

Week 7 - Gideon's Rise - Judges 6:1-32

Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 28:15-34

Introduction

This morning we come to the account of Gideon, the fourth and middle major judge

Partially because Gideon stands in the middle slot of the seven major judges and partially because of his character, the account of Gideon serves as the pivotal point of the book of Judges

The quality of those God raised up to deliver Israel during these roughly 350 years continues to decline with Gideon, and the decline picks up speed after Gideon

When we meet Gideon, he seems much like the man who went to a psychiatrist for help with a problem he had

He met with the doctor and said, "Doctor, you have to help me. Everything in my life seems to be going wrong. I feel utterly worthless, and my friends tell me I have an inferiority complex. Can you help me?"

The psychiatrist gave him some tests and said that he would evaluate him and that the man should come back in a week

Upon returning for his second appointment, the psychiatrist said, "Friend, I have some good news and some bad news to give you. The good news is that your tests prove you don't have a complex. The bad news is, they also show that you are inferior."

When we meet Gideon, he is a defeated man with absolutely no self-confidence

Othniel was strong, Ehud was treacherous but brave, Barak was reluctant but compliant, and Gideon is introduced as the original hard-luck kid

But, thankfully for all of us, when God looks at us, he doesn't see us for what we are but for what we can become as he works in our lives

God loves to take the weak and make them strong

In **1Corinthians 1:27**, we read how God chooses to use the weak things of the world to shame the strong

God doesn't look at what's wrong with us and say, "Fix all those things; then I can use you."

He knows all of our weaknesses, our doubts, our discouragements, our failures, and inadequacies - both real and imagined - and he delights in coming into our lives and transforming us through his presence

So, while Gideon presents us with a bit of a puzzle, his account assures us that God can work through anyone to do great things

As I told you last week, we will be looking at the Gideon cycle today and over the next two Sundays

And our passage for this morning is Judges 6:1-32 which deals with matters that are mainly introductory to the Gideon cycle

If you are taking notes, I have alliterated the sections of this passage as:

The "**climate**" of Gideon, The **commissioning** of Gideon, and the **compliance** of Gideon

To rightly understand Gideon, we need first to understand the times Gideon was living in

I. The "climate" of Gideon

After Deborah and Barak defeated Sisera and Jabin, we are told that Israel enjoyed rest for forty years [**Judges 5:31b**]

But as chapter 6 opens, we are confronted once again with the proclamation [**Judges 6:1a**]

The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord

And, as we would expect, the verse continues [**Judges 6:1b**], *and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years*

And servitude is what the covenant breakers should have expected based on our Scripture reading today

They were warned explicitly of the penalty for turning away from God

And in the author's detailed description, we see that the Midianites, along with the Amalekites and "Easterners," came up with a unique way to torment and oppress the people of Israel

Rather than moving in to rule, these seminomadic desert people would swarm into the area and set up camp to devour their fill of Israelite crops and allow their animals to pasture on the rest

Verse 4 [**Judges 6:4**] says they came riding camels in uncountable numbers like a swarm of locusts, pitched their tents, and laid waste to the land each year

We also get the sense that the invaders would send out raiding parties to sweep up any livestock, provisions, and goods they could lay their hands on, leaving nothing behind

Picture the Midianite horde coming in a relentless flood over the horizon

I imagine you could see the dust they raised and maybe even hear them before you could see them

Fearing the savagery of the invaders, the people of Israel fled to the hills and sheltered in what amounted to animal dens in the natural caves of the area - relying on the natural defenses the terrain offered them

This went on for seven years

And the prolonged terror campaign of the Midianites and their compatriots had a devastating effect not only on the economy of the Israelites but on their emotions

Verse 6 [**Judges 6:6a**] tells us that Israel was brought very low - they were deprived and depressed

Once more, we find the beginning of a judge cycle completed as the people who committed the sin of apostasy come under God's judgment through a human agent sent to torment them, and the resulting pain causes the people to cry out

As in the second part of verse 6 [**Judges 6:6b**], we read: *And the people of Israel cried out for help to the Lord*

But in this case, we see God do something unexpected

Whereas God had responded to the cries of Israel in the previous three judge narratives by sending a deliverer, this time, he sent them a prophet

That's somewhat akin to a person who is floundering in the water and in fear of drowning crying out for help only to have a swimming coach show up instead of a lifeguard

