up for someone who has been put down, to sit with someone who is

depressed or grieving, to join a mission, start a ministry or make a decision that you are putting off. Every call is different, but make no mistake, He is calling. Are you listening?

When Gideon answers God's call, the next step is **Change**. That change begins at home. After building an altar to the Lord, God commands Gideon to tear down his father Joash's altar to Baal and Asherah. The town's people awake the next morning to a devastating scene of vandalism. Imagine if you arrived at worship today to find the communion table hacked to pieces, the Cross reduced to kindling wood, and the stained glass windows shattered. They want blood. They demand Joash to turn over his son. But Joash replies, "I will no longer fight for Baal. If he is truly a god, let him fight for himself. My son Gideon has reminded me what our fathers taught us: the Lord is the only true God. You shall have no other gods before Him. You shall not make for yourself idols. From now on, my house and I will serve the Lord." A change comes over the village that day. It is a spark that ignites a wildfire, a trumpet blast that launches a revolution. And it all begins with a boy who is the least of the least of the least. A young man, who hears God's call and decides to make a change.

Most people do not like change...especially church people. I heard a new twist on that old joke. "How many church members does it take to change a light bulb?" The church member replies, "Change? You can't change that light bulb. My grandmother gave that light bulb." But if you answer God's call, if you follow God's plan, some changes need to be made. Thoughts, desires, hungers, secret deeds: any activity, which separates you from God, must change. You will face opposition from the crowds around you. But Jesus said, "You cannot serve two masters." Choose the one you will serve and then make the change.

Finally, when Gideon answers God's call and makes the necessary changes, he learns he must **Count On God Alone**. During the next maelstrom of Midianites, the Spirit of God takes possession of Gideon. With a blast on the ram's horn, he summons his clan and the neighboring tribes to arms. A new day is dawning for the Israelites. They can almost taste their freedom.

That's when Gideon gets cold feet. He is steeped in self-doubt. Maybe God did not tap him on the shoulder. There are scores of other more qualified warriors. He needs proof. He wants a sign on the dotted line before he leads Israel into battle.

Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised— look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." (Judges 6:36-37)

Waking the next morning he finds the ground as dry as the night before while the fleece is a sopping sponge. Most of us would be convinced by this miraculous sign. Not Gideon. This proves nothing. He prays,

Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew. (Judges 6:39)

Next morning, pearls of dew dotted the ground while the fleece is bone dry. From that day forward, believers say they are "putting out a fleece" when they ask God for a sign. "Lord, if this light turns green by the time I get to the intersection, then you want me to take that job in Pocatello, Idaho." We want a sign on the dotted line of the contract before we will commit. God does give signs but He does not prefer to work this way.

Consider Gideon. Called by an angel, coached by the Lord, filled with the Spirit, followed by warriors, this is the last guy in the world who needs another miraculous sign. When he receives the first fleece he pushes for a second. Gideon is truly trying God's patience. Either he is very courageous or very dumb. Miraculous signs do not convince a closed mind and heart. Jesus casts out demons, the Pharisees call Him the devil. Jesus performs countless miracles, everyone, including His disciples, abandons Him in the end. Those who resist God are rarely convinced by signs. Faith does not grow from signs and wonders. You must have the eyes of faith to see the signs and wonders of God in their world. The greatest sign from heaven is Jesus Himself. We don't need a lamb fleece laid down on the ground to believe. We need the Lamb of God who laid down His life and rose again. That's the sign that God is real and alive.

The Lord also gives us the Holy Spirit from heaven. Did you notice how the Holy Spirit possesses Gideon? The literal translation of that verse is, "The Holy Spirit clothed himself with Gideon" (Judges 6:34) The Spirit wore Gideon. In the Old Testament, the Spirit only touched a few people. After Jesus, God gives the Spirit to all who believe. The Holy Spirit needs to grow into your skin so the fit will be just right. Let the Spirit wear you and work through you. These are the signs from heaven that God uses to guide us: His Son - the Lamb of God laid down for us, His Spirit - the presence of God that wears our skin, His Word - the promises of God that will never be broken. The more you allow these signs to direct your life, the more you will see and hear the signs of God working in our world.

Gideon doesn't need a sign. In fact, God teaches him to count on the Lord by taking away every other prop and support. On the eve of the battle with Midian, Gideon knows his army is no match for the enemy's vastly superior numbers. Entering his tent, the nervous general falls on his knees. I imagine the conversation goes like this: "Lord, we have a problem here. There is no way we can drive out the Midianites with this army." "You are right," concedes the Almighty. "Good! I'm glad you agree with me. Well, what should I do?" "Send some home." "What?" "My ways are not your ways, Gideon. Trust me. I must prove to My rebellious people that they will triumph only when they depend on Me." In the end God reduces Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300 soldiers who drink like dogs. "With your three hundred dogs I will defeat Midian," God says. At this point, Gideon thinks the Lord has thrown him to the dogs. Yet that night the Lord used Gideon and his three hundred "dogs" to make the Midianites panic and run in terror. Gideon learned to count on God alone.

Sometimes, we only trust in God when life has stripped away every outer prop we think we need. Without the earthly braces and supports we learned to stand on His firm foundation. E. Stanley Jones was one of the great missionaries to India. When he was an aged man, Jones "had a debilitating stroke that left him immobile and virtually speechless. But not faithless. 'I need no outer props to hold up my faith,' he wrote, 'for my faith holds me.' But he saw that not everyone felt this way.

I was talking to a bishop who had retired. He was frustrated. When he was no longer in the limelight of the bishopric, he was frustrated and he told me so. He wanted to know the secret of victorious living. I told him it was in self-surrender. The difference was in giving up the innermost self to Jesus. The difference was in the texture of the things that held him. When the outer strands were broken by retirement, the inner strands were not enough to hold him. Apparently he had a case of "limelight-itis" instead of a case of surrender to Jesus. Fortunately, with me, surrender to Jesus was the primary thing, and when the outer strands were cut by this stroke, my life didn't shake.

E. Stanley Jones learned that victory only comes by surrender. When he surrendered his inner self to Jesus, he found he could live without the outer props of the world.

The world is longing for a sign of victorious living. Are you willing to be that sign? Are you ready to sign up?

