

Judges

Chapter 6

Midian Oppresses Israel

The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. 2 And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. 3 For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. 4 They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. 5 For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in. 6 And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to the LORD. 7 When the people of Israel cried out to the LORD on account of the Midianites, 8 the LORD sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery. 9 And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. 10 And I said to you, ‘I am the LORD your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.’ But you have not obeyed my voice.”

6:1–9:57 The Gideon and Abimelech narratives are a literary unit and constitute the center account of the judges. They are bracketed by the stories of Deborah (from Ephraim, a son of Joseph; west of the Jordan) and Jephthah (from Manasseh, the other son of Joseph; east of the Jordan)—which in turn are bracketed by the stories of the heroes Ehud (from Benjamin) and Samson (from Dan). In this center narrative, the crucial issues of the period of the judges are emphasized: the worship of Baal, and the Lord’s kingship over his covenant people Israel. (CSB)

6:1 *Midian*. Since they were apparently not numerous enough to wage war against the Israelites alone, they often formed coalitions with surrounding peoples—as with the Moabites (Nu 22:4–6; 25:6–18), the Amalekites and other tribes from the east (v. 3). Their defeat was an event long remembered in Hebrew history (see Ps 83:9; Isa 9:4; 10:26; Hab 3:7). (CSB)

Descendants of Abraham by his wife Keturah following the death of Sarah (Gn 25:1–2). Midianites are mentioned as one of the caravan traders that took Joseph as a slave into Egypt (Gn 37:28–36). Moses’ wife was a Midianite (Ex 2:15–22). They were quite prosperous when Israel conquered them (Nu 31:32–54); archaeologists associate the Qurayyah pottery found in northwest Arabia with the Midianites. They did not continue as a national people after the rise of the Israelite kings. (TLSB)

6:2 *dens ... caves ... strongholds*. Dry ravines, valleys, and caves in the clefts of the mountains carved by water erosion were refuges of last resort. (TLSB)

6:3 Normally living farther south in the Negeb, the Amalekites allied with the Midianites in making raids into Israelite territory. These desert dwellers would have found the fertile, well-watered Israelite lands attractive to raid. (TLSB)

6:4–5 *devour the produce.* Bringing their livestock and tents with them, the raiders set up camp at strategic locations all the way to Gaza, on the Great Sea shore. (TLSB)

6:5 *locusts in numbers.* A vivid picture of the marauders who swarmed across the land, leaving it stripped bare (see 7:12; Ex 10:13–15; Joel 1:4). (CSB)

camels. The earliest OT reference to the use of mounted camels in warfare. (CSB)

Not typical livestock of the Israelites. A single camel could carry a load of up to 400 lb, plus its rider, and travel for up to a week without water. (TLSB)

6:7 *cried out to the LORD.* The Israelites' cries of distress occurred in each recurring cycle of the judges. (CSB)

6:8 *prophet.* The unnamed prophet rebuked Israel for forgetting that the Lord had saved them from Egyptian bondage and had given them the land (vv. 9–10). (CSB)

This unnamed male prophet was a counterpart to Deborah (4:4). Using covenant language (cf Ex 20:2), the prophet reminded Israel of the blessings God had showered on Israel: freedom from slavery in Egypt and rescue to the land of Canaan. (TLSB)

6:10 *Amorites.* Probably here includes all the inhabitants of Canaan. (CSB)

The Call of Gideon

11 Now the angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. **12** And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, “The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor.” **13** And Gideon said to him, “Please, my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.” **14** And the LORD[a] turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?” **15** And he said to him, “Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.” **16** And the LORD said to him, “But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.” **17** And he said to him, “If now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. **18** Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you.” And he said, “I will stay till you return.” **19** So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them. **20** And the angel of God said to him, “Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on

this rock, and pour the broth over them.” And he did so. 21 Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes. And fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight. 22 Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the LORD. And Gideon said, “Alas, O Lord GOD! For now I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face.” 23 But the LORD said to him, “Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.” 24 Then Gideon built an altar there to the LORD and called it, The LORD Is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites. 25 That night the LORD said to him, “Take your father’s bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it 26 and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down.” 27 So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.

6:11 *terebinth*. Also known as the turpentine tree, which grows over 32 ft tall. (TLSB)

Ophrah. To be distinguished from the Benjamite Ophrah (Jos 18:23). (CSB)

Uncertain location, possibly 8 mi NW of Beth-shean. (TLSB)

Abiezrite. The Abiezrites (v. 24) were from the tribe of Manasseh (Jos 17:2). (CSB)

beating out wheat in the winepress. Rather than in the usual, exposed area. Gideon felt more secure threshing in this better protected but very confined space. (CSB)

Fearful and demoralized, Gideon was beating out the grain with a stick, under cover of the walls of a wine vat. (TLSB)

