



Gideon: Deliverer for the People

September 13, 2009

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:

JUDGES 6–8

PRINTED TEXT:

JUDGES 6:1–3, 7–16

The LORD turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”

—Judges 6:14

Opening Song

Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; the third day He arose from the dead, He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Church Universal, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting

Opening Prayer

JUDGES 6:1-3, 7-16 (NIV)

6¹ Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. ² Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. ³ Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country.

⁷ When the Israelites cried to the LORD because of Midian, ⁸ he sent them a prophet, who said, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ⁹ I snatched you from the power of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them from before you and gave you their land. ¹⁰ I said to you, 'I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me." ¹¹ The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. ¹² When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior." ¹³ "But sir," Gideon replied, "if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, 'Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?' But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian." ¹⁴ The LORD turned to him and said, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" ¹⁵ "But Lord , " Gideon asked, "how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." ¹⁶ The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

INTRODUCTION**A. WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH**

Johnny Weissmuller (1904–1984) won five gold medals in swimming in the Olympics of 1924 and 1928. He set dozens of swimming records between 1921 and 1929. When he retired from amateur swimming, he had never lost a race.

Yet his life did not begin with the promise of any such accomplishments. He came to America with his German-speaking parents when he was less than a year old. His father worked first as a coal miner in Pennsylvania, then later as a brewer in Chicago. Johnny was sickly, but the move to Chicago gave him access to Lake Michigan, where he could build his strength through swimming. With parental encouragement, he developed some swimming skills, and he began to pursue the sport with a passion. He went on to become even more famous in the role of Tarzan in 12 movies.

Haven't we all at some time benefited from the persuasion and encouragement of others? Today's lesson is about Gideon, and he also needed some extra persuasion to reach his potential. For Weissmuller it was in swimming that he needed parental persistence; for Gideon it was the Lord who moved him to commit himself to deliver the nation of Israel from her enemies.

B. LESSON BACKGROUND

Joshua (last week's lesson) had fulfilled his commission. Having led Israel in the initial conquest of Canaan, he had worked with Eleazar to consign the land among the tribes. Joshua's major military campaigns occurred between about 1406 and 1400 BC. This conclusion is based on Caleb's statements in Joshua 14:7–10. Caleb was age 40 when he was a spy, which means he was about 39 when he left Egypt, and therefore 79 when the Jordan was crossed 40 years later. The fact that he was 85 as land was assigned to him thus indicates that the initial conquest took about 6 years.

As Joshua's life was coming to a close, he assembled the people to renew their commitment to the Lord's covenant (Joshua 23, 24). He expressed skepticism that they could keep their word, but they vowed their determination to do so. The book of Judges, which covers the period about 1380 to 1050 BC, relates how they did not keep their part of the covenant. Israelite faithfulness was like the morning dew that evaporates into the air.

God had promised that if the people were faithful, they would have children, great crops, full barns, and protection from enemies (Deuteronomy 28:3–14). The people had no taxes to pay except their tithes, and the Lord would take care of them. Moses had predicted severe punishment if the Israelites served other gods (Deuteronomy 28:15–68). The book of Judges sets forth the fulfillments of the curses that came upon them—punishments for their disobedience.

When Joshua died, Israel did not have a leader designated, and there was no procedure to select one. According to Judges 1, it seems that each tribe operated independently and was expected to help expedite the mopping up operations against the Canaanites. The mopping up began well. Then an exception appears in Judges 1:21. That is followed by a list of failures in verses 27–36.

In Judges 2, an angel of the Lord appeared and rebuked the people for their disobedience. The generation that entered Canaan did not teach the next generation to know the Lord (Judges 2:10). As a result, their descendants were attracted to the gods of Canaan. The people did not keep their word. God, however, kept his word and sent other nations to punish Israel.

A cycle thus began that is given six times in the book of Judges. It is often summarized as *sin*, *sorrow*, *supplication*, and *salvation* (the words *slavery*, *servitude*, and *silence* are sometimes

added to the description of the cycle). The Israelites repented and prayed for help each time. Then God would send a savior in the form of a judge, who served as a military deliverer, magistrate, or both. The book of Judges has 13 such judges, and 6 of them are major delivering judges. Today's study is about Israel at the beginning of the judgeship of Gideon. He is the fifth judge, and he is the fourth major deliverer. We date his exploits between 1192 and 1152 BC. The first phase of the four-part cycle is ready to be repeated, for repentance often has a short duration.

