

Material from Tim Kellers Leaders Guide on Living in Pluralistic Society

Gideon meets God

Judges 6:1-40

INTRODUCTION

The new oppressors are the Midianites, semi-nomads from the desert. Their aim, however, was different than that of Israel's former enemies. Their goal was not political control, but rather economic exploitation. They pioneered the use of the camel (6:5) in warfare, which enabled them to make swift, wide-ranging raids on a land a long distance from their own homes without fear of any immediate reprisal. Their superior technology enabled them to plunder Canaan of all its food each year near harvest time. They did not set up a military government or levy taxes, but they left the Israelites in a state of complete poverty (6:6). Again we see that each successive oppressor had a very different set of strategies and tactics than the former. Israel was forced into a completely primitive existence deep in inaccessible mountain regions (6:2).

1. vv.1-10. What three things happen to prepare the people for revival this time? What did God do? What did they do?

Most of the initiative is, again, from God. There are three active verbs, and two of them belong to God. We are told about God that a) *v.1- he gave them*, and b) *v.8 - he sent them*. On the other hand we are told about Israel only c) *v.6 - they cried to the Lord for help*. The people's action is sandwiched between God's two actions. God's first action essentially causes the people's action. Then in response to the people's action, God does something else by way of preparation.

First, *v.1- he gave them into the hands of the Midianites*. Again we see God sends **awakening trouble**. Their economic troubles were part of God's plan for them. The people had been warned not to worship idols. Idols always promise freedom, but they always bring slavery instead. In other words, if you live for money — to become "financially independent" — you will become spiritually *dependent* on money, through worry or pride or over-work. Idolatry always leads to some form of bondage and oppression. God here is aggravating the slavery in order to humble Israel. Notice the interesting similarity between the language of 6:1-2 and Romans 1:24, 26. In Romans, Paul says God "*gave them up*" or "*gave them over*" to the sinful desires of their hearts. This means that God works by allowing natural consequences. This suggests that ordinarily God shields us from the natural consequences of our sins and wrongs. Sometimes, however, he "*gives us what we want*", and lets the consequences hit us full force. This is a very just and fair way to chasten us.

It would be good to consider two points about how God uses troubles to revive us spiritually.

First, repeated, consistent sin patterns will always bring their own consequences (Gal.6:7), but not because he is vindictive, but because he loves us too much to let us get away with sin, which will break and corrupt us (Heb.12:1-13). Second, we should not assume (as Job's friends erroneously did) that any trouble or suffering is due to sin in our lives. Suffering will always have a purpose (Rom.8:28) in God's plan for us, but it is not necessarily sent (as here in Judges 6) to awaken us because of some besetting sin. Jesus suffered terribly, according to God's gracious plan, but it was not because of his sin. So our suffering is not necessarily due to sin (John 9:1-3).

Second, in response to this awakening trouble, the people begin to awaken! They do not ignore God, turn away from God or curse him, but rather they *v.6 - cried out to the Lord for help*. Again we see that corporate prayer — a wide- scale calling out to God for salvation ("*help*") — is critical for spiritual renewal and revival.

Thirdly, *v.8 - "he sent them a prophet, who said..."* So secondly God send **a convicting message**. It is interesting to notice that God's first response to the people's cry (*v.6*) is not to send a savior or salvation, but to seek to convict them more deeply of their sin, through preaching. The prophet comes and helps them to understand why they are in the trouble they are in, why idolatry is so wrong. He reminds them who God is and what he has done for them. Some have called this a "covenant lawsuit". The prophet, in a sense, is God's attorney, who comes to the Israelites and points out how they have violated their contract.

So we see here that God wants not just a call for salvation in general, but repentance in particular. He wants them to understand their sin.

2. vv.1-10. What is the difference between repentance and regret? Read 2 Cor.7:9-11. Which do the people express? How does God try to help them? What do we learn from this for our own spiritual renewal?

The Bible makes a clear distinction between true repentance and mere regret (or remorse). Both (as we see in the 2 Corinthian passage) are characterized by very deep sorrow and distress. But they are completely different. a) First, "worldly" sorrow or regret does not produce any real change while repentance does (2 Cor.7:11). Why? It is sorrowful over the consequences of a sin, but not over the sin itself. If there had been no consequences, there would have been no sorrow. There is no sorrow over the sin for what it is in itself, for how it grieves God and violates our relationship to him. Therefore, as soon as the consequences go away, the behavior comes back. The heart has not become disgusted with the sin itself, so it remains rooted. b) Second, "worldly" sorrow stays regretful, while repentance removes all regret about the past. Why? Real repentance comes to focus on the only real permanent result of sin — the loss of the Lord. Repentance always makes us more able to accept and "move past" the things that happened. When we realize that God has forgiven us and we haven't lost him, we feel that earthly results are rather small in comparison. We say, "I deserved far worse than

what happened. The *real* punishment fell into Jesus, and will never come to me." After real repentance and restoration to God, we do not hate ourselves, and we do not hate our lives. When a person is inconsolable, it means they have made something besides God their *real* god and savior (e.g. money, friends, career, family). It is an idol, and its loss is therefore impossible to heal without repudiating it as an idol.

