

BIBLE BRIEFING

“Sign Language”

JUDGES 6 - 7

Introduction

Constantine became the emperor of Rome in 306, and was the most powerful person in his part of the world. His conversion to Christianity is debated; but this is how the story goes. He was at war against his brother-in-law and co-emperor, Maxentius. According to the historian Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, before the crucial battle of Milvian Bridge, Constantine was convinced that he needed divine assistance. While he was praying for such assistance, God sent him a vision of a cross of light at midday, bearing the inscription *in hoc signo vinces* (in this sign you will be victorious). That night he had a dream that reaffirmed his earlier vision. God told him to use the sign he had been given as a safeguard in all of his battles. Thus, Constantine is said to have converted to Christianity and ordered the symbol to represent his army. Constantine was victorious in the battle of the Milvian Bridge, and he continued to wear the symbol for Christ against every hostile power he faced.

Did God give Constantine a sign? Don't know. Do you need signs? That's a more intriguing question. We'll get some better perspective on answering it in the story of Gideon.

Remember, the Book of Judges records a recurring cycle of rebellion, retribution, repentance, and restoration in Israel. Israel sins; God disciplines them by letting them be conquered by their enemies; then He raises up a man to lead them out of trouble. These men (and one woman) are the Judges. Gideon was one of them – an unlikely one!

Judges 6:1 Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years,

Judges 6:2 and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains.

Judges 6:3 So it was, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up; also Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them.

Judges 6:4 Then they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey.

Judges 6:5 For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts; both they and their camels were without number; and they would enter the land to destroy it.

Judges 6:6 So Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD.

The Midianites waited while the children of Israel planted their crops and raised their livestock. Then they would come with their own herds and flocks, devour all the grazing land, steal the harvest, and take the livestock.

This had been going on for seven years. Undoubtedly, after the first year, the children of Israel began to come up with strategies to cope. As things got worse and worse, they were forced to live in holes in the earth. To add to their distress, the text indicates they **made the dens, caves, and strongholds**. They dug them out of the rock and dirt with their bare hands.

The children of Israel still worshipped God; but they worshipped other gods, too. Instead of prospering, they were **impoverished**. The gods of this world offer you so much; but they always take everything from you. They eventually devour you, until you are alive, but living in a grave.

Judges 6:7 And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried out to the LORD because of the Midianites,

Judges 6:8 that the LORD sent a prophet to the children of Israel, who said to them, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel: 'I brought you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage;

Judges 6:9 and I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land.

Judges 6:10 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."

An anonymous prophet was sent. Our flesh desires recognition. As believers, we should want to remain as anonymous as possible. Whatever we do, let it be the Lord doing it through us – not even us doing it for the Lord. If nobody recognizes you – it's a blessing!

The prophet reminds Israel of God's past deliverances. He has not changed. He can, and will, deliver them. All they must do is **obey** His voice.

A simple step of obedience is often all that is required for you to be delivered from some besetting sin. We've been trained to think that our problems are too deeply ingrained for their solution to be simple. It is simple, because the Lord is powerful.

The Midianites were not really even the problem! Their relationship with God was the problem. Get right with God and the things you think are problems will fall into place.

Judges 6:11 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. Judges 6:12 And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him, and said to him, "The LORD *is* with you, you mighty man of valor!"

Crafty Gideon was threshing wheat in a wine press – so that the Midianites would not find him and take his meager harvest.

He's interrupted by **the angel of the Lord**. We believe this Person, Who often appears in the Old Testament, is an appearance of Jesus Christ before He took upon Himself a human body at the incarnation.

Jesus addresses Gideon as a **mighty man of valor**. And so he would become. God has begun a work in you; He will perform it.

Judges 6:13 Gideon said to Him, "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 the LORD bring us up from Egypt?' But now the LORD has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites."

Blameshifting is a part of our flesh – deeply ingrained in us ever since Adam blamed Eve, then Eve blamed the devil. Still, Gideon was sincere. As we'll see in a moment, he hadn't had a very good example of how to walk with the Lord. His family were idol worshippers.

Judges 6:14 Then the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?"

What was the **might** of Gideon? Well, it's at the end of the sentence: **Have I not sent you?** Whatever God sends you to do, He has equipped you to do.

Judges 6:15 So he said to Him, "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."

