

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. Last week we finished up a lengthy preaching series through the Gospel of Luke, and in two weeks time we will begin a new preaching series on the Holy Spirit. That leaves me with two weeks of preaching before my sabbatical begins, and I've decided to focus on two different Old Testament characters. This week and next we will look at a person's story that reveals something about God's heart and about the human heart.

As I begin, I want to ask you a question. Have you ever had a moron moment? You know the kind... you're not paying attention, you do something foolish, and you end up looking at yourself in the mirror and saying, "*I'm such a moron.*" I've had many such moments in my life.

A number of years ago, when I was still in Calgary, I had scheduled a dinner meeting with a business couple in the early evening; they were coming straight from downtown and I didn't have time to go home after work, so I dressed up a little at the start of the day. I was wearing a pair of dress pants and a crisply pressed shirt.

Around lunch time, one of my colleagues asked if I could give him a hand. A delivery truck had just arrived at the church with an industrial paper cutter that weighed 150 pounds; two of us unloaded the paper cutter from the truck. By the time we were done I had a massive black stain down the front of my right pant leg and the stain was low enough that an untucked shirt wouldn't cover it. "*That's just great!*", I thought to myself.

Later on—at lunchtime—I sat down to enjoy the leftover spaghetti Naomi made the night before. Just as I was bringing the first forkful

to my mouth, I thought to myself, "*I've got a massive black stain on my right pant leg, wouldn't it be terrible if I spilled spaghetti all over my left pant leg?*" Does anyone want to guess what happened next?

The spaghetti leapt off my fork and fell towards my left pant leg—if this event had been captured in a movie, this would have been the slow-motion scene. Paralyzed, I watched the spaghetti fall, internally screaming "*Nooooo!*" Moments later I found myself at the bathroom sink, scrubbing my pant leg furiously, and thinking to myself, "*Mark, you are such a moron!*"

Seldom, do I, or probably any of us, feel like we have "arrived," especially when it comes to our character or our faith. We wish our faith was bold and courageous in the face of challenging obstacles, but often, we are defined more by fear than by faith. Instead of standing tall in our circumstances, we find ourselves cowering.

This morning, I want to introduce you to a person who had plenty of unpleasant mirror-moments. But this man, Gideon, through the transforming work of God, moved from fear to faith. It's a move that I believe God can do again—wants to do again—for many of us this morning.

If you have your Bibles, I want to invite you to turn with me to the book of Judges; Gideon's story is told in chapters 6-8. If you have one of our blue Bibles in hand, you can find Gideon's story on page 194.

There are many twists and turns in Gideon's life, just like our own lives. I'm going to pause in certain parts of his story and skip over others quite quickly. My picking and choosing is not so much a

reflection of what's most important, instead, I'll be highlighting what God has laid on my heart for you.

Background: first, let me give you a little bit of background. The book of Judges follows a predictable, cyclical, pattern. The nation of Israel would turn from God and turn to the worship of idols. God would raise up prophets, send them to plead with the people to repent and turn back, and when the people refused, God would remove His hand of protection.

Subsequently, a foreign nation would descend upon Israel—invading and oppressing. And at some point, usually years later, Israel would cry out to God asking for mercy, and God would raise up a judge who acted as a warrior-deliverer. God would empower the judge, they would lead Israel into battle, and God would rescue the nation.

In Judges 6:1, we encounter the beginning of a cycle: *“The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.”* During the time of Gideon, Israel was being overrun by the nation of Midian. At harvest time, the Midianites would sweep across their land, taking their crops and animals. What the Midianites didn't steal, they would destroy, and Israel was left fearful and impoverished. Judges 6:2 tells us that Israel's fear was so great that they started carving out shelters in the face of mountains, to hide from their enemies.

After seven years, the Israelites cried out to the Lord for help. But instead of saving them, God sent a prophet with a message—vs. 8-10; allow me to paraphrase it for you. *“God brought you out of Egypt, He gave you everything you needed and more, but you've rejected the Living God for idols made of wood and stone. God*

warned you to stay away from these idols—they have no power to help or protect you—you've gotten yourself into the mess you're in.”

With a message like this, we might expect there to be nation-wide repentance, but we have no indication that anything like this happened. The spirit of entitlement makes a person—a nation—do funny things, like expecting God to rescue them, without any real intention to return to Him. What we do have record of is God raising up a Deliverer, to save the people He loved. Let's move on from the back story and address one of the key themes of the story, namely, identity.

