



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for September 13, 2009
Released on Wednesday, September 9, 2009**

“Gideon: A Deliverer for the People”

Lesson Text: Judges 6:1–3, 7–16

Background Scripture: Judges 6–8

Devotional Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:26–31

Judges 6:1–3, 7–16

1 And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD: and the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years.

2 And the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel: and because of the Midianites the children of Israel made them the dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strongholds.

3 And so it was, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against them.

.....

7 And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried unto the LORD because of the Midianites,

8 That the LORD sent a prophet unto the children of Israel, which said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage;

9 And I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all that oppressed you, and drave them out from before you, and gave you their land;

10 And I said unto you, I am the LORD your God; fear not the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but ye have not obeyed my voice.

11 And there came an angel of the LORD, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abi-ezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites.

12 And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him, and said unto him, The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valor.

13 And Gideon said unto him, O my Lord, if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt? but now the LORD hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.

14 And the LORD looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?

15 And he said unto him, O my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.

16 And the LORD said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.

INTRODUCTION:

We marvel at the grace of God as we see it demonstrated time and time again in the pages of Scripture. In the Old Testament we read of God's continued rescues of His people despite their repeated failures to remain faithful. These accounts encourage us to turn to God's grace when we fall short in our Christian lives.

God shows His grace not only by providing deliverance but also by the means He chooses to use. He chooses people who are weak in their own eyes so that He will receive all the glory for the victory.

Israel had followed a consistent pattern, which the book of Judges records. The people experienced God's blessing, grew prosperous, and then proceeded to forget about God. He then sent oppression to discipline them. In the throes of this, it would have been easy to just give up and believe recovery impossible. The first requirement for any leader would be a strong faith in the power and goodness of God.

God called Gideon in a dark time. He still calls upon leaders today when His people are in distress.

LESSON BACKGROUND:

Time: 1191 B.C.

Place: Ophrah

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 in these four words: *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 B.C. The first phase of the four-part cycle is ready to be repeated, for repentance often has a short duration.

LESSON AIMS:

Facts: to show the circumstances under which Gideon was called into leadership.

Principle: to demonstrate that when our lives seem to be in chaos, God often provides a leader to change things.

Application: to show that when we are in trouble, God is often preparing someone to lead us out of that situation.

THE PEOPLE'S PLIGHT (Judges 6:1-3)

1. Who were the Midianites? What was Israel's experience with them?

(Judges 6:1)

Judges 5 recounts the victory God gave Israel over the Canaanites through the leadership of Deborah and Barak. But it was not long before the people sinned against God again. As a result, He brought them under the sway of another enemy, this time the Midianites.

The Midianites were a nomadic people descended from the fourth son of Abraham and Keturah (cf. Gen. 25:1-2). At various times in Scripture they cross paths with Israel, appearing over a wide geographical area.

The Midianites and Israel indeed had a long history with each other. Moses had befriended Jethro, a Midianite priest, in the Sinai wilderness (Exod. 2:15-20; 3:1) and married one of his daughters (2:21). Later, it was the Midianites, with the help of Balaam, who led the Israelites into immorality and idolatry prior to their crossing into the Promised Land (Num. 25:1-9; 31:16). God commanded that the Midianites be attacked because of their bad influence on Israel (cf. 31:7-12).

The Midianites lived through trade and, less admirably, by raids for plunder. In Gideon's day they were raiding Israel when crops were ready to be harvested. Such attacks were devastating and caused great hardship.

The physical oppression of Israel that resulted from their sin is a picture of the hardship of all kinds that comes from rebelling against God's ways. We may think that our way will bring us freedom and happiness, but in truth any path apart from God brings only grief.

We also learn from Israel's experience here that the timetable for God's chastening may not be to our liking. Israel suffered under Midianite oppression for seven years before God sent Gideon to deliver them. Sometimes it takes a long time before we are ready to truly understand the error of our ways and call out to God for mercy.

2. What measures had the people of Israel resorted to as a result of Midianite oppression? (v. 2)

God delivered Israel into the hand of the Midianites, and they oppressed Israel for seven years. As a result, this nomadic group and others were able to enjoy the fruits of Israelite labors. The Israelites were allowed to sow and harvest their crops. Then the marauders help themselves to the harvest, leaving just enough so that there would be seed for the next year. It was a time of desperation for Israel.

The language of verse 2 suggests the oppressive nature of the enemy Israel faced. They were at the mercy "of these rapacious hordes as they moved from one

area to another. The cumulative effect of these raids would be considerable" (Cundall and Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, InterVarsity).