I. DEVASTATION BY MIDIAN (JUDGES 6:1-3)

A. DURATION OF THE PUNISHMENT (v. 1)

1. Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.

Six rebellions by God's people are recounted in the book of Judges. Each begins the same way: affirming that the people *did evil in the eyes of the Lord* (Judges 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1 [here]; 10:6; 13:1). The phrase is defined more fully in Judges 2:11-13 as abandoning the worship of the Lord to serve the local deities (Baals and Ashtoreths, who are gods and goddesses of agriculture and fertility). Such worship is often associated with immoral practices.

While the Israelites were still at Sinai, God had warned them about the peoples of Canaan. The Israelites were not to make covenants with them, intermarry, or participate in their worship (Exodus 34:12-17). Yet God's prohibitions are treated like a warning about wet paint—people have to test it.

In the case before us, the evil is followed by punishment—a seven-year period of affliction from the Midianites. This group of people is also descended from Abraham, but through his second wife (Genesis 25:2). That was many centuries before the event being described here, so any sense of kinship has long since been lost. The Midianites live in the deserts east and south of Israel. Moses had found refuge for 40 years with these

people after he fled from Egypt (Exodus 2:15).

The people of Israel have been given a foundational charge by the Lord: they are to be a holy people, because they have a holy God (Leviticus 19:2; compare 1 Peter 1:15, 16). The gods of their religious neighbors are grossly immoral and so are the religious practices associated with them. To follow in those ways is to bring the promised disasters.

B. DESPERATE RESPONSES (v. 2)

2. Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds.

The oppression continues year after year. *Caves* and remote areas become places for the people to find safety for themselves and their crops.

C. DESCRIBING THE OPPRESSION (v. 3)

3. Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country.

God has withdrawn his special protection from Israel. As a result, nomadic groups are able to enjoy the fruits of Israelite labors. *The Israelites* are allowed to sow and harvest *their crops*. Then the marauders help themselves to the harvest, leaving just enough so that there will be seed for the next year. It is a time of desperation. The *Amalekites* seem to be descendants of Esau (Genesis 36:12). This is the group that attacked Israel just before it reached Sinai (Exodus 17:8-16). They are also a part of

the oppression that preceded Israel's second judge, Ehud (Judges 3:13).

II. DECLARATIONS BY A PROPHET (JUDGES 6:7–10)

A. PRAYER FOR RELIEF (V. 7)

7. When the Israelites cried to the LORD because of Midian,

When you have to live in the dens of the foxes, you finally get “foxhole religion.” This is usually defined as offering prayers and vows while in extreme situations, but the commitments tend to be forgotten after the dangers pass. After seven years, however, the prayers are more sincere. For the time being at least, the people intend to keep their pledges.

B. PROPHET'S REBUKE (VV. 8–10)

8–10.... he sent them a prophet, who said, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

An unknown *prophet* is *sent* to remind the Israelites that they have broken the covenant. The words are very similar to the message given by the angel of the Lord in Judges 2:1, 2. They are also reminiscent of the verse that immediately precedes the first of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2). Many generations have come and gone since the Mosaic covenant was given. But the passing of time does not lessen responsibility.

9. “I snatched you from the power of Egypt and from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them from before you and gave you their land.

The deliverance from Egyptian bondage was only the beginning of God's gracious acts on behalf of Israel. He had protected the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. The nation had met opposition as the people approached the area east of the Jordan (Numbers 21:22–35). But they easily had routed the foes. The battle of Jericho (Joshua 6) and the battle of the long day

(Joshua 10) are among the blessings that God bestowed on his people in their conquest of the Canaanites. Such victories allowed God to give *their land* to Israel.

10. “I said to you, ‘I am the LORD your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.’ But you have not listened to me.”