Judges 6:16 And the LORD said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man."

Never look upon the outward preparation. Look as the Lord looks – on the inward empowering. How? Wait on the Lord! Listen to Him, and follow His leading.

Judges 6:17 Then he said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who talk with me.

Judges 6:18 Do not depart from here, I pray, until I come to You and bring out my offering and set *it* before You." And He said, "I will wait until you come back."

Judges 6:19 So Gideon went in and prepared a young goat, and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot; and he brought *them* out to Him under the terebinth tree and presented *them*.

Judges 6:20 The Angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay *them* on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so.

Judges 6:21 Then the Angel of the LORD put out the end of the staff that *was* in His hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire rose out of the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. And the Angel of the LORD departed out of his sight.

Judges 6:22 Now Gideon perceived that He *was* the Angel of the LORD. So Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord GOD! For I have seen the Angel of the LORD face to face."

Judges 6:23 Then the LORD said to him, "Peace *be* with you; do not fear, you shall not die."

Judges 6:24 So Gideon built an altar there to the LORD, and called it The-LORD-*Is*-Peace. To this day it *is* still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

It's not wrong to desire confirmation from the Lord – if it's about something not already clearly revealed in His Word. We tend to go to extremes – either ignoring confirmation if it doesn't fit our plans, or planning without ever asking for any confirmation.

Judges 6:25 Now it came to pass the same night that the LORD said to him, "Take your father's young bull, the second bull of seven years old, and tear down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the wooden image that *is* beside it;

Judges 6:26 and build an altar to the LORD your God on top of this rock in the proper arrangement, and take the second bull and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the image which you shall cut down.”

He had turned to God. Now he would turn from idols. Conversion must result in change!

Judges 6:27 So Gideon took ten men from among his servants and did as the LORD had said to him. But because he feared his father’s household and the men of the city too much to do *it* by day, he did *it* by night.

Let’s cut Gideon some slack. This was all new territory for him. We need to be tolerant of young Christians and their efforts.

Judges 6:28 And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, there was the altar of Baal, torn down; and the wooden image that *was* beside it was cut down, and the second bull was being offered on the altar *which had been* built.

Judges 6:29 So they said to one another, “Who has done this thing?” And when they had inquired and asked, they said, “Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing.”

Judges 6:30 Then the men of the city said to Joash, “Bring out your son, that he may die, because he has torn down the altar of Baal, and because he has cut down the wooden image that *was* beside it.”

Judges 6:31 But Joash said to all who stood against him, “Would you plead for Baal? Would you save him? Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning! If he *is* a god, let him plead for himself, because his altar has been torn down!”

Judges 6:32 Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, “Let Baal plead against him, because he has torn down his altar.”

When you try to live for the Lord, and make radical changes, people get upset. It calls their spirituality into question.

Judges 6:33 Then all the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel.

Judges 6:34 But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him.

Judges 6:35 And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, who also gathered behind him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.

Note that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon. It was something he would have known internally. An immediate external result of the Spirit’s presence was that he was able to raise a sizeable army.

Keeping that in mind... What Gideon did next was questionable at best:

Judges 6:36 So Gideon said to God, "If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said -

Judges 6:37 look, I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, and *it is* dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said."

Judges 6:38 And it was so. When he rose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water.

Judges 6:39 Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew."

Judges 6:40 And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground.

Gideon had the Word of God; he had a sign; he had received the inward testimony of the Holy Spirit; he had the outward blessing of an army. He was blowing it! Confirmation of God's will is one thing. This was something else – fear.

Gideon did not keep his word. God fulfilled the sign once, and Gideon said that would be enough for him. But he went back on his word after God fulfilled the first sign. But the Lord was still merciful and gracious to Gideon.

Judges 7:1 Then Jerubbaal (that *is*, Gideon) and all the people who *were* with him rose early and encamped beside the well of Harod, so that the camp of the Midianites was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley.

Judges 7:2 And the LORD said to Gideon, "The people who *are* with you *are* too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'

Judges 7:3 Now therefore, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever *is* fearful and afraid, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead.'" And twenty-two thousand of the people returned, and ten thousand remained.

Gideon's 32,000 men are already outmatched by 135,000 Midianite troops. The sight of the enemy struck fear into 22,000 of the children of Israel, and they left.

