

Judges 6-8

Lesson 3 2013 Series 1

In the section that deals with the story of Gideon, Israel's relationship with God continues to decline. The issue of leadership remains a prevalent issue here as it has been in the previous chapters of Judges. The character of the individual heroes has reached such a low level that Gideon, who is contacted directly by God, repeatedly demands proof from God, undertakes the campaign for personal reasons, flirts with the notion of taxation, kingship and dynasty.¹

Chapter 6 begins once again with the all too familiar phrase that, "The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord ...". This is followed as well by the very familiar response of God which is to give them into the hand of an enemy that will oppress them and make life hard for them. This time that enemy was the Midianites. The plight of the Israelites is described much more fully here than in the

¹ Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, in the Berit Olam series (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 99.

previous accounts. The lifestyle of the people is dramatically altered with them being forced to live in caves and other fortified places. The Midianites and the Amalekites are mentioned at verse 3 as coming up against them any time they “put in seed”. These groups that are arrayed against Israel are nomadic, marauding hordes that move from place to place and have set themselves to the destruction of Israel and their way of life.

Verse 6 marks the point when Israel is finally desperate enough to call upon God, who they have forsaken. This story, that covers chapters 6-8, will explore more deeply than the previous stories the depths of the apostasy of Israel. In the depths of their apostasy Israel will cry out to a God that they have forsaken, but still he answers and he does so quickly by sending an unnamed prophet who indicts them for forsaking the Lord (verses 7-10). The prophet recites the delivery of Israel from Egypt and the fact that they have not “given heed to his voice” as charges against Israel. In “calling upon Yahweh” at verse 6 the Israelites are doing more than simply crying out for help

they are also invoking a relationship with Yahweh. To invoke relationship with Yahweh lays obligations upon Israel, obligations that have not been fulfilled. The message of the prophet reveals God's frustration with his people and is a caution against drawing a simple equation between "calling upon Yahweh" and "repentance". Appeal to Yahweh does not in some way automatically secure the future of Israel. The future of Israel is left in uncertainty at the end of verse 10.²

With the coming of the angel of the Yahweh it is made clear that God intends to rescue Israel once more. He remains faithful in his love and concern for his people even when they have not kept their part of the relationship and have been unfaithful. Despite the fact that God will resolve to rescue Israel the problem of Israel's apostasy remains unresolved. The angel of Yahweh appears to Gideon who is beating out wheat in a wine press in order to hide what he is doing from the Midianites. The angel addresses Gideon with the words, "Yahweh is with you, you mighty warrior"

² Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges An Integrated Reading* (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock, 1987), p. 145.

(verse 12). The first part of this greeting would normally be expressed as a “friendly wish”, but Gideon understands it as an assertion and reacts with a bitter retort,³ **“But sir, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our ancestors recounted to us, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has cast us off, and given us into the hand of Midian.”**⁴

The response of the Lord is quick and to the point at verse 14 with God telling him to **“Go in this might of yours and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian; I hereby commission you.”**⁵ He responds with the protests that would be anticipated by one who is called to be a hero of Israel, much as did Moses when he was called (Exodus 3:11). The LORD indicates that he will be with him and promises to strike down all the Midianites (verse 16).

Gideon then requests a sign that it is truly Yahweh who is

³ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, Soncino Books of the Bible series (London: The Soncino Press, 1982), p. 207.

⁴ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jdg 6:13). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

⁵ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Jdg 6:14). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

speaking to him (verse 17). It is unclear at this point whether Gideon has any real belief or not, he appears very much to be testing the ground, and at least allowing for the possibility that the messenger is truly from Yahweh. His request is for the angel to remain until he can prepare a meal for him. When this is done the angel requests that the meat and unleavened cakes be placed on a rock and the broth to be poured over them (verse 20).

Once this is completed the angel reached out with the tip of his staff and touches the meat and the unleavened cakes and fire springs from the rock and consumes everything and then the angel vanishes from sight (verse 21). It is at this point that the text informs us that Gideon finally perceives that the messenger who had been before him was an “angel of the Yahweh” (verse 22). He then cries out in fear for Yahweh to help him as he realizes that he has seen the angel of God face to face. He fears that he is about to die. We are not informed as to exactly how the message is conveyed, but he is informed, it appears directly by Yahweh, that everything is okay. The familiar word *Shalom*

(שָׁלוֹם) is given to him, meaning “peace” and he is informed that he will not die (verse 23).