The mention of *the Amorites* brings to mind Joshua's challenge in Joshua 24:15. The Amorites ordinarily live in hill country, but the term is sometimes used to refer to all the peoples of Canaan. The unknown prophet's concluding statement *but you have not listened to me* justifies the punishment that has been received by Israel. The people are not grateful for the privilege of living in the *land*. Their subsequent disobedience involves gross idolatry.

III. DIALOGUE WITH GIDEON (JUDGES 6:11–16)

A. ANGEL (V. 11)

11. The angel of the LORD came and sat down under the oak in Ophrah that belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, where his son Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites.

Angel is the general word for “messenger.” The phrase *angel of the Lord* thus points to a heavenly being that appears in order to deliver a message. In certain contexts, this messenger is interpreted to refer to a function of the Son of God before he comes as a babe in Bethlehem. The ground is holy when this being appears (Exodus 3:2, 5), and he receives acts of worship (Judges 6:18–23). In addition, the language in the text before us and in Exodus 3 frequently changes from *angel* to *Lord* and/or *God* as the spokesperson. The apostle John is told twice that only God is to receive worship (Revelation 19:10; 22:8, 9), so *angel of the Lord* likely refers to a divine being here.

The location for this event is given as *under* a well-known *oak* tree that is *in*

Ophrah; verse 15 indicates that it is in the tribal territory of Manasseh. This serves to distinguish it from other communities that may have the same name. A *threshing* floor for grain is usually in an open area. This is so that the wind may blow away the chaff after a threshing sledge is pulled over the grain by oxen. Such places become targets for raiding parties (1 Samuel 23:1). *Gideon*, however, is doing this task in a *winepress* in order to conceal himself from *the Midianites*. A winepress is often a pit or recessed place in a rock.

B. ANNOUNCEMENT (v. 12)

12. When the angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon, he said, “The LORD is with you, mighty warrior.”

The sudden appearance of the heavenly messenger is intended to arouse Gideon’s attention. The greeting itself may have a certain irony or sarcasm in it, for this *mighty warrior* is hiding in a winepress to conceal what he is doing! The salutation also may be interpreted to mean that Gideon is simply a member of a family of distinction (compare Ruth 2:1, where the same words in Hebrew describe Boaz). Another possibility is that the phrase prophesies Gideon’s future accomplishments.

C. ANXIETY (v. 13)

13. “But sir,” Gideon replied, “if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all his wonders that our fathers told us about when they said, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up out of Egypt?’ But now the LORD has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian.”

Gideon responds to the first part of the angel’s greeting by asking a series of questions that seem to challenge the assertion that *the Lord* is present with Israel. His first question is the *why* question that is often associated with tragedies.

Gideon is aware of the history of his people. At least in his family, it has been told by the *fathers*, and he is able to cite the

acts of God associated with the deliverance from bondage. He changes from questions to the assertion that *the Lord* has deserted Israel, in spite of the promises of his presence. Now Israel is being oppressed by others.

Gideon conveniently overlooks or is not aware of the denunciation by the unknown prophet (vv. 8–10, above). We may assume that the angel appears to *Gideon* because he is, in some sense, a righteous man. But the righteous often have to suffer along with the unrighteous.

D. COMMISSION (v. 14)

14. The LORD turned to him and said, “Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?”

In response, *the Lord* does not answer *Gideon*’s questions of verse 13. Instead, the Lord tells *Gideon* to *go* in order to *save Israel*. The speaker has the authority to send *Gideon* on the mission that is planned for him. Some see an implication in the phrase *go in the strength you have* that *Gideon* is being bestowed with the ability to fulfill his assignment.

E. CONCERNS (v. 15)

15. “But Lord,” Gideon asked, “how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”

The task given to *Gideon* is formidable. Thus he expresses what he considers to be valid and serious reservations about his abilities and self-worth. Although not stated here, the text reveals later that two of his brothers have been slain by the Midianites (Judges 8:18, 19). If the intention of such slayings is to intimidate, the purpose has been accomplished in the mind of *Gideon*.