The Israelites were forced to hide out in mountainous regions, making use of caves and natural strongholds to protect themselves and what little they could salvage of their crops. Here was the miserable result of their "freedom" from God's law. The nation of Israel was a kind of collective version of the prodigal son, reaping the consequences of their poor decisions.

3. What role had the Amalekites had in Israel's history? (v. 3)

The Midianites were accompanied on their raids by other groups. One of these groups was the Amalekites who also had a history with Israel. The Amalekites seem to be descendants of Esau (Genesis 36:12). They were also a part of the oppression that preceded Israel's second judge, Ehud (Judges 3:13).

They had a famous battle with the Israelites in the time after the Exodus when Israel was in the Sinai Peninsula (Exod. 17:1, 8-16). They continued to harass stragglers during the years of the wilderness wanderings (Deut. 25:17-19). Moses said they were to be wiped out—a command finally fulfilled in the time of King Saul (1 Sam. 14:47; 15:1-35),

The Amalekites were a nomadic tribe like the Midianites, and so too were the people described in Judges 6:3 as "the children of the east." According to Leon Wood, this phrase is "a general designation for desert people to the east of southern Canaan" (*Distressing Days of the Judges*, Zondervan).

THE PROPHET'S REBUKE (Judges 6:7-10)

4. Before God sent a deliverer, what did He do to explain the Israelites' situation? (vs. 7-9)

The hard times that God sometimes sends our way are often acts of mercy. They cause us to turn to Him (cf. Ps. 107). The Midianite oppression had finally pushed the people of Israel to look to the Lord for help.

That the Lord responded to the cry of the Israelites is proof of His great love and a picture of His grace, the kind of grace that would prompt Him to send His only Son to save us from sin. But it was important for the people to clearly understand the heinousness of their unfaithfulness to God. So He sent a prophet to explain this to them.

It seems odd that no name is given to this prophet. Perhaps the omission is intended to emphasize the sudden and striking nature of God's response after the years of Israel's suffering. We are in no way distracted from the fact that although the people of Israel had offended the Lord God, He was the one now responding.

The prophet began by reminding the Israelites of what God had done for them. The nation had suffered greatly in the land of Egypt, and He had given them their freedom.

The Lord, through His prophet, elaborated further on His gracious work in the life of Israel. His deliverance of them out of the hand of the Egyptians (Judges 6:9) reminds us particularly of how He defeated the enemy at the Red Sea when Israel looked trapped and doomed.

The Lord's care extended throughout the years following the Exodus, during the time just before their crossing into the Promised Land, and then as they fought the residents of Canaan after they crossed the Jordan. Their past victories in conquering the land had not been due to their own strength. The sovereign Lord had been the one who had driven the enemies out.

The Lord made reference to the fact that the enemies had oppressed Israel. This, no doubt, was to make the connection to the people's current plight clearer. It is true that the Israelites had suffered in the past at the hands of their enemies, and it

was not just the Egyptians who had been guilty. As we have mentioned, for example, the Midianites themselves practiced a kind of oppression when they provoked the Israelites into sin in the days of Moses (cf. Num. 31).

5. Why was it wrong to "fear" the gods of the Amorites (Judges. 6:10)?

Considering all that the Lord had done, the people should have stood immovably on the central truth that Yahweh was their great God (Judg. 6:10). They had no reason to look elsewhere for life and strength. They had no reason to fear their enemies.

The pagan residents of Canaan are referred to as "Amorites." In Numbers 13:29 the Amorites are said to be a people who occupied the mountainous areas of Canaan. This appears to have been the part of Canaan where Gideon was (cf. Judg. 6:3, 10). The Amorites, then, were just one of the people of Canaan, but they are singled out here because of their relevance to Gideon.

To fear the pagan gods was to show disrespect to the one true God and to disregard their own past history. It meant giving respect and worship to false deities. It meant they were deriving their values from the world and seeking to praise something other than God.

Despite all God had done for them, however, Israel did not obey the Lord. The prophet was telling them now that they themselves were the cause of all their troubles.

The prophet's concluding statement "but ye have not obeyed my voice" 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.

GIDEON'S CALL (Judges 6:11-14)

6. Who do many believe the angel of the Lord really was? (v. 11)

After the prophet laid the groundwork, an "angel of the Lord" appeared. Many believe this appearance was a theophany, a preincarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus. In favor of this view is that the angel is called "the Lord" in verse 14.