The fact that God sends a prophet is a strong indication that the people who are crying out for his help (Judges 6:6) are not repentant yet. Their history of fast relapses is strong evidence that their "outcryings" were really "worldly sorrow" as Paul defines it. The nature of the sermon also shows that God is trying to convict them down into deep repentance. Regret is all about "us" (how I am being hurt, how my life is ruined, how my heart is breaking) but repentance is all about God (how he has been grieved, how his nature as Creator and Redeemer is being trampled on, how his repeated saving actions are being trivialized and used manipulatively). The sermon (Judges 6:8-10) is enormously God-centered. The Lord says: "I brought you up... I snatched you... I drove them from before you... I said to you 'I am... your God'". So it is quite clear that the goal of God is to get them from beyond regret to remorse.

Unfortunately, there is no indication that the people responded in repentance to the prophet's sermon. This is completely in line with the quick relapse, even within the lifetime of Gideon, into idol-worship.

What can we learn for ourselves? This is an application/brainstorming question. There are many more things we can learn than we can mention here. a) One thing is that we have to listen to God's Word. It is interesting that the people cried out for some dramatic miracle, and God sent them a sermon — an exposition of the Word of God. There is no getting around the study of the Bible. That is where we learn who we are; that is the means through which God brings spiritual renewal in our lives. b) We need to discern in ourselves is the difference between the normal lapses on the road to increasing Christian maturity versus a "stuck" repeated pattern of lapses which shows no signs of real progress. If you are continually falling into the same spiritual pit, and your falls are not decreasing in numbers or intensity, then you may be responding in regret rather than repentance. In other words, you may be simply regretful for the troubles of your sin, but unwilling to identify or reject the idol under the sin which is still attractive to you. The big problem here is that we often cannot get a good perspective on our hearts all by ourselves. Many people who are making progress feel they are not, and many people who are not making progress are in denial about it. This is why we need several strong Christian friends and Christian leaders who can help you tell the differences.

3. vv.11-24. a) God starts the deliverance though the people do not yet show signs of repentance. What do we learn from that? b) Who is this talking to Gideon — an angel or the Lord? Why does this figure keep turning up (cf.2:1; 13:1ff.) How does Gideon's fear of dying and his altar shed light on this question?

a) Why does God start the deliverance of the people before they repent?

Here again we see how the tension between God's holiness and his grace "drives" the narrative. We said before that God has demanded that his people be holy, yet he has promised to support and prosper them (see comments on Judges 2:1-4). We have here a perfect illustration of this here. God seems to respond very harshly to the call for help (6:6) by sending them a prophet to warn and exhort and convict them of sin. What a response to a cry of distress! This seems a much more severe response than we would give someone begging for mercy. But now, the angel of the Lord goes forth to recruit and prepare a Judge and Savior for Israel, even though there is no indication of any real repentance. This is a much more gracious response than we would give someone. God seems on the one hand to say and do very severe things, and then on the other hand to be giving unconditional support and love to the people. What do we learn here? a) That God's holiness will not eliminate his grace, or vice versa. They must both be expressed, because they are equally who he is. Within the book of Judges we never see a resolution — not until we get to the cross of Christ in the New Testament. His substitutionary death enables God to be both "just and justifier" of those who believe (Romans 3:26). b) We also see that God does not wait for us to repent before he begins to save us. We repent because he's begun his saving work — he does not begin his saving work because we repent! c) Basically, we just learn that God is compassionate and will never give up on us.

b) Who is the angel of the Lord?

We met the angel in Judges 2. And he shows up again in chapter 13 to announce the coming of Samson. The angel appears to Joshua before the battle of Jericho (Josh.5:13ff.) and to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3) and on the mount (Exodus 33-34) and to Abraham before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorra (Genesis 18). In appearance, the angel of the Lord does not seem to have been all that overwhelming. It is not until the miracle of v.21 that Gideon is sure that this is a divine figure. (This seems quite different from other places in the Bible where angels are so radiant and glorious that the onlookers fall down on the ground.) So this is a very human-appearing figure. But there is a remarkable mystery and "tension" in all the Biblical descriptions of who the angel is.