F. COMFORT (v. 16)

16. The LORD answered, “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together.”

The assurance given to Gideon is the same as was given to Moses—that the Lord *will be with* him (Exodus 3:12). Like Moses, this is only partially comforting to Gideon. The narrative that follows shows that he is not fully persuaded. He receives the promise

that he will be able to be victorious over *the Midianites*, but he is not totally convinced. Like Moses, Gideon needs some signs to validate what he is to do. These will be given to him according to his requests.

CONCLUSION

Gideon was reluctant at first to do what the Lord asked him to do. Yet God patiently worked with him, and he became more confident and trusting in the Lord. He is mentioned in the listing of heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11:32: “I do not have time to tell about Gideon, ... who through faith conquered kingdoms; ... whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.”

One of the challenges for every believer is simply to do what God wants to be done as revealed in his Word. Most people are fully aware of the areas in which they need to make changes. But to have the resolve and then make the changes is the real test.

Teachers of this lesson are strongly encouraged to read the entire account that relates the subsequent events in Gideon’s life: the water test involving the wetness of the fleece left on the ground overnight, the reduction of his army from 32,000 to 10,000 to 300 (against 135,000, Judges 8:10), the attack on the Midianite camp at night, and the pursuit of those who were able to get away. The total number of verses given to Gideon and his son is more than that given to any of the other judges.

A certain preacher once used the record of Gideon in a sermon, saying that he always wondered if he would have been among the 300 who were selected to be in Gideon’s final army. Afterward, one of the church leaders asked pointedly, “What makes you think you would not have been among the 22,000 that went home when they had the opportunity?” Good question!

REJECTION HOTLINE

The “dating game” is nearly as old as the human race. Traditionally, the male of our species makes the first approach. Men have developed all sorts of pick-up lines to impress and interest the women they are attracted to. An important step in the process is a request for the woman’s phone number.

What if the woman is totally uninterested, but doesn’t want to crush the poor fellow’s fragile ego in a public place? The option of giving a false phone number has been around a long time, but now a new twist has been added: she now can give him the phone number of the local “rejection hotline,” smile, and walk away. The would-be suitor thinks he has hit the jackpot.

When he calls the following day, however, he hears this recording: “Hello, this is not the person you were trying to call. You’ve reached the rejection hotline.... Unfortunately, the person who gave you this rejection hotline number did not want you to have their real number.” The rude voice goes on to list numerous negative characteristics that the woman may have noticed.

Israel presumed she could worship idols with impunity. Her “big time” rejection in the form of the Babylonian captivity is far in the future in Gideon’s day. When the leaders of that later time tried to call on the Lord, they found themselves reaching God’s rejection hotline (Ezekiel 14:3).

The unknown prophet in today's text gave Israel something of a warm-up to that heaviest of Israel's rejections. How does God rebuke disobedience yet today?

AFFECTED BY THE PAST

The past has a way of catching up with us. Take, for example, the town of Picher, located in the northeast corner of Oklahoma. Picher was once a center for lead and zinc mining. The mines finally played out in the 1970s, and the town's population dropped from a pre-World War II high of 16,000 to about 1,600. Now, Picher is underlain with a maze of old tunnels and caverns that are subject to collapse at any time.

In 1967, nine houses fell into a single sinkhole. In 2005, a cave-in appeared beside the primary road into Picher, forcing the highway to be closed to large trucks. In 2006, the Environmental Protection Agency met with the townspeople to tell them the whole town was in danger of falling into the earth. The EPA announced its plans to buy the whole town—houses, mobile homes, church buildings, and businesses—at a cost of at least \$20 million. An even greater cost is the lead poisoning that affects the children who have grown up in Picher. That which seemed at one time to promise the good life has come back to haunt the town.

Past sin has a way of coming back on us as well. Israel's "evil in the eyes of the Lord" undoubtedly seemed fun and satisfying at one time. But it proved to be the nation's downfall. The principle still applies: what we did yesterday and in years past affects our lives today. We can't change the past, but we can act on the fact that what we do today will affect our lives tomorrow.

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. What tools does the Christian have to break or avoid the cycle of "sin, sorrow, supplication, and salvation" that the Israelites experienced? How will you use these tools in the week ahead?