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* here likely refers to the Lord Himself.

7. Where was Gideon when the angel of the Lord appeared? (v. 11)

Scripture gives us a fairly detailed description of where the angel of the Lord appeared, perhaps to emphasize the reality of this amazing occurrence. We are struck by the fact that the angel sat down under the tree. As great as this personage was, he assumed a position of friendship and conversation. It is true, though, that judges sometimes wielded their authority in such places (cf. Judg. 4:5).

The angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon in a place called Ophrah. Apparently, Ophrah was in the land of Manasseh. This was the place where Gideon would one day die (Judg. 8:29-32).

We are told further that Gideon was working on land belonging to his father, Joash, who was part of the extended family of the Abiezrites. He was laboring in a winepress, threshing wheat.

A winepress in ancient times typically was "a hollow carved out of the rock with a channel connecting it to a lower trough" (Cundall and Morris). The juice pressed out of the grapes would flow through the channel to the trough.

Gideon was threshing wheat, which was best done "in an exposed place so that the wind could carry away the chaff" (Cundall and Morris). The job was a lot harder to do in a winepress. That Gideon was doing the work there showed how oppressive the Midianite threat was and may reflect the small size of the harvest.

What an unlikely place this was for an angelic visitation! But man's extremity is often the time of God's activity so that He will receive all the glory.

8. Why did the angel of the Lord refer to Gideon as "thou mighty man of valour" (v. 12)?

The angel of the Lord referred to Gideon as "thou mighty man of valour" (Judg. 6:12). The greeting itself may have a certain irony or sarcasm in it, for this *mighty man of valor* is hiding in a winepress to conceal what he is doing! The greeting may also have been a prophecy of Gideon's future accomplishments.

Certainly Gideon did not appear to be acting valiantly by hiding from the enemy! It is much more likely, however, that the angel was declaring what Gideon would become through God's empowerment.

There is an important lesson here for all of God's people. Although we may be weak in our own eyes or in the eyes of others, God sees what we are becoming through His sanctifying and empowering work in our lives. We *can* fight the good fight of faith with the strength He provides.

9. 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.

10. What questions did Gideon ask the angel of the Lord? (v. 13)

Gideon responded 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 wanted to know why all this had befallen them and where were the miracles that he had of God from his fathers.

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.

The Lord welcomes our sincere questions. He will not lash out at us for expressing our doubts. Gideon could not see any evidence of the Lord's favor in the circumstances Israel was facing. There is a difference between a stubborn refusal to believe and its resultant disobedience on the one hand and Gideon's honest questions expressed here.

11. What assurance did the angel of the Lord give in response? (v. 14)

In response, the angel of the Lord does not answer Gideon's questions of verse 13. The angel of the Lord did not argue with Gideon. He simply promised and assured that Gideon would lead Israel in vanquishing the Midianites. He referred

again to Gideon's strength: "Go in this thy might" (Judg. 6:14). As in Joshua's case, the Lord knew that Gideon would need reassurance on this point.

In a clinching remark, the angel of the Lord challenged Gideon to remember who was sending him. What greater assurance could Gideon have asked for than the promise of God's sustaining presence and power? The Lord is glorified when we rest in that promise. He can be counted on to iron out the details. Our part is to step out in faith. Our "might" is found in the favor of God.

12. 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?

The Israelites repeated a cycle in the book of Judges that is summarized in these four words: *sin, sorrow, supplication, and salvation* (see Lesson Background). Christians are able to break this cycle since we 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 most definitely benefit from God's Word, as well as the encouragement and instruction of a body of believers.

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).

PRACTICAL POINTS:

- 1.** The consequences of offending the Lord are far greater than those of offending the world (Judg. 6:1-3).
- 2.** In times of trouble, it is appropriate to be reminded of God's past goodness (vs. 7-9).
- 3.** If we expect God's help, we must confess our sin (v. 10).
- 4.** We can do anything God calls us to do, for we know He will be present with us (vs. 11-12).
- 5.** The Lord is present and at work in trying times just as He is in prosperous times (v. 13).
- 6.** God uses people to achieve His purposes. God looks for commitment, not complaint, from those He uses (v. 14).

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.

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!

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 Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER:

God plus one committed person equals victory.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON:

Next week's lesson is "Ezra: A Priest for the People". We will see how Ezra pleaded to God on behalf of his people and acted as their priest. Study Ezra 9:1-15.

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