The strength of Gideon returns enough so that he builds an altar to Yahweh and calls it *Yahweh-Shalom*. That night the LORD speaks to him again and tells him to tear down the altar of Baal that belongs to his father (verses 25-27). He does this by night because of the fear that he has of his own family and the townspeople. This is an indication of how far Israel has fallen into apostasy. It seems that the tearing down of an idol has, at this time, become a crime rather than a glorious event. This fear proves to be well founded as the next morning the townspeople begin an investigation into who has done this (verse 28) and at verse 30 they demand Gideon be brought out so that he may “die”.

Joash, the father of Gideon challenges the townspeople. It is likely they thought that Joash still believed in Baal and would be honored to punish his rebellious son.⁶ Instead he asks them if it is proper for them to contend for Baal (verse 31)? He contends that whoever

⁶ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 212.

“contends” for Baal will be put to death by morning. It is likely that this is not to be perceived as a threat of retaliation from Joash in defense of his son, rather it is likely intended to defend the honor Baal. To defend the honor of a god is to impugn that god. It is to say that the god is too weak to defend himself. Perhaps the world would be a far better place if these words were spoken more frequently. If a god needs to be defended is he a god at all?⁷ It does not matter if we are talking about Muslim extremists or religious fundamentalists there needs to be the recognition that a god does not need defending. Perhaps too, if we allowed him to defend himself there would be a greater recognition of his hand in the world. At one time swearing on the Bible was a big thing because God was feared, now fear of God is low or nonexistent and people do not think that swearing on the Bible means much. People today do not fear that God will retaliate against them if they dishonor him.

⁷ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 213.

With verse 33 the scene changes and the Midianites and Amalekites crossed the Jordan River and encamped in the valley of Jezreel. This is a huge area that divides the land of Israel almost in half. At this point we are informed



that the spirit of Yahweh “took possession”, literally “clothed itself with Gideon” (וַיְרוּחַ יְהוָה לְבִשָּׁה אֶת־גִּדְעוֹן). This word used here for “clothed” is a very rich word, it is the word used when God clothed Adam and Eve in the garden (3:21) it is also used in the likening of God’s imputed righteousness to clothing. The individual’s own deeds are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6; cf. Zechariah 3:3), which are

removed by God and replaced with the clothing of salvation (הלבישני בגדי-ישע). This verse in Isaiah uses the word that is the root of the name for “Jesus” (Yesha in Hebrew the name of Jesus would be Yeshua).⁸

Gideon calls his clan and sends messengers throughout Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali. Amazingly, even after being clothed with the spirit of Yahweh, Gideon still asks for a sign of God’s support. Block indicates this cautious approach comes from the fact that Gideon does not have enough history with God to truly trust him.⁹ In each instance God does as Gideon asks and in each instance the result is the same as God continues to answer Gideon by completing the test. Gideon clearly recognizing that he may be pushing his luck pleads with God not to let his “anger burn against” him (verse 39) as he continues to test God.

Chapter 7

⁸ Andrew Bowling, “לְבַשׁ” in R. Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 1077.

⁹ Daniel I. Block, “Will the Real Gideon Please Stand Up? Narrative Style and Intention in Judges 6-9”, in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, (1997), 40/3:353-366.

In chapter 7 the troops are mustered and they appear to be ready for battle, but at verse 2 God informs Gideon that he has too many men. God tells him to send home any that are “fearful and trembling” (verse 3). Gideon sends home twenty-two thousand of his troops, leaving him with ten thousand men. In light of the fact that the Midianites have a force of one hundred and thirty five thousand armed men, sending away men from an already inadequate force must have seemed ludicrous. At verse 4, God informs Gideon that he still has too many men and he gives him a way to sift them even further by watching how they drink water. This test leaves only 300 men to attack the Midianite camp. That same night God wakens Gideon and tells him to attack the camp of the Midianites.

