

Who was Gideon in the Bible?

Gideon was the fifth judge and renowned as the greatest of Israel. The account of his life is recorded in Judges 6:11–8:32. The backdrop for Gideon's biography begins with the Israelites being ravaged by the Midianites as a consequence of Israel's disobedience to God (Judges 6:1). For seven years they faced invasions from the Midianites, Amalekites, and Eastern foreigners who ruined their crops and destroyed their cattle. God's discipline through the foreign nations caused the Israelites to cry out to God for help (Judges 6:6). God sends them a prophet to remind them of how the one true God had provided for them in the past and how quickly they had forsaken Him (Judges 6:8–10).

God hears their cries and graciously intervenes to deliver His people. He starts by sending the angel of the Lord to Gideon to call him into service (Judges 6:11–14). Gideon, whose name means “cutter” or “cutter of trees,” belonged to an undistinguished family of the Abiezrites, and he saw himself as unfit for God's service (Judges 6:15). During his conversation with the angel, it becomes apparent to Gideon that he is speaking to the Lord Himself (verses 14, 16).

But Gideon needed proof positive that it was, in fact, God calling him to the divine task of leading a military force against Midian (Judges 6:17). Gideon asked the angel of the Lord to stay where he was while Gideon went to prepare a meal. Gideon returned with some food, which he set on a rock (verses 19–20). Then God gave a sign: “The angel of the LORD touched the meat and the unleavened bread with the tip of the staff that was in his hand. Fire flared from the rock, consuming the meat and the bread. And the angel of the LORD disappeared” (verse 21). Gideon built an altar in that place and called it “The Lord Is Peace” because he had seen God and did not die (verses 22–24).

The same night, Gideon destroyed the altar to Baal and the Asherah pole that belonged to his father (Judges 6:25-28). For this bold action, Gideon received the nickname Jerub-Baal, meaning “Let Baal Contend” (verse 32). Later, an alliance of Israel’s enemies entered the land, and “the Spirit of the Lord came on Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him” (verse 34). Men from the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali joined Gideon (verse 35).

After the troops had been mustered, Gideon grew nervous. He asked God for another sign to confirm his calling. He put out a piece of wool overnight and asked God to make it wet while keeping the surrounding dirt dry. God graciously did as Gideon asked. Then Gideon asked for yet another sign—this time he asked God to keep a fleece dry while making the surrounding dirt wet. Again, God complied, and Gideon was finally convinced that God meant what He said and that, under Gideon’s leadership, the nation of Israel would have victory over Midian (Judges 6:36-40).

But God was not done increasing Gideon’s faith. Before entering battle, Gideon’s troops numbered 32,000, but in obedience to God, he reduces them by 22,000 (Judges 7:2-3). God further pares down his army, leaving Gideon just 300 men (verses 7-8). This was against an enemy that is described as “thick as locusts” with camels “as countless as the sand on the seashore” (Judges 7:12, BSB). God’s purpose was to prevent Israel from boasting that their own strength had saved them (verse 2).

That night, God sent Gideon into the midst of the Midianite camp. There, Gideon overheard a couple of frightened Midianites discussing a dream that they took to portend disaster for them. Hearing this encouraged Gideon, and he rallied his troops (Judges 7:11, 13-15). Using some unusual tactics, Gideon and his 300 men attacked the Midianite

coalition and routed the enemy troops (Judges 7:16-25).

After the victory, the people of Israel wanted to make Gideon their first king, but he demurred, saying, “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you” (Judges 8:23). The peace won by Gideon lasted for a generation: “During Gideon’s lifetime, the land had peace forty years” (verse 28). On a sadder note, Gideon requested that the troops contribute gold from the plunder of the battle so he could create an “ephod,” which he set up in his hometown (Judges 8:24-26). Whatever Gideon’s intent in fashioning the ephod, the people began to use it for idolatrous purposes, and “it became a snare to Gideon and his family” (verse 27).

In accomplishing the mission God set before him, Gideon proves himself to be a faithful man, a mighty warrior, a strong leader (Judges 7:17), and a diplomat (Judges 8:1-3). As such, he is included in a fitting testimonial for the great men of faith in Hebrews 11:32-34.

Gideon’s faith seemed to be weak at times, but God patiently worked with him and strengthened his faith to the point that he could carry out God’s mission. Gideon’s obedience to the Lord required him to take a stand against his own father and his own tribe. He feared what would happen when he tore down his father’s idol (Judges 6:24), but it is evident he feared God much more.

In battle Gideon took on far greater odds than seemed possible, but he knew where his strength lay (see Philippians 4:13). The sovereign God is faithful, and He saw Gideon through the battle to victory. Gideon also showed humility when the Israelites wanted to honor him as their king. He is a good example of those who obey the command to “trust

the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

God uses ordinary people to accomplish His plans, and the key to Gideon’s success was his willingness to obey God. Gideon went from being a man in hiding, threshing wheat at the foot of a hill out of sight of the enemy, to vanquishing the same enemy in battle. However, he was careful to ensure that it was God’s will he was obeying. As the apostle Paul wrote, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2).