Israel is in pain and they cry out for God to respond with a deliverer who comes in his power only to have God send them a proclaimer of his Word

But, believe it or not, God knew best what his people needed

And God knew that what Israel needed understanding more than they needed quick relief from their affliction

Sometimes we need to be schooled so that we gain insight before God can venture to give us safety

And while it was only natural for Israel to want to be delivered from the bondage they were under God wanted them to see the source of their bind before he removed it

It's no different with us today and oftentimes when we cry out in pain God seeks to instruct us rather than pacify us

One of the hardest things God does for his children is to bring them under the examination and criticism of his Word and the chastening of his hand so as to make them miserable

And although we may not immediately recognize or appreciate it, that is God's kindness at work

A good question for us to ponder is whether or not the presence of understanding is more important to us than the absence of difficulty in our lives - because it is to God

God wants us to rightly understand and interpret our circumstances - not only in bad times but in good times

So God sends a prophet in response to Israel's cry and the prophet's message is in the form of a judgment speech

But it's a speech that is cut short

It's found in verses 8-10 [Judges 6:8-10]

"Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery. 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. 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."

First we see a brief survey of what God had done for them in the past

Then we see an indictment of Israel for their treacherous response to his goodness

But it stops short of giving a consequence leaving the reader to understand that Israel's current situation is the result of their disobedience and leaving them to wonder what is coming next - perhaps even so anticipate further punitive action

And we are caught somewhat off guard as the text reveals that what God was doing with his prophet was setting the stage for the call of Gideon

We are therefore left with the clear understanding that, God's provision of a deliverer for Israel is an act of pure grace on God's part

There has still been no act of repentance in spite of obvious guilt and, while God could righteously destroy, he delivers yet again

So we come to the commissioning of Gideon recorded in verses 11-26

II. The commissioning of Gideon

When we first encounter Gideon he doesn't seem to be the hero Israel is looking for

It appears the setting is that the start of the eighth harvest season has rolled around bringing the threat of the Midianite invasion with it and the scene takes place in Ophrah

Gideon is hard at work threshing wheat in the winepress in order to keep his activity concealed from the Midianites

This is undoubtedly a sign of the perilous and uncertain nature of the times

Typically, wheat would have been threshed on a wooden threshing floor located near the wheat fields both to keep from having to transport the harvest in order to process it and to take advantage of the winds to blow away the chaff

And it would most likely have been processed on a large scale with threshing equipment towed by oxen

Given the circumstances, it would have been unwise to conduct such an operation so Gideon resorted to beating a small amount of grain with a threshing pole in a sheltered vat normally used for pressing grapes

Winepresses of Gideon's day typically involved two hollowed out depressions in the rock on a hillside with one depression situated above the other

The grapes were harvested and trampled in the top depression while a conduit allowed the resulting juice to flow down into the lower basin

Such a location might have been satisfactory for the threshing portion of the operation but it would have necessitated carrying the threshed grain to a windy spot for separating it from the chaff by tossing it up so the chaff would blow away

And I suspect that operation would have needed to be done hastily to protect the grain from Midianite theft

The picture we are presented with, then, is that of a man who is beaten down and perhaps discouraged but doing what he can to preserve a bit of his harvest

And, as he was engrossed in his work, a messenger of God appears, sitting under the terebinth tree that provided shade and shelter for the winepress

Our text says this messenger is an “angel” but we need to understand that this wasn’t one of the winged angels

The term used here indicates that this was an authorized spokesman for God - so much so that the messenger speaks for God in the first person

That plus the definite article of “the” angel rather than “an” angel gives credence to the thought that the messenger may well have been a theophany, or, more precisely, a Christophany - an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ

I can’t be adamant about that but it would seem to fit which we will see as the narrative unfolds

Our author doesn’t give us any indication how long the messenger was sitting silently under the tree watching Gideon as he worked before he spoke to Gideon

But when he speaks he says, “The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor”

The messenger’s opening statement is strange because it seems rather incongruous

First, Gideon is portrayed here as the opposite of mighty or courageous and one could argue quite convincingly against any evidence of God’s presence with Gideon or the nation of Israel given their plight

Now, I don’t believe God’s messenger was mocking Gideon by addressing him in that manner

One of two explanations is likely correct - either it was spoken as a foreshadowing of events to come or it was an acknowledgement of Gideon’s standing in the village - after all, he was the son of an influential and, likely, wealthy man

That would make it more of a flattering form of address

But the messenger sought to assure Gideon of God’s presence with him

You can almost picture Gideon in verse 13 looking around as he wiped the sweat and bits of chaff from his face and neck before replying [**Judges 6:13**]

“Oh yeah? If God is with us then why are we in this mess? Where are all the miracles that our ancestors told us about? Why have they stopped?”