God continues to show great patience with Gideon recognizing that he is still fearful and maybe even more so now that he has reduced his forces from more than thirty thousand to three hundred. God gives Gideon an element of reassurance by sending him down to the Midianite camp in order to hear something being said there. At verse 13

Gideon listens to the dream of one of those in the Midianite camp. When he hears the dream and its interpretation he “worshipped” and then proceeded to his camp and divided his men into three companies and armed them with trumpets, empty jars and lit torches and told them to do what he will do (verse 17).

At verse 19 the attack begins with the blowing of the trumpets and the smashing of the jars and they cried out “A sword for Yahweh and for Gideon!” Gideon’s men stood and watched as the men of the Midianite camp ran and then Gideon’s men blew the three hundred trumpets and the men of the camp began to attack each other with their own swords. They then fled and the men from several of the tribes of Israel were called out to pursue the Midianites. They captured the leaders of the Midianites, killed them and brought their heads to Gideon.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 begins with a complaint from the Ephraimites for not being called to fight the Midianites. They were the most powerful tribe in the north and they are

resentful of this usurpation of their authority by this lesser tribe.¹⁰ Gideon quells their protest with a tactful answer (verses 2-3). Gideon then crosses over the Jordan in hot pursuit of the remnants of the Midianite forces and their two kings with his 300 men who are “exhausted and famished” (verse 4). He asks the people of Succoth for some loaves of bread for his men, but they refuse.¹¹ The officials of Succoth would not provide any food to Gideon or his men, probably they deemed the force of 300 men as far too small to capture these two kings. Gideon replied that when Yahweh had delivered the two kings into his hands he was going to come back and “trample” their flesh on the thorns of the wilderness and on the briers (verse 7). He then proceeds to Penuel where he has a similar encounter and he threatens to come back and break down their tower (verse 9) after he completes his mission.

Verse 10 begins with the location of Zebah and Zalmunna in Karkor and then informs us that they are with

¹⁰ A. Cohen, ed., A. J. Rosenberg, rev., *Joshua Judges Hebrew Text and English Translation with Introductions and Commentary*, p. 223.

¹¹ Tammi J. Schneider, *Judges*, p. 119.

their army of fifteen thousand men and that they are the remains of a force that once numbered one hundred and thirty five thousand men, but that one hundred and twenty thousand men had already “fallen” (נָפַל). Whatever hesitation once plagued Gideon is now replaced with incredible boldness as he takes his 300 men and attacks the army of Midian with its force of fifteen thousand men. Zebah and Zalmunna flee, Gideon pursues them and “took” them, and the army of the Midianites is thrown into a panic (verse 12).

At verse 13 Gideon returns from the battle and captures a young man from Succoth and gets the names of the seventy-seven officials and elders of Succoth. He then takes the elders of Succoth and fulfills his proclamation and tramples Succoth with thorns and briers. He breaks down the tower of Penuel and kills the men of the city (verse 17). He then turns his attention to Zebah and Zalmunna and asks them about the men of Tabor (verse 18). They respond that these men were just like Gideon to which he replies they were my brothers (verse 19). At first Gideon orders

his firstborn son to kill them, but he does not, and so Gideon kills them himself and takes the crescents from the necks of their camels (verses 20-21). In other words here Gideon takes booty.

As might be expected the Israelites go to Gideon after these events and plead with him to rule over them and to create a dynasty whereby his children would rule over Israel after him (verse 22). In verse 23 Gideon answers them by informing them that neither he nor his sons will rule over Israel, but that “Yahweh will rule over you”. At this point it certainly appears that Gideon has become a great spiritual leader for Israel, but the next verse comes with a request from Gideon for an earring from each of them, from the booty taken from the Midianites (verse 24). They gladly comply (verse 25) and a great treasure is amassed (probably around 43 pounds of gold just from the earrings).

Gideon used all of this to make an ephod, which was likely a cultic garment of some sort (verse 27). This ephod became a snare to the people as they began to worship this

object in the town of Ophrah. The victory of Gideon over the Midianites broke the spirit of the Midianites (verse 28) and the land was given rest for forty years. Gideon goes home a wealthy and powerful man, has lots of wives and lots of children and died at an old age (verses 29-32). Even during the time of Gideon there appears to be no real expression of loyalty to Yahweh and despite this God still blesses them with a time of peace.