Discovering Identity: When we first meet Gideon, in Judges 6:11, he is hiding in a winepress, threshing wheat. The threshing of wheat was always done in wide open spaces; wheat would be spread out on the ground, it would be beaten and then tossed into the air where the chaff could be blown away by the wind. But not Gideon; in order to protect the little that he and his family had, he took his wheat to a winepress—he didn't want their harvest stolen. Everything about Gideon smells of fear.

An angelic messenger came to Gideon with a word from God, and the words spoken over Gideon are recorded in Judges 6:12: *“The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.”* It's ironic, don't you think? But with this word, a chain reaction began in Gideon's life that brought about a transformation he never saw coming.

God is still in the business of speaking life-changing-words; God often speaks words to us, words about us, that have no grounding in our present reality. I'm sure when Gideon heard the words “mighty warrior,” he pointed to himself and asked: *Are you talking about me?*

When God speaks to us about who we will become, it always sound strange to our own ears—we can see the all the reasons why it could never happen. But what God has said will come to pass.

From vs. 13-24, God and Gideon begin a two-way dialogue. The angel has just greeted Gideon saying, *“The Lord is with you, mighty warrior,”* and Gideon’s reply can be paraphrased as follows, *“Are you blind to the mess we’re in? Maybe the Lord used to be with us, but that’s no longer the case; if He were, would I be hiding in a winepress? I’ve heard the old stories, but that God abandoned us a long time ago.”*

And what God does next is astounding to me; He simply moves on. The Lord could have responded to Gideon’s accusation, trying to defend His reputation, after all, Israel was the one who had abandoned God, not the other way around. In vs. 14, God says, *“Go...and save Israel...Am I not sending you?”*

As Gideon responds we see what is in his heart; it seems that Gideon doesn’t know God firsthand, he’s only heard that God was once strong many years ago. What we see in Gideon in fear; he was brought face to face with his own weakness. Gideon was afraid that he wasn’t enough, that he would never be enough, and that God’s supply could never make up for weakness. Gideon is more like us than we care to admit.

Gideon responds to God saying, *“I can’t do what you’re asking—I have no strength, position, or authority.”* To Gideon’s credit, he wasn’t afraid to tell God what he thought. I want you to notice something about this dialogue between God and

Gideon—God doesn’t punish Gideon for doubting His goodness or for being afraid; God simply keeps bringing Gideon along. There’s a little phrase that most of us are familiar with in culture today—“It’s not what you know, it’s *who you know* .”

In verse 16, God reminds Gideon, and He also reminds us, that He doesn’t ask us to be strong, to have position, or to wield authority—it’s not what we know or what we can do that makes the difference. God makes the difference—He goes with us. God promised to go with Gideon, God would be the warrior, all He asked of Gideon, and of us, is that we put our trust in Him, and agree to go along.

Gideon was not easily convinced, and neither are we. Pain has a way of ramping up both fear and confusion. When we find ourselves in the middle of difficulty we often say to ourselves, *“Why would God allow this? How could He ask this of me? Why won’t He make things easy for me?”*

Gideon didn’t want to do what God was asking and so he asked God for a miraculous “sign”: *if you really are God, and you will provide what You have promised then prove it with a miraculous sign—if You send the sign, I will let You send me.”* Gideon is more than a little presumptuous but God indulged him; Gideon prepared an offering, placed it on a rock, and when the Angel of God touched it with a staff it was consumed by fire. Gideon had his proof, but his faith was still ruled by his fear. Let’s move on to the next scene, found in Judges 6:25-32.

Dealing with the Backyard: one of the lessons we learn from Gideon is that who you are at present isn't all that God intends for you to be—the path to our becoming involves transformation.

Before God can use Gideon, Gideon has to take care of some business in his own backyard—his father and his town have some shrines set up to false gods. God makes it clear, *“if these idols don't go, I cannot go with you.”* Let me give you a principle and then we'll move on.

The battle for our becoming begins in our own backyard. Until we are willing to deal with the junk that disrupts relationship with God, we can't embark on the rest of the journey. Do you know what your backyard issues are? What are you doing about them? Have you make a point of simply ignoring the junk in your backyard?

Becoming a man or woman of God will mean looking deep into our hearts and minds, and getting rid of thoughts, attitudes, priorities, and actions that are sinful. This backyard clean up is something that God asks us to do in our own strength; this too is God's work in us.