And Gideon isn’t wrong theologically - in fact, he’s in alignment with the word of the prophet God had sent

God had abandoned Israel and God had delivered Israel into the Midianites’ hands

But, while Gideon was right in part, he was terribly wrong in his attitude because he completely neglected the responsibility that the people of Israel had to bear for their current situation

I find it quite interesting that the messenger doesn’t dispute with Gideon; doesn’t explain anything more than the prophet has already proclaimed - it’s almost as if the messenger didn’t even hear Gideon’s reply

He simply looks at Gideon and gives him a commission saying [**Judges 6:14**]

Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do I not send you?”

Naturally, Gideon considers the situation and the commission and protests and he does so with a bit of sarcasm as he presents himself as the weakest of the weak

We need to recognize here that Gideon has no idea at this point who he is talking to - there is nothing about this man under the tree that would make him think he was addressing a divine messenger

Again, the messenger doesn’t debate with Gideon but he does offer him two words of encouragement in verse 16

In reverse order, the messenger assures Gideon of an easy victory - he will defeat Midian as if he were fighting one man

But, and this is the most important encouragement although Gideon doesn’t yet understand it, the messenger says, “I will be with you.” [**Judges 6:16**]

Everything Gideon will need is found in that one statement - "But I will be with you"

God promised that to Moses in Exodus 3:12 and Joshua in Joshua 1:5 and many others in all their dilemmas and difficulties as he did to Paul in Acts 18:9-10-

And he promises the same to his each of his followers today in **Matthew 28:20**

God may not tell us how or when or any of the other details we would like to have nailed down but we can go through any trial and dare any assignment with that promise because having God with us in power is all we need to succeed

About this time it appears to dawn onto Gideon that this isn't a mere man he is talking to but a servant of God so he devises a test

He asks for forbearance and rushes to prepare a huge meal of goat meat, unleavened bread, and broth and when he returns with it The messenger then tells Gideon to set the meat and bread on a rock and to then pour the broth over it

And when Gideon does as instructed, the messenger touches the meal with the tip of his staff and the meal is consumed by fire as the messenger disappeared from Gideon's sight

Gideon had asked for a test but, when he got the answer he sought, instead of being pacified, he panicked

Whereas the angel of the Lord had come to reassure him, Gideon took it the other way and feared for his life

So God again, this time only as an audible voice, reassured Gideon that he would not die and Gideon demonstrates his acceptance of the meaning of the sign and built an altar commemorating the event naming it "The Lord is Peace"

But God wasn't done with Gideon yet and that night he came to Gideon in a vision or dream and gave him a job to do

God commanded Gideon to take his father's ox and destroy the altars to Baal and Asherah that stood on his father's land and replace them with an altar to God

Then Gideon was to take a second ox and offer it as a burnt offering using the wood of the Asherah pole he had cut down

And, whereas our impression of Gideon thus far isn't that of a bold or decisive man, we see Gideon's ready compliance

III. The compliance of Gideon

We are told that Gideon, fearing the townspeople, immediately took ten of his servants and did as God commanded Gideon didn't mess around but got straight to the task at hand

Some people fault Gideon at this point because of his fear but I don't think it really matters all that much that Gideon did what God asked at night

After all, God didn't say "Tear down the altars in the daylight" and God didn't tell him he wasn't allowed to be afraid

God simply gave Gideon a task to do and all that was required from Gideon was obedience; heroism was optional

And that's very comforting to me because it tells us that we can go forth on wobbly legs as long as we are obedient

Defeated, timid Gideon has passed his first test of obedience in spite of his fears

However, obedience in the night still produces results that are visible in the daylight and the next morning, the townspeople discovered what he had done under cover of darkness and they were angry

Remember, these are supposed to be people who are devoted to the true God and, while we got a hint of their Canaanization when we read about Gideon's fear of them, now it is on full display

Look with me at verse 30 after the townsfolk discover it was Gideon who destroyed the idols to see how far away from God they have strayed [**Judges 6:30**]

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."