After Gideon dies the Israelites return to their worship of the Baals and they also did not treat the family of Gideon fairly for all that he had done for Israel. There is the clear indication in this cycle that Israel continues to spiral downward in their faithfulness to God. Here it appears almost not to exist at all. It is also apparent that the heroes of Israel become less and less like those that went before in their faithfulness in their stature and in their understanding of the nature of God.

Synopsis

This story begins with the state of the people of God worse than it was in any of the previous accounts encountered thus far in the Book of Judges. Despite this the people in their desperation and hardship cry out to God in some way, and he sends an unnamed prophet to make a plea for them to repent and turn from their paying reverence to other gods. The angel of Yahweh then appears to Gideon and after some testing Gideon comes to truly recognize that he has had an encounter with the angel of God. God then calls upon Gideon to destroy the altar of Baal that belonged to his father and to cut down the sacred pole beside it. He is then called upon to build an altar and offer the bulls he had used to tear down the altar and sacred pole in a fire made from the sacred pole.

He does this at night because of his fear of retaliation from the townspeople. In the morning, after some investigation they seek Gideon's life, but his father basically

says that if Baal wants his life let him take it, otherwise he is not a god at all. Needless to say Gideon does not die and after this the Midianites once again invaded Israel and Gideon calls on some of the tribes of Israel for troops to fight against Midian. He amasses an army and then calls upon God to prove that he will indeed deliver Israel from Midian by a series of tests.

God fulfills Gideon's requests in each of the tests and so Gideon sets out for the valley of Jezreel, but God says he has too many men and sifts them down from a force of thirty two thousand to a force of three hundred in order that they would know for certain that it was not by their own might, but by the hand of God that Midian was defeated and Israel was delivered. After another event that reassures Gideon that God will deliver Midian into his hand he proceeds with a bazaar plan that includes trumpets, torches and clay pots, with no mention of any other weapons to surround the Midianites who end up turning on one another and then the remainder fleeing.

The Ephraimites confront Gideon for not calling them to the battle, but he diffuses their anger with an answer of healing and praise. Gideon then proceeds in his pursuit of the Midianite kings and the remnants of their forces across the Jordan River. He asks for food from Succoth and Penuel and they refuse to give any. He promises to return and deal with them after he completes his task. He catches up with the two kings and their force of fifteen thousand men and they are once again thrown into panic. They are defeated and the two kings are captured.

Gideon returns and carries out his threats against Succoth and Penuel, kills the two kings and then returns home. It is at this point that the Israelites try to get Gideon to rule over them as king and set up a dynasty whereby his descendants would rule over Israel. Gideon refuses and tells them that God is their king, but then exacts tribute from them and makes an Ephod that becomes a source of idolatry for Israel. Gideon lives a long life, has many children and there is peace in the land for forty years. After

this the people once again begin prostituting themselves
before the Baals.

The story of Gideon demonstrates the continuing
decline of the people of God further and further into
apostasy.

Main Points

1. That apostasy becomes worse if people do not return to God in true repentance.
2. That God is merciful far beyond what anyone could ever imagine, even in the unfaithfulness of people.
3. That as apostasy from God grows even what people believe is justice becomes distorted.
4. God allows us to be a part of his salvation but he does not need our strength.
5. True gods do not need human beings to defend them from dishonor.

Questions

1. Why do you think God continues to hear the cries of Israel even as they become more and more disobedient?
2. Why do you think God continues to warn people against disobedience?
3. How do you think you would react to an encounter with an angel of Yahweh?
4. Is it wrong to test God? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think God told Gideon to tear down the altar of Baal and the sacred pole?
6. What does the reaction of the townspeople toward what Gideon did to the altar of Baal and the sacred pole say about their view of God?
7. Why do you think people tend to drift away from God?
8. How can we help each other remain faithful to God?
9. What do the victories of Gideon teach us about God?
10. What do the victories of God teach us about human nature?

11. Why do people always seek to be led by someone
other than God?

12. What does the fact that God blesses Gideon teach us
about God?