6:12 *angel of the LORD*. At first, Gideon assumed he was talking only to another man. This messenger spoke as the Lord Himself. (TLSB)

mighty warrior. Apparently Gideon belonged to the upper class, perhaps a kind of aristocracy (see v. 27), in spite of his disclaimer in v. 15. (CSB)

Given the pitiful circumstances in which Gideon found himself, the angel’s greeting may have seemed ironic, even sarcastic. But this greeting foreshadowed Gideon’s future. Because the Lord was with him, Gideon would become a man of valor. (TLSB)

6:13 *if the LORD is with us*. Though outwardly polite, Gideon’s response expressed skepticism and his demoralized spirit. (TLSB)

6:14 *LORD turned*. See vv. 22–23. Apparently this appearance of the “angel of the LORD” (v. 11) was a theophany (a manifestation of God). *Go...* (CSB)

To face Gideon, who was complaining about the Lord’s inaction. (TLSB)

Am I not sending you? Gideon was commissioned to deliver Israel as Moses had been (see Ex 3:7–10). (CSB)

Go in this might of yours. Foreshadowing Gideon’s future success, it is expressed, however, with sarcasm. (TLSB)

6:15 *how can I ... ?* The Lord usually calls the lowly rather than the mighty to act for him. (CSB)

Gideon felt not only his own inadequacy but also that of his clan. The clan was the basis of the military unit called a “thousand.” (TLSB)

6:16 *as one man.* As if they were a single man, echoing the promise to Joshua (Jsh 23:10). (TLSB)

6:17 *show me a sign.* See vv. 36–40; cf. the signs the Lord gave Moses as assurance that he would be with him in his undertaking (see Ex 3:12; 4:1–17). (CSB)

Gideon then realized he may have been speaking with more than a mere mortal. He will continue asking for signs, however, and his response to the Lord’s signs demonstrates his reluctance and insecurity in answering the Lord’s call. (TLSB)

6:19 *presented.* Gave a sacrificial gift. Gideon’s gift is lavish. Even in times of plenty, people did not eat meat every day. (TLSB)

6:21 *consumed the meat.* Indicating that Gideon’s offering was accepted (see Lev 9:24). (CSB)

Evidence that the Lord accepted Gideon’s gift. (TLSB)

6:22 Gideon could see that his visitor was the Lord, and he became convinced he would die, as Moses (Ex 33:20) and Isaiah (Is 6:5) also feared. (TLSB)

6:23 *But the LORD said to him.* Gideon now spoke with the Lord directly, as Abraham and Moses had done in the past. (TLSB)

6:24 *built an altar.* Cf Gn 8:20; 12:7–8; 13:18; 26:25; 35:7. Offerings were typically to be made at the tabernacle. (TLSB)

The LORD Is Peace. Relieved that his life had been spared, Gideon expressed his newfound safety and security in the name he gave to the altar. (TLSB)

To this day. Until c 1000 BC, when Jgs was written. (TLSB)

6:25–26 *bull ... second bull.* Gideon likely yoked them together to pull down the altar. (TLSB)

seven years old. How long Midian had oppressed Israel (v 1). (TLSB)

Baal ... Asherah. Growing up in pagan surroundings, Gideon may not have known much about the Lord until this appearance. (TLSB)

build an altar. Gideon's construction of an altar to the Lord posed a direct challenge to the community and to his father. (TLSB)

stronghold. A community fort. (TLSB)

6:25 *pull down the altar.* Gideon's first task as the Lord's warrior was to tear down an altar to Baal, as Israel had been commanded to do (see 2:2; Ex 34:13; Dt 7:5). (CSB)

6:27 *too afraid.* Gideon's immediate response showed fear rather than zeal. He removed the Baal altar at night, hoping not to incur the wrath of his community and family. (TLSB)

6:1–27 Gideon's initial call to be a judge reveals his demoralized spirit and weak character, yet with the assurance of the Lord's presence, he makes a first assault on the Baal worship in his own community. Unchecked, sin takes an ever greater hold on individuals and entire communities. Instead of speaking God's words and promises from generation to generation, parents may leave a legacy of unbelief and false worship (cf Dt 5:9). Gideon seems an unlikely figure to become a future champion of Israel. Yet the Lord of surprising, unearned grace seeks sinners and equips them to accomplish great things. • Help us, Lord, to believe Your promises, seek Your will, and act in the courage You alone give. Amen. (TLSB)

Gideon Destroys the Altar of Baal

28 When the men of the town rose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the Asherah beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built. **29** And they said to one another, "Who has done this thing?" And after they had searched and inquired, they said, "Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing." **30** Then the men of the town said to Joash, "Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has broken down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it." **31** But Joash said to all who stood against him, "Will you contend for Baal? Or will you save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down." **32** Therefore on that day Gideon[c] was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, "Let Baal contend against him," because he broke down his altar. **33** Now all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East came together, and they crossed the Jordan and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. **34** But the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon, and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him. **35** And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, and they too were called out to follow him. And he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they went up to meet them.