On the one hand, we are told "*the angel said*" in v.12 and v.20, but we are also told "*the Lord said*" in v.14, v.16, and v.18. If we try to conceive of the angel as a kind of "communication channel" or "speaker phone" for God, we run into the phrase in v.14 – "*The Lord turned to him and said.*" So here we have

something remarkable. This figure is the angel *of* the Lord, and yet also the Lord. What does this mean? This is one of the mysteries of the Old Testament which is impossible to understand without the New. If there is one God, how can he both be in heaven, having sent this visible figure, and at the same time *be* the visible figure. If this was simply God come in human form, why doesn't it just say he is the Lord, rather than also one sent by the Lord? (The word "angel" means messenger.) The only explanation that makes sense is that we have here an indication that our one God is nonetheless multi-personal. We have a deep hint of the Trinity. There is good reason to see this figure as Christ, the Son. His concern even then was to bring salvation and "peace on earth". The final evidence that the angel of the Lord is an uncreated, divine person, is that Gideon knows this himself. When he cries out that he has seen the angel "*face to face*" (v.22), God has to assure him that he won't die. Gideon's response was one of enormous gratitude. He creates an altar "*The Lord is Peace*". This shows he knows that he should have died, to look upon the face of a holy God (cf. Exod.33:20). But he also knows that somehow, God has provided grace so that he can be at peace with him. Gideon celebrates his reconciliation with God — not knowing at all how it could be possible that a sinful man could stand in the presence of a holy God and yet live. But the answer is the angel himself. There is one who will come to earth who is the Lord and who will pave the way for us to be acceptable in God's presence.

4. vv.11-16. Is Gideon's assessment of Israel's problem right (v.13) or is God's right (v.1, 14)? How can we make the same mistakes in our lives today?

Israel's problem

Gideon's assessment of Israel's condition in v.13 is — "*You are not with us, you abandoned us and put us into the hands of Midian.*" But we, the readers know that God put them into the hands of Midian because he had not abandoned them! It was "awakening trouble". Second, Gideon's assessment of Israel's need is that they need great deeds and a Savior such as Moses. And God, says, shockingly — "*you are the*

salvation I am sending. You are the great deed- doer I am sending. You are my Moses for this generation.”

Application

What do we learn from this? It is extremely clear and convicting. We are continually making the same two mistakes. a) First, we are sure that our troubles mean that God has left us, instead of thinking that God is working in us for good. b) Second, we are often waiting for God to do something to us or for us, instead of in us. In other words, we may be saying, “Lord why don’t you remove this problem” instead of “Lord, make me the person that can handle this problem”. Another way to put it. We are like people on a boat, and a rock ahead of us is sticking 3 feet out of the water and will destroy our boat. We pray, “Lord, remove the rock.” But God may be wanting to raise the level of

the water four feet to go over the rock. Often, God wants to do a great work of character formation within you, rather than to remove the obstacle or problem from your life.

5. Is Gideon’s assessment of his ability right (v.15) or is God’s right (v.12) — or are they both right? How is this a picture of what it means to be a Christian? What happens to us when we lose either “side” or perspective?

Gideon’s ability

As Gideon himself tells us, he is *“the least in my family”* (6:15). The very scene underscores this. For fear of the Midianites, Gideon is afraid to winnow his wheat out in the open air, where the breeze catches the grain and separates it from the chaff. He is afraid of doing that and becoming too visible to enemy eyes. So he is crouching down, trying to thresh his wheat in the pit of a winepress. Suddenly the angel speaks to him. He probably jumped out of his skin! By *“the least”* Gideon would have meant that he was the economically and socially the poorest member of the poorest clan in his tribe. He was from *“the wrong side of the tracks”*. He probably was shy and reserved and very unassertive.

Why, then, did the Lord very pointedly call Gideon *“you mighty warrior”* (v.12)? One answer is that the Lord was being highly ironic, almost mocking Gideon. An opposite answer is that *“he is like the Gilbert and Sullivan character who sings of himself as ‘diffident, modest, and shy’ when he is nothing of the sort.”* (Wilcock, p.78). In other words, he is really quite strong and valiant, but he just hasn’t “gotten in touch” with his own potential.

Both of these answers are wrong — they take neither God’s power nor his word seriously. God is on the one hand talking of what Gideon most definitely is *in him*. See how in v.14 the Lord says to take *“the strength you have”* and combine that with v.16 the knowledge that *“I will be with you”* and that *“I am sending you”* (v.14). So the knowledge of God’s fellowship and calling, combined with what ability he had, would make him the champion. So both Gideon and God are correct.