Rather than seeing the error of their ways and returning to the God who had done so much for them, they were ready to kill for the false gods they had turned from God to serve

Remember, according to God's Law, idolatry deserved the death penalty - the same penalty the townspeople sought to impose on Gideon as they very significantly ignore the altar Gideon built to God and the sacrifice he made there

It's a wonder that God is even interested in delivering such a people

Gideon's father, Joash, becomes the focus in verse 31 and it's difficult to know what to make of him

First, he acts as a father should act as it appears what matters most to him is his son

But it appears he also undergoes a significant transformation

Perhaps he was chastened by Gideon's actions and ashamed of how far he had let things go by allowing the cultic shrine to be erected on his property

I would like to think he rightly assessed Gideon's actions and knew that he should have done likewise long ago

In any event, he defends Gideon by posing two questions that reveal the illogic of Gideon's accusers as they reveal the weakness of the false god they are serving

The implication that he is making is that it's a weak and worthless god that needs deliverance from his followers

And then he goes further and states that anyone who dares to come to Baal's defense by killing his son will be put to death before the night is over

Ironically, Joash seems unaware of the pronouncement of Moses in Deuteronomy 13 concerning false gods and those who promote them - he simply exercises what he sees as his rights as a father that if anyone kills his son he can kill them

And so Joash's test was established [**Judges 6:31d**] -

If [Baal] is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down."

The results of the test are not delayed as Gideon is left standing exposing Baal as impotent in this matter

And so we are told that Gideon received a new name, Jerubbaal, which means "Let Baal contend against him."

Unfortunately, we will see later in the account of Gideon that winning a battle is not the same as winning a war and Baal isn't finished contending with Gideon just yet - but that's for another day

For now, Gideon stands tall as living proof of the weakness of Baal and the strength of God because it was God's presence with him that allowed Gideon to prevail

Conclusion

So, what should we take from this portion of the Gideon narrative?

First, God demonstrates his longsuffering nature as he continues to deliver a people who have gone so far astray

Knowing that our God is a patient God should give all his children comfort because we all like sheep go astray

Second, God will not share his glory with anyone or anything

God commanded Gideon to build an altar to him but first the ground had to be cleared of the other two idols

Other gods may be content to sit on a shelf alongside others but not God

Our true God is a jealous God who will not tolerate his children going astray or share their affections

No one can serve two masters and when we try to continue to live like the world while clinging to God, God is not pleased and he won't allow us to continue in that way

God doesn't accept half-hearted allegiance and he will not permit us to claim him while [**1Kings 18:21**] "*limping along between two different opinions*"

Let's park on that thought for a moment

Gideon lived with a fear that we largely don't think much about today - he knew that seeing God meant death in those days whereas we take intimacy with God as a given based on our relationship with Jesus

Sadly, there isn't much that's amazing about grace as long as there is nothing fearful about holiness

And we tend to downplay what God's holiness requires, making us casual about his grace toward us

God *is* gracious and longsuffering but make no mistake - he demands our complete loyalty and won't settle for less

Third, God is not afraid of our weaknesses

God was patient with Gideon - and we will see God's patience really put to the test as the narrative continues - so we know that he will be patient with us

Given the response of the townspeople, Gideon believed it was prudent to be wary and God didn't chastise Gideon for his wariness as long as he was obedient

Yes, God could have and would have protected Gideon at noon and Gideon didn't need to act in the dark of night to be safe but God didn't make an issue of it

God assured and reassured Gideon every step of the way and, as we will see next week, this is a continuing pattern between Gideon and God

Fourth, and perhaps most important, we see that God's promise of presence is all we need to move forward in doing what he has given us to do

We may well be afraid to share Christ with others or to take some other step of obedience - but we can do so even if we are quaking as we do because we know God is with us

Mind you, there is nothing wrong with making sure that what we think we hear as God's direction in our lives is truly God speaking to us - Gideon sought to make certain he was hearing from God and we should too

But, once we know that God has given us a task, while we may not know all the details, we can and must move on it knowing that we don't go alone but that God goes with us

We need not be afraid to be afraid - heroism is optional - but, in the end, we need to be obedient

God knows how he has formed us [**Psalm 103:14**] and he delights in using the weak things of this world

And there is nothing braver than being obedient in spite of fear

Next week, we will be looking at **Judges 6:33-7:25** which carries the narrative of Gideon through the next phase of his life and service to God as God sends him to battle the formidable Midianite forces who have once again moved in to camp on the land and decimate Israel

Let's pray