Discerning God's Direction: The next scene immediately follows; after tearing down his father's shrine, Gideon was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he put out a call to Israel and 32,000 men rallied to his side. God supernaturally provided Gideon with an army, but Gideon was still without faith; he wanted another sign from God, just to make sure.

And so Gideon set up a fleece experiment, and here's how it went. *“God...I'm going to lay wool out on the ground...when I wake up*

tomorrow, if the ground is dry, and the wool is wet...then I'll know that You intend to save Israel by my hand.”

The next morning Gideon awoke to find the fleece wet and the ground dry, but he thought to himself, *“That's too easy. I'll ask for the reverse sign— dry wool and a wet ground.”* Now inevitably, people point to this story and ask, *“Does this kind of thing actually work with God? Is this the biblical pattern for discerning God's will? Where can I get some of that wool?!”*

What is interesting is that Gideon already knew God's direction— God has made it plain multiple times; Gideon didn't need clarity, what he needed was courage. We like the wool-test largely because it requires no faith. It's like a science experiment: if the litmus paper turns red then it's an acid, if it turns blue then it's a base. In this kind of scenario, one thing is certain, there is no room for faith.

No, laying our fleeces before God is not the way we discern His will. You might say, *“But it worked for Gideon,”* and you would be right, but this scene teaches us less about how to receive God's guidance and more about what God is like. God is gracious and gentle; though we ask for signs, when He's already given us direction, He frequently indulges us in order to demonstrate His trustworthiness.

illus: a number of years ago, good friends of mine—a husband and wife—began to think about starting a family. As they prayed, God spoke to them about an international adoption from Thailand. What they discovered in the process was that the financial costs involved exceeded their own resources. But they knew what God had told them and so they kept moving in God's direction.

At every stage of the process, when money was required, God provided the funds through friends and family. The day came when they had one final instalment to pay for—a little over \$3000—and they didn't know what to do. They didn't have the money and so they began to check into getting a loan, or setting up a deferred payment plan.

One Sunday they were in church, and during worship God gave the wife a vision of a birdcage; the door to the cage was open, but the bird was still sitting inside. She didn't know what to make of it until a few days later. People from their church came by for coffee and they had an envelope with them. When she opened the envelope she saw a picture on the front of the card—it was a picture of a little Thai boy, holding a birdcage, the door was open, and the bird was still inside. Inside the card, she found a cheque that covered the entire last instalment.

Faith is not a matter of waiting for all the concrete evidence and then deciding to take the first step—no faith is required in this scenario—faith gets our feet moving in God's direction and trusting God for the rest along the way.

An Unfair Fight: The next scene begins in Judges 7:1, I've entitled it "*An Unfair Fight*."

In order to deliver Israel from Midian, first, Gideon had to deliver Gideon from his independence. Gideon had received his sign, he had a little faith, and an army of 32,000 men. Gideon knew he will be facing an army with superior numbers, but 32,000 men wasn't a bad start.

My dear people, self-confidence is not the same thing as faith. God still needed to sift Gideon—his faith was in a sign, and maybe in an army, but not yet in God. And so, quite deliberately, God began to shrink Gideon's army.

In chapter 7:2, God says to Gideon: *I know what's going on in your head—if you beat the Midianites with your army, you'll forget all about Me; you have too many men. Tell the men that if any of them are afraid, they can go home.* And when Gideon told the men, 22,000 of them grabbed their stuff and left; only 10,000 remained.

But God said to him one more time: *There's still too many men.* The question is, *too many for what?* Here's the answer—**too many for it to be a unfair fight**; you see, this is exactly what God wanted, an unfair fight.

We like "fair fights," we want things to be evenly matched or to have the advantage—we want to win! A fair fight gives us a false sense that we control our own destiny, that our skill or ingenuity will be the deciding factor.

But once again, self-confidence is not the same thing as faith. We learn to trust God in situations where we are painfully aware of our own weakness and need. We don't need faith for something we can control, we need faith when things are beyond our control, when our strength is failing, and the situation is dire.

We can work harder, trying to improve our knowledge and skills, trying to conquer all weakness, and many of us do take this route. But here's the thing, we are limited, created, beings. We don't have all the answers, we don't control all the outcomes, we don't make all

the rules. The fact that we are not God means that we will always be dependant; in other words, we will always need God.