Application

Here we see a foreshadowing of what it means to be a Christian. On the one hand, in ourselves, we are sinful and lost, but in Christ we are accepted and loved. If we ever forget one or the other, we fall into serious trouble. If we forget our sinfulness, we become over-confident, unloving, bad listeners, judgmental, undisciplined in prayer. If we forget our acceptance and lovedness, we become anxious, guilty, driven, and so on.

6. vv.16-40. What ways does the Lord prepare Gideon? How does he show him how to see and deal with a) the enemy among us (vv.25-32) b) the enemy around us (vv.33-35) and c) the enemy within us (vv.36-40). How do we today need to make the same adjustments in our own lives?

a) The enemy among us.

It is no surprise that Gideon's own father Joash has an altar and a pole for the worshipping of Canaanite deities. Notice how Gideon knew all about the Exodus story and the Lord (v.13). The Israelites had not abandoned worship of God for the worship of idols. They had combined the worship of God with idols. They worshipped God formally, but their lives revolved around agricultural idols (if they were farmers) or commerce idols (if they were in business) or sex- beauty idols, and so on.

"The gods have not changed, for human nature has not changed, and these are the gods that humanity regularly re-creates for itself. What does it want? If it is modest — security and comfort and reasonable enjoyment; if ambitious — power and wealth and unbridled self-indulgence. In every age there are forces at work which promise to meet our desires — whether political programs, economic theories, career options, philosophies, lifestyle options, entertainment programs — all having one feature in common. They promise that they can make our lives better than we can make them ourselves, yet at the same time they appear amenable to our manipulating them so we can get what we want without losing our independence... Here is the enemy among us. We say we worship the Lord... but the world has crept in and controls our heart..."

Before they can throw off the enemies around them (the Midianites) they have to throw off the enemies among them — the false idols of Canaan. This is always the main way that we get renewal in our lives. God will not help you out of your obvious, visible problems (money problems, relationship problems, etc.) until you see the idols that we are worshipping right beside the Lord. They have to be removed first.

Gideon is essentially being told here to make God the Lord of every area of life. We are not to add anything to Jesus Christ as a requirement for being happy. We are not to use God to get what we really want, but we are to see and make God that which we really want.

b) The enemy around us.

Now, in vv.33-35 we see *“the Spirit of the Lord”* came on Gideon and he began to get the wisdom and might that will enable them to deal with the visible, obvious oppressors — the Midianites. Gideon had to remove the less obvious idols before he can remove the more obvious oppressors.

c) The enemy within us.

However, the root cause of all our problems is “unbelief”. The reason we have the enemies around us (“Midianites”) is because of the enemies among us (“idols”). But the reason we have idols, is because down deep we don’t trust God. The serpent suggested that we couldn’t trust God, and that is what we have believed ever since. The real reason we don’t worship him fully is because we are afraid that, if we give ourselves to him utterly and make him the supreme desire of our hearts, he will let us down.

God helps Gideon with his unbelief with the famous sign of the “fleece”. Many people have castigated Gideon for this action. If, however it was so wrong and sinful, why did God respond? Others have imitated Gideon in this action. They say: “Lord, if you want me to take this job, let me get a phone call from them today.” But we must be careful. When Satan asked Jesus to “test” God by asking for a “sign”, Jesus rebuked him. So what is going on here?

Commentators have noted that Gideon was very specifically asking God to show him that he was not one of the forces of nature (like the other gods) but was sovereign *over* the forces of nature. Gideon, then, was not looking for “little signs” to help him make a decision. He was really seeking to understand the nature of God. We have to remember that he did not have the Bible, nor many of the “means of grace” that we have now (the Word, prayer, the sacraments, Christian fellowship). He was very specifically addressing the places where his faith was weak and uninformed. We cannot use this as a justification to ask for little signs and signals. Gideon was not doing so — he was asking for supernatural revelation from God to show him who he really was. This therefore is not about how to make a decision. This is about how we need to ask God to give us a big picture of who he is. We need to know the attributes of God as he reveals himself in his word.

We also learn, however, that God responds to requests to “build up faith”. Essentially, Gideon was saying, “help my unbelief” (cf. Mark 9). He was asking for more faith, and God answered him. He will do the same for you.

7. Application. How has God helped prepare you to be of service to others? How has God given you guidance at key times in your life?

Gideon leads to victory

Judges 7:1-25

1. vv.1-8. Who is sent home and why? Why did God want to reduce the size of Gideon's army?

Who is sent home and why?

The first group which is sent home are those "*who tremble with fear*" (v.3) This was 22,000 men out of the 32,000 — over two thirds! These were people who were able to admit