

DISCUSSION GUIDE :: WEEK 1

THE UNDERDOG
WHEN FEAR TAKES OVER
JUDGES 6:12-16, JUDGES 7:9-15
10/31/2016



MAIN POINT

God calls us to overcome our fear when we learn to trust him

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

How do you feel about risk? Why?

Are there certain areas of life in which you are more comfortable with risk than others?

What about spiritually? Do you think God has ever asked you to do anything risky?

It's easy to get frustrated, scared, or apprehensive when we think God is asking us to do something that seems impossible. And He often does just that. When we are willing to accept what seems risky, we demonstrate that we believe God to be wise and powerful, but we also demonstrate that if God is truly in control, then risk is a myth. This is what Gideon learned in Judges 6 as he was willing to take God at His word and move in obedience.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JUDGES 6:11-16.

What was Gideon doing when the Angel of the Lord first appeared and spoke to him?

How do you think Gideon felt when the Angel addressed him as "mighty warrior"? Do you think the Angel was being sincere or sarcastic? Explain.

What was Gideon asking the Angel in verse 13? Do you think his questions were out of line? Why or why not?

Have you ever felt like Gideon? That God was asking you to take a risk?

God invites us to do things for His honor that far exceed our own capabilities. When we focus on our own abilities, we impose limits on what we believe God can do. When God assigns a task, He promises His presence and strength to accomplish it.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JUDGES 7:9-11.

What did the Lord instruct Gideon to do to allay his fears about advancing on the Midianite camp? Why would it take courage on Gideon's part to do as the Lord asked?

What does it mean to you that the Lord was not frustrated or upset with Gideon over his fear about the upcoming battle?

What does that mean about our ability to help each other when God asks us to do hard things?

God could have been angry at Gideon for being afraid; instead, He showed Him a glimpse of His power. The character of God, not the change in circumstances, is the antidote to our fear. Along with that, God uses other believers to support and encourage us as we face doubts and uncertainty in our attempts to serve Him. We can provide support and encouragement to others who are stepping out in faith to serve the Lord.

ASK A VOLUNTEER TO READ JUDGES 7:13-15.

How did God encourage Gideon in this passage?

How did Purah's words bring encouragement to Gideon and acknowledge God's provision as well?

What are some things you need to remind yourself are true about God in order to take on the things He asks you to do?

How does reminding yourself of God's character change your perspective about risk?

In His grace, God goes before us and then goes with us as we complete the tasks He gives us. When we are afraid, we can trust in the character of the One who is sending us. No matter what the outcome is, we know we will be successful when we are obedient.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

What is God calling you to do right now that makes you nervous?

How can we as a group stand together to encourage each other in what God has told us to do?

What is one practical way you can remind yourself of the character of God when you feel afraid?

PRAY

Thank the Lord for inviting His people to participate in His mission, and that we accomplish His will by His strength, not our own. Thank Him for the ways He encourages us, and ask Him to help us look for ways to encourage one another in serving and honoring Him.

COMMENTARY

JUDGES 6:11-16

Verse 11. Gideon had a direct encounter with the Lord when the Angel of the Lord came, and He sat under the oak that was in Ophrah. When this passage speaks of the Angel of the Lord, it isn't a reference to an ordinary angel but to an earthly manifestation of the Lord Himself (see 6:14,16).

The Lord spoke to Gideon on a number of occasions, and Gideon knew the voice of God and obeyed (see 6:25,36; 7:2,4,9). Yet here, too, there was weakness in Gideon's faith. Gideon famously needed dramatic signs to reassure him (see 6:36-40—the signs of the dew and the fleece). As a general rule, when a follower of God demands signs, it is indicative of an immature faith if not a complete lack of faith (see Matt. 16:4; John 4:48).

Gideon's father Joash had set up a shrine to Baal on his ground in Ophrah, and later Gideon would use the shrine to house a sacred memorial. If Gideon thought of the oak tree in Ophrah as a sacred site, then a heavenly visitor appearing there might not have been totally surprising.

Nevertheless, the first thing we are told about Gideon's demeanor is that he was fearful. He was threshing wheat in the wine vat in order to be as inconspicuous as possible. Typically, a threshing floor for wheat would be on high ground. A person would crush the stalks of grain, separating the wheat kernels from the chaff, and then toss the crushed wheat into the air. The wind would blow away the lighter chaff, but the heavier kernels would fall to the ground. Obviously this process worked best if the threshing was done on high ground, where the wind would be stronger and more consistent. By contrast, wine presses were built down low because wind wasn't needed. Nobody wanted to haul grapes up a hill! A traditional, elevated threshing floor held a major disadvantage for Gideon: it was highly conspicuous, and Gideon did not want to catch the attention of any passing Midianites.