Let's never force people into ministry. It's just wrong. Even if it is ultimately for their own good; it's wrong.

Outnumbered 3-to-1, the children of Israel still would have claimed it was their cunning that won the battle. Or worse: They may have had some sense of their own strength and not been open to God's unusual plan. 32,000 was still a great resource to depend upon; God wanted them to depend only on Him.

Judges 7:4 But the LORD said to Gideon, "The people *are* still *too* many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. Then it will be, *that* of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' the same shall go with you; and of whomever I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' the same shall not go."

Judges 7:5 So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, "Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself; likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink."

Judges 7:6 And the number of those who lapped, *putting* their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men; but all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water.

Judges 7:7 Then the LORD said to Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the *other* people go, every man to his place."

Judges 7:8 So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all *the rest of* Israel, every man to his tent, and retained those three hundred men. Now the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

It's been suggested that those who cupped the water showed more caution and awareness of their surroundings. Maybe; but, after all, God wasn't looking for the very best of them – He just wanted to whittle down their number. We still are thinking that there was something in the men that God was looking for – some quality.

Some people need to hear: *you're too big to be used by God. You're too strong. You have too much influence, and you are trusting in all those things instead of the Lord.*

The odds were now in God's favor at 400-to-1.

Judges 7:9 It happened on the same night that the LORD said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand.

Judges 7:10 But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant,

Judges 7:11 and you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp." Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outpost of the armed men who *were* in the camp.

Judges 7:12 Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude.

It was reasonable for Gideon to fear; but it was not necessary. God understands our fears, and He works to alleviate them. *Fear not* is a common encouragement in the Bible. Sometimes God's *Fear not* is accompanied by a further sign, a further confirmation.

Judges 7:13 And when Gideon had come, there was a man telling a dream to his companion. He said, "I have had a dream: *To my surprise*, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed."

Judges 7:14 Then his companion answered and said, "This *is* nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp."

It is by lack of faith in God that we make our enemies stronger than they are.

Judges 7:15 And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, "Arise, for the LORD has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand."

Gideon's encouragement was contagious; once he had been encouraged by God, he could not help but spread that encouragement to others, and his encouragement built their faith.

Judges 7:16 Then he divided the three hundred men *into* three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers.

Judges 7:17 And he said to them, "Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do:

Judges 7:18 When I blow the trumpet, I and all who *are* with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, '*The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!*'"

Judges 7:19 So Gideon and the hundred men who *were* with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that *were* in their hands.

Judges 7:20 Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers - they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing - and they cried, "The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!"

Judges 7:21 And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled.

Judges 7:22 When the three hundred blew the trumpets, the LORD set every man's sword against his companion throughout the whole camp; and the army fled to Beth Acacia, toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah, by Tabbath.

Judges 7:23 And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites.

Even though led by the Spirit, you must have a plan! It must be God's plan; but it's a plan nonetheless.

It strikes you that Gideon only asked them to do what he was willing to do. Sometimes folks will see a need, then ask someone else to meet it. Maybe God wants to use **you!**

Did it bring glory to Gideon to use his name? That's open for debate. I think it was somewhat unnecessary. It does emphasize for us that God still uses people – even though you must completely depend upon Him. It's His sword; but it must be in your hand.

The Midianites awoke to an explosion of light, noise, and movement. They were disoriented. The first phase of the battle wasn't between Israel and Midian, but the Midianites fought themselves. This is a good example of how we can be **more than conquerors through Him who loved us** (Romans 8:37).

Judges 7:24 Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the mountains of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the Midianites, and seize from them the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan." Then all the men of Ephraim gathered together and seized the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan.

Judges 7:25 And they captured two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side of the Jordan.

This phase of the battle got a little more intense and personal. You're not always going to be able to remain on the sidelines; you need to engage.

Conclusion

Gideon will mop up and complete his victory in Chapter Eight. How he handles victory is another matter; we'll look at it next time we study Judges.

What can we conclude about signs? Nothing too conclusive!

1. God is sometimes pleased to give them.
2. God is sometimes willing to give them.
3. We don't always need them.

Trust in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the Word of God. If you need a sign, God will give it; but don't demand it – just receive it as further confirmation of what you already know to be true.