One of the most important steps on the journey from fear to faith is admitting to God, self, and others that you will always have weaknesses and limitations. Once we have made this confession, we can stop trying to eradicate our weakness, and begin to surrender it to God. In the Lord's hands, our weakness becomes a weapon.

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 12, shares one of his struggles. He says that at one point in his life, he was experiencing great suffering and weakness. Three times Paul pleaded with God to take it away, but God said to him:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore, Paul says, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”¹

Our weakness is a weapon. When we submit our weakness to God, He comes with His power and might. You may be praying these days for God to make you strong, and often this kind of prayer—deep down—is a prayer for independence. *“God make me so strong that I can handle every situation on my own and come through it unscathed and victorious.”*

¹ 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

This kind of prayer, in essence, is a prayer for God to make us so strong that we no longer need Him. Is this the kind of prayer that God will answer with a “yes”? Instead of praying for independence we can pray for His strength to be made manifest in us—His strength in our weakness—so that we, and everyone around us will know that God is the One who rescues and saves.

Gideon's army went from 32,000, to 10,000, all the way down to 300; this is the kind of fight that God wanted—it was so lopsided, so unfair, Gideon and the men had no choice but to depend on God.

Lawson Younger writes, “Sometimes God has to take us through such experiences to expose our fear and lack of trust in Him....If we continue to depend on other things for our security and confidence, He must remove these to bring us to the point of true dependence on Him alone. He brings Gideon to the point where He must either trust God or reject Him altogether.”

Some of you could probably shake your heads in agreement with that truth—you've been there before. Maybe you're living there right now, and if you are, hang on—with God there is always hope. Let's turn our attention to one final scene—Judges 7:9-15

An Encouraging Word (7:9-15)

With Gideon's fear exposed and his faith failing, God gives Gideon an encouraging word. In chapter 7:9, we read: *“During that night the Lord said to Gideon, “Get up, go down against the camp, because I'm going to give it into your hands. If you are afraid to attack, go*

down to the camp with your servant Purah and listen to what they are saying. Afterward you will be encouraged”.

Gideon did as God asked; he snuck into the enemy camp at night and cozied up beside one of their tents. Verse 13-15 says, “*Gideon arrived just as a man was telling a friend his dream. ‘I had a dream,’ he was saying. ‘A round loaf of barley bread came tumbling into the Midianite camp. It struck the tent with such force that the tent overturned and collapsed.’ His friend responded, ‘This can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon...God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands.’”*

On three different occasions, God told Gideon that Midian would be defeated, but it wasn't until Gideon heard this word from the enemy that he believed and was filled with courage. Verse 15 tells us that right then and there—outside of the enemy tent—Gideon worshipped God (probably very quietly!) and then he returned to camp. He gathered his 300 men and went to battle, and God delivered Midian into their hands.

One of the boldest moves that will ever take place in your life is the move from fear to faith. I have found that fear is not something that we conquer, fear is something that must be replaced with a greater fear—the fear of God. Not that we need to be afraid of God, but that we acknowledge He is bigger, and stronger than anything that makes us afraid. The Book of Proverbs reminds us that when we make this fear of the Lord our #1 fear, the result is wisdom; in other words, we begin to see our circumstances in the light of God's love, presence, and power.

Life is filled with difficulty and challenge—it's to be expected; we live in a world broken because sin. But this we know: Jesus has overcome the world, difficulty and pain will not be forever, and in the mean time, God will be with us in every tight spot.

If you are surrounded by trouble, look to Him; Psalm 34:7 says, “*The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and He delivers them.*” We may be surrounded by trouble, but we and all our troubles are surrounded by God.

Conclusion: As interested as we might be in living an unhindered, easy life, few of us will ever experience such a life before Heaven. God isn't looking to simply deliver us from our circumstances, He's looking to deliver us from ourselves. Fear, doubt, sin, God wants to move from fear towards faith, from doubt towards trust, from sin towards righteousness—these are but a few of the bold moves God wants to bring about in your life.

And all of these bold moves have to do with who you are becoming. It is God who shapes our character and destiny; He sees who we will become—people conformed to the likeness of His Son, the Lord Jesus. And God will work through any and every circumstance to see this transformation take place.

Don't be discouraged about where you find yourself, or in the parts of your character that remain to be transformed. God is not finished with you yet; He will finish the good work that He began in you—He will be faithful to complete it.

Pray.