The Midianites were a people from northwest Arabia. Moses had fled to Midian after he killed an Egyptian, and he married the daughter of a Midianite priest (see Ex. 2:15-21). Yet the Midianites were also closely connected with nomadic desert peoples from the south and southeast of Israel, principally from the regions of Edom and Arabia. Racially, they were a mixed group, being recognized more by their way of life than by a national identity. They can be thought of as desert pirates who preyed on settled communities. They rode camels for the sake of speed and so that they could cross the desert. They could appear seemingly from nowhere, take what they wanted, and then withdraw back into the desert where people without camels could not follow. When they hit a community, they stripped local farmers and shepherds of their best agricultural products. At the beginning of the story, therefore, Gideon was timidly threshing grain in a low and inconspicuous place in order to hide it from the Midianites.

Verse 12. With Gideon looking anything but heroic at this point, it is a little surprising that the Angel of the Lord gave him the greeting, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior." We might take this to be a humorous or even a sarcastic comment. More likely, however, the greeting had a serious and positive significance. While it is true that Gideon was at that moment feeling timid and working in hiding, God was calling him to be something greater. He needed to become the leader and fighter who could save his people.

The Lord, therefore, addressed Gideon not in terms of what he was but in terms of what the grace of God could make of him. Similarly, when Jesus first met a vacillating man named Simon, He gave him the name Peter, meaning "Rock," in anticipation of how steadfast Simon Peter's faith would become (see John 1:42).

Verse 13. Gideon responded to the Lord with an appeal for help for the Israelites. "Where are all His wonders that our fathers told us about? They said, 'Hasn't the Lord brought us out of Egypt?'" This is normal Old Testament thinking. God's previous mighty works, especially those done at the exodus, were regarded as the basis for an appeal for God to do something in the present. The historical memory of such things as the plagues on the Egyptians, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the manna in the wilderness were proof of God's power and of His love for His covenant people. Gideon was calling on the Lord to show His covenant love for the people of Israel again. Instead of saving them, Gideon complained, God appeared to have abandoned them to Midian.

Verse 14. Here the Lord could have responded that it was the people's own fault that they were under Midianite oppression. However, He was not there to talk about why the Israelites were being punished. He came to call Gideon to take on the responsibility of being the agent of God's deliverance. "Go in the strength you have and deliver Israel from the power of Midian. Am I not sending you?"

Verses 15-16. Gideon responded with a protest that he was not the one to lead the Israelites to victory. "Please, Lord, how can I deliver Israel? Look, my family is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house." Gideon was to some extent exaggerating the lowliness of his position. In Judges 6:27, we read that Gideon had at least 10 male servants. This fact tells us that he was from a wealthy family. However, just as Gideon had appealed to the exodus when pleading with the Lord to rescue the Israelites, even so he took the stance Moses took when commissioned to lead the people. Despite his gifts and background, Moses also had protested that he was not adequate to lead the people out of their oppression (see Ex. 3:11). God's answer to Moses then had been "I will certainly be with you" (Ex. 3:12). His answer to Gideon was similar: "But I will be with you ... You will strike Midian down as if it were one man." The God of the exodus was indeed going to act again, and he would use Gideon as His new Moses!

JUDGES 7:9-15

Verse 9. We should not be too hard on Gideon. He did, after all, obey God. He first got rid of the defilement of his father's shrine to Baal (see 6:25-32). This act, in effect, opened God's hand for delivering Israel. It would have been inconsistent with God's own commands for Him to deliver Israel while the Baal shrine still stood. Gideon then summoned men for battle (see 6:34-40). Doing what would seem contrary to military sense but was an act of obedience to God, he winnowed his force down to a minimal size (see 7:1-8). Then God commanded Gideon to move out and make the attack: "Get up and go into the camp, for I have given it into your hand."

Verses 10-11. Ideally, Gideon should have assaulted the Midianite camp then and there. However, he was still less than confident in faith and heroics; he needed more moral support. God condescended to his weakness: "But if you are afraid to go to the camp, go with Purah your servant. Listen to what they say, and then you will be strengthened to go to the camp."

Just to approach the enemy camp required some courage on Gideon's part. Thus we should again hesitate about being too critical of him. For our purposes, the important point we can take from these verses is this: God takes us as we are and in His grace makes provisions for us to succeed. All of us, when called to a task by God, carry doubts. We might ask, "Will God really enable me to succeed, or am I deceiving myself about this calling?" "Do I have the moral and spiritual qualifications to do a work in God's name?" "Do I have the skills needed, or am I just being arrogant for even thinking that I might take on this task?"

Verses 13-14. Gideon overheard one man tell another his dream concerning a loaf of barley bread that came tumbling into the Midianite camp, struck a tent, and it fell. The loaf turned the tent upside down so that it collapsed. The other man then gave an interpretation of the dream: "This is nothing less than the sword of Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite. God has handed the entire Midianite camp over to him." The Midianites already knew of Gideon and of his gathering of an army. The word of what Gideon was doing would have spread quickly, especially if Gideon was from a prominent family. Yet we might wonder why the enemy warrior would so readily interpret his companion's dream as an Israelite victory.

Verse 15. God had spoken to Gideon in a manner that he could understand and appreciate. Gideon's chance overhearing of this conversation could not have been a coincidence. Thus he was fully convinced now that victory would be his. He bowed in worship, and then he got the attack started.