6:28 *rose early.* Dawn was a common hour for offering sacrifice. (TLSB)

6:29 *Who has done this thing?* Spoken not in appreciation for Gideon's courageous act but in anger and with the intent of punishing the perpetrator. (TLSB)

they said. The informants are not identified. (TLSB)

6:30 *He may die.* The Israelites were so apostate that they were willing to kill one of their own people for the cause of Baal (contrast Dt 13:6–10, where God told Moses that idolaters must be stoned). (CSB)

6:30 Because Gideon still lived in his father’s household as the youngest son of the family, the responsibility for his action lay with his father, Joash. (TLSB)

6:31 *Will you contend for Baal?* Joash’s question uses legal language. If Baal was such a powerful god, why would he need any human being to act in his defense? Though he does not directly defend his son, Joash seems to support his actions. (TLSB)

6:32 *Jerub -Baal.* This name later occurs as Jerub-Besheth (2Sa 11:21) by substituting a degrading term (Hebrew *bosheth*, “shameful thing”) for the name of Baal, as in the change of the names Esh-Baal and Merib-Baal (1Ch 8:33–34) to Ish-Bosheth and Mephibosheth. (CSB)

Ironic nickname. Joash put the name positively: Gideon had challenged Baal by tearing down the altar devoted to him. Yet Gideon never fully renounced his loyalty to Baal; cf 8:27, 33. (TLSB)

Let Baal contend with him. Let Baal defend himself against Gideon. (CSB)

6:33 The invading armies, sweeping from the east, crossed the Jordan at this spot, where rich farmland was clearly visible. (TLSB)

6:34 *Spirit ... clothed Gideon.* Lit. “Spirit ... clothed himself with.” This vivid figure, used only three times (here; 1Ch 12:18; 2Ch 24:20), emphasizes that the Spirit of the Lord empowered the human agent and acted through him. (CSB)

Descriptive expression for how the Holy Spirit surrounded Gideon with divine protection for his assignment. In vv 36–40, Gideon used an article of clothing to discern the Lord’s will. In 8:27, he formed an article of clothing that became the object of idolatrous worship. (TLSB)

6:35 *Manasseh.* West Manasseh. (CSB)

Asher. This tribe earlier had failed to answer the call to arms (5:17). (CSB)

Gideon’s summons for help went out to the northernmost tribes clustered around the Sea of Chinnereth. (TLSB)

6:28–35 Gideon’s act of tearing down the Baal altar arouses antagonism. He receives an outpouring of the Holy Spirit to empower him for battle and win the support of neighboring Israelite tribes. As Gideon is clothed by the Lord, so the Holy Spirit clothes us with the righteousness of Christ Jesus. Through Baptism, we live here in safety and will stand bold “on the great day of God the Almighty” (Rv 16:14). • “Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness My beauty are, my glorious dress; Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head.” Amen. (LSB 563:1) (TLSB)

The Sign of the Fleece

36 Then Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said, 37 behold, I am laying a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said.” 38 And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. 39 Then Gideon said to God, “Let not your anger burn against me; let me speak just once more. Please let me test just once more with the fleece. Please let it be dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground let there be dew.” 40 And God did so that night; and it was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

6:36–37 At best, Gideon’s challenge is a weakness of faith, maybe even outright unbelief (cf Dt 6:16). Gideon did not need these signs to ascertain the will of God; the Lord had clearly revealed His will (v 14). Gideon sought signs because he wanted a demonstration that the Lord had the power and the willingness to keep His promises. The Lord is patient with him.

6:37 *fleece*. Blanket of wool shorn in one piece from a sheep. (TLSB)

6:38 *dew*. Sign of God’s blessing; dew sustained life in a dry climate (cf Gn 27:28; Dt 33:28). Through the summer months, there is little or no rain in Israel, but the appearance of the morning dew is the guarantee of moisture on crops. (TLSB)

6:39 *just one more*. Cf. Abraham’s words in Ge 18:32. (CSB)

dry on the fleece only. The second sign would go against nature, since the wool fleece would ordinarily absorb moisture. Luth: “In all his promises, moreover, in addition to the word, God has usually given a sign, for the greater assurance assurance and strengthening of our faith. Thus he gave Noah the sign of the rainbow. To Abraham he gave circumcision as a sign. To Gideon he gave the rain on the ground and on the fleece. So we constantly find in the Scriptures many of these signs, given along with the promises” (AE 35:86). (TLSB)

6:36–40 Despite a clear revelation of the Lord’s will, Gideon twice puts the Lord to a test, hoping to gain certainty for his faltering faith. Jesus said that an evil and adulterous generation looks for a sign (Mt 12:39). But when the Lord wishes to give us a sign, we are arrogant to reject it (cf Is 7:10–14). The Lord is patient with us and merciful through His Son. • Almighty God, send us Your Holy Spirit, that through Your Holy Word our faith may be built up and strengthened. Help us realize that in the Word alone we find the Good News of salvation, through Jesus Christ. Amen. (TLSB)