2. Why do you think idol worship was such a strong temptation to Israel? In what ways do we succumb to the same temptation, and how do we prevent this?

3. What are some promises that you or others have made to God during extreme situations? Did those promises lead to a lasting change in your (or their) relationship with God? Why, or why not?

4. Who is a "person of valor" you know who may not at first glance stand out as a courageous person in the eyes of the world? In what ways is this person a Christian example to emulate?

5. Why does God allow the righteous to suffer along with the guilty? What instances of this have you seen?

LET'S TALK IT OVER

1. What tools does the Christian have to break or avoid the cycle of “sin, sorrow, supplication, and salvation” that the Israelites experienced? How will you use these tools in the week ahead?

Christians have received forgiveness of sins, adoption as children of God, and the indwelling presence of God's Spirit. Unlike Old Testament believers, who had only dim glimpses of the coming atonement and had to approach God fearfully through flawed human intermediaries, Christians have received a more complete revelation (Hebrews 1:1, 2). We have the Son of God himself as high priest (Hebrews 4:14, 15).

We also benefit from the encouragement and instruction of a body of believers that follows the Lord for spiritual reasons, not material benefits. One of the strongest tools we have for overcoming discouragement at our own imperfection is the awareness that our salvation is a gift of grace (Ephesians 2:8, 9). And let's not forget the tool of the lessons of history. Seeing Israel's mistakes should caution us not to do the same things (1 Corinthians 10:1–13).

2. Why do you think idol worship was such a strong temptation to Israel? In what ways do we succumb to the same temptation, and how do we prevent this?

All it takes is a look at the hair styles in your high school yearbook to realize the power of peer pressure! While all the surrounding nations had multiple deities represented in impressive temples and tangible images, Israel had one invisible God whose presence was manifested in the tabernacle—a travel-worn tent. The peer pressure of the surrounding nations is obvious.

Ancient pagan rites often included sexual immorality and other behavior that appealed to people's baser instincts. We see much the same appeal to base instincts in modern media. Then as now, following God means resisting powerful cultural forces.

3. What are some promises that you or others have made to God during extreme situations? Did those promises lead to a lasting change in your (or their) relationship with God? Why, or why not?

Life-threatening situations are occasions for making sweeping promises to God. But that's also true for something as mundane as taking a final exam. “Get me out of this, Lord, and I promise I will (or will not) ...” is something of the pattern.

The problem with making such promises is that when God does His part, we may feel as if we've done a deal with the Mafia—and now it's time to pay up, with interest. Scripture warns us not to make rash promises to the Lord (Ecclesiastes 5:5–7; compare Judges 11:30–40; 1 Samuel 14:24–45). Integrity before God includes not making promises we cannot keep.

4. Who is a “person of valor” you know who may not at first glance stand out as a courageous person in the eyes of the world? In what ways is this person a Christian example to emulate?

Quiet courage comes in many forms. Think of the gifted person hindered by a disabled and uncooperative body; the couple that chooses to work through a marital crisis; the addict who persists in trying again after every failure; and the shy teen who invites a friend to a youth event. For Gideon, harvesting may have been an act of courage in and of itself, as the enemy could appear at any moment to kill and confiscate. God still sees and values even small acts of courage. He recognizes their potential to make us fit to perform greater acts of courage in faith.

5. Why does God allow the righteous to suffer along with the guilty? What instances of this have you seen?

If only unrighteous people were stricken with accidents and illness, there would be an artificial incentive to seek God for material and physical benefits. The story of Job illustrates how God is glorified and Satan is proved a liar when Job, “a perfect and an upright man” (Job 1:8), persisted in seeking God even in the midst of suffering and tragedy. Tertullian, a Christian thinker of the third century, observed that the spilled blood of Christian martyrs is like “seed” that causes the church to spread and grow through the powerful example of a faith worth dying for. Ultimately, God will settle all accounts in the final judgment, and the sacrifices of His people will be amply rewarded.

PRAYER

Almighty God, I am grateful for the example of Gideon. May I use it to become more what you want me to be. Then may I encourage others in the same way. In Christ's name. Amen.