

In 2016, my father gave each of his grandchildren a family photo album for Christmas. It was a project he worked on for a year, and the photographs in the album represented five generations of my family. And while my kids were moderately interested, I was all over this thing. It not only showed the names and faces of the Pressler clan, it also told the story of my family. It included family members I'd never met, and others I'd never even heard of. And, not surprisingly, there were several photos that showed just how awkward my family could be.

Like this one. Those are my grandparents. And, based on the glassware in front of them, it looks like my grandmother won. This was taken in the German tavern they owned in McHenry, IL. And then there's this one. That's my dad, and he's not trying to make a fashion statement. Some of you may remember the classic TV show *The Six Million Dollar Man*. I loved that show, and I constantly pretended to be Steve Austin and take out bad guys. One day, while in character, I innocently took a swing at my dad's face, and my fingernail caught his eye and scratched his cornea. He had to wear this contraption for several weeks to keep the light out so his eye could heal. Then there's this one. There's actually nothing awkward about this photo. I just wanted you all to see that, at one point in my life, I did have hair...and I think we can all agree it was awesome. And finally, there's this one. This is a photo taken in 1938 of my Uncle Fritz, an officer in the army. But if you're looking for the stars and stripes, you'll be hard pressed to find them, because my uncle served in the German army. This one stopped me in my tracks. Why did my dad include someone of questionable repute in our family photo album? Was there anything redemptive to his story? What impact did he have on our family?

You have a Father who's also given you a family photo album. And while there are no actual photographs to be found, the Bible tells the story of God's family. And just like my family, and I'm sure just like yours, there are plenty of awkward pictures to be found in this book. Just in the genealogy of Jesus is found the pair who brought sin into the world, a man who was sold into slavery by his brothers, a woman who bore sons to her dead husbands' father, an adulterer and murderer, and a guy with 1,000 wives. Talk about awkward.

This morning we begin a new series called *Awkward Family Photos*. We are going to spend the next several weeks looking at some of the most interesting members of God's family who, at first glance, appear too broken, too weak, too evil...too awkward, to have had a great impact for God. But all that changes when God intervenes to redeem, direct, and empower them for his purposes. We want learn from their stories.

Today we begin with one of my favorite characters in all the Bible: Gideon. Gideon is found in the Old Testament book of Judges. Here's basically how the book of Judges goes: God blesses Israel, Israel lives in peace, Israel grows complacent and becomes disobedient, God judges Israel by allowing them to be conquered by foreign nations, Israel repents and turns back to God, God raises up a leader, called a judge, to fight back the foreign threat and liberate Israel, God blesses Israel, and then whole cycle starts again. And in chapters 6-8, we find the Midianites have conquered Israel, Israel has repented of their sins and turned back towards God, and God is on the move to raise up one of the most unlikely leaders in all of Israel. But to be used by God, Gideon must first believe and respond to what God says about him and what God says about himself.

The first thing Gideon must believe is **God uses the insignificant significantly**. The way God views us is often different than the way we view ourselves. We often underestimate ourselves and what God can do through us. Don't think you're nothing when you're something.

[JUDGES 6:12-15] 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 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."

The angel of the Lord shows up and tells Gideon God has a job for him. Gideon's immediate response is to question God's character and doubt himself. Gideon's struggle is a lot like ours. We are concerned about where we've come from, but God is concerned about where we are going.

In this exchange, God speaks life into Gideon. They are words intended to propel him forward. First, he gives him a name. God addresses him as "O mighty man of valor." Names are powerful because they shape identity, and Gideon was in the midst of an identity crisis that needed to be resolved. God's name for Gideon wasn't who he was in that moment but, by God's enablement, it was the man he would become. In spite of Gideon's background, God was calling out Gideon's potential.

The second thing given to Gideon was his calling, and it's a calling tied directly to his identity. "Go in this might of yours (identity) and save Israel from the hand of Midian (calling)." Gideon must come to believe that not only does God know who he is, but God actually has something significant for him to do.

Where did you come from? What names did you grow up with? If the angel of the Lord came to you today and said God had a holy assignment for you, how would you respond? So many of us are in an identity crisis because we are playing the tapes of old that include names like "not good enough", "stupid", "weak", "worthless". These are tapes of limitation, and they are full of lies. They give us a false identity and keep us from believing we have anything to offer.

But God has a different message for you. It's a message of new names and of great potential. Scripture tells us what God calls all of us who are in Christ; names like beloved, child, friend, bride. And he has something specifically for you. "You may not currently see it, but wait until my grace and power get a hold of you and then watch what happens." When God looks at you right now, he sees what you can be because he knows what he can make you. Believe God when he says you have something to offer.

The second thing Gideon must believe is that **God uses a little to accomplish a lot**. From the beginning of Gideon's story, he's confronted with the decision of whether or not he's going to

trust God. Immediately after God gives him his calling to defeat the Midianites, Gideon responds with the question “How can I?” God gives him a clear and wholly sufficient answer.

[JUDGES 6:16] ¹⁶ And the Lord said to him, “But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.”

God’s promise of presence and power is given to all who would follow after him. Gideon is promised God’s presence and is told victory will be as easy as if the Midianites were but one man. But over the course of three chapters, which I would encourage you to read, it’s clear Gideon is racked with doubt. He continually questions and tests the Lord. Gideon is struggling with the question of if God is who he says he is and if God will do what he says he’ll do. Ultimately the Lord is going to test Gideon and make him answer that question. As they prepare for battle, God makes a move to ensure victory is completely dependent on him.

[JUDGES 7:2, 8] ² The Lord said to Gideon, “The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’... ⁸ So the people took provisions in their hands, and their trumpets. And he sent all the rest of Israel every man to his tent, but retained the 300 men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

Would you take a bet where your odds are 450:1? That’s where Israel finds itself now with just 300 fighting men. God wants to make it clear he’ll be the one defeating the Midianites. He does this to make sure Israel can’t boast, thinking of themselves as something when, without God, they are nothing. And he does this to provide a moment for Gideon when all human confidence is stripped away.

God wants to be glorified in our lives. But if we doubt him and doubt his Word, we make that difficult. We may be at risk of succumbing to this age of fame and acclaim, reluctant to share the glory with God because we want the credit for the success in our lives. Or we stay frozen in fear, unwilling to step out in faith and risk. Both responses are because we doubt God. Both responses rob God of his glory.

But God is abundantly patient, and he works with us as we grow in our belief. God tells Gideon it’s time to fight, but he adds a caveat. If Gideon is afraid, he can sneak down to the Midianite camp, listen, and what he’ll hear will strengthen him. When Gideon approaches, he hears one Midianite tell another of a dream, and the other says it clearly means “God has given into Gideon’s hand Midian and all the camp.” Gideon was convinced. **[JUDGES 7:15b] And he returned to the camp of Israel and said, “Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand.”** Fear turned to confidence. Doubt turned to belief. Gideon knew God was going to give them victory. And he did, followed by 40 years of peace.

Our calling should give all of us pause. If you think you don’t need God to fulfill what he’s called you to do, there’s a good chance you’re overestimating yourself or you heard him wrong. For myself, over the last seven or so months, when people have asked me how it’s going, I usually answer with two thoughts: I’m having the time of my life. And it’s heavy. The weight of responsibility of God’s calling for my life often has me asking the same question as Gideon:

“How can I?” It’s really a confession that says I can’t do this without God. Thankfully, he answers me in the same way: “I will be with you.”

We all have to decide if we believe what God says about us and what he says about himself. For us to be who God says we are, God has to be who he says he is, because we can’t do it without him. He can take all of who you are now, no matter how little you have to offer, and accomplish amazing things, because he’s the one working through you to do so. In fact, our limits show God is limitless.

So what do we do with this? Whether we struggle with being nothing when we’re something, or being something when we’re nothing, one thing we must always remember is that God is everything. **God uses those whose hearts are turned towards him.** There are two significant moments in Gideon’s life that preceded the battle and show his growing belief of what God says about him and what God says about himself. It’s those two moments that propelled him to action.

[JUDGES 6:25b-27a] ²⁵…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…²⁷ So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the Lord had told him.

This is the act of consecration. Gideon renounces the idols of his past and dedicates himself to the Lord. Idols are anchors that weigh us down, they prevent us from getting started or hinder us from moving forward in fulfilling our calling. It’s anything we value above God or anything that gives us our identity other than God. Status, relationships, success, notoriety. All of these are false, and they are stumbling blocks to living out what God has called us to. To honor God and maximize our impact for his Kingdom, we must replace our devotion to those things with a devotion to God alone.

I had the privilege of hearing a friend’s testimony this week, and a part of it was his act of consecration. “My first act of obedience wasn’t baptism, rather it was breaking up with my girlfriend. Our relationship wasn’t good.” This guy now saw his relationship as an impediment to living out what God was calling him to, and he made a difficult but obedient choice to follow him completely. If we are going to live our lives for God, we’re going to have to leave some things behind. But, without fail, what God has as the alternative is infinitely more fulfilling.

The second significant moment occurs when Gideon approaches the Midianite camp and hears “God has given into Gideon’s hand Midian and all the camp.” **[JUDGES 7:15a] ¹⁵ As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped.**

Gideon finally recognized God as glorious and trustworthy, that he is who he says he is, and in that moment, he couldn’t help but worship. Gideon is so overwhelmed with the awesomeness of his God that he sits silently at the edge of the enemy encampment to adore the one who will accomplish his will that day. It’s then when he’s ready to move forward and taste God’s victory.

God can handle our doubt, and he is an encourager along the up-and-down pathway of faith. When you are assured of his character and see him at work, worship is irresistible. Where in your life are you praying for God to show up and show off? Do you pray to see God's glory?

Consecration is the act that shows we believe what God says about us, and we dedicate ourselves to him to live that out. Worship is the act that shows we believe what God says about himself, and from us pours adoration. And no matter what has come before: sinfulness, brokenness, weakness, evil, and the rest, when we offer to God a consecrated life and a worshipful heart, we are ready to be used by him.

Which brings me back to my Uncle Fritz. Before my dad was born, his parents and two sisters were in Germany to visit family. The year was 1938. And one night, my Uncle Fritz came home in a panic. He looked at my grandfather and said "You have to leave tonight. Hitler is closing the country." If they got stuck, there was no telling what would happen. My grandfather had emigrated to the US from the Fatherland and become a citizen. How would they look at him? My grandmother had emigrated but had not yet become a US citizen. That means she was a German citizen, and there was no way they would have let her out. So my uncle used his influence, pulled some strings, and put himself in harm's way to get my family out of the country that night. Now look, I don't know my uncle's politics. I don't know if he was a Nazi, or if he loathed what his country had become. But what I do know is, even with his questionable background, his awkwardness, he had a moment of true goodness, as he risked himself for the blessing and benefit of my family. Because of that, not only did he show up in our family's photo album, but my father, whom was born two years after that incident, was named Hans Fritz.

Now, Uncle Fritz is the hero of that story. But, in this photo album, there's only one hero: God. And what we saw today, and what we'll see throughout the rest of this series, is that the hero invites us to join him in his heroic work, and he repurposes us so that we can have an impact for his family and his Kingdom. And no matter our past, no matter what we've been told about ourselves, no matter how poorly we've lived our lives, no matter how we've doubted and questioned, God can redeem it all. You become useful to God because he makes you useful.

We see that in Gideon, and we'll see that in each character we look at over the next several weeks. And one of the things I'm really excited about is that you're going to be able to hear from several of our very own awkward family members. I'm committed to sharing this pulpit. It's good for us to hear from multiple voices, and it's vital for those whose God given purpose includes preaching to get an opportunity to exercise that calling. So come back each week and be inspired and encouraged how God takes awkward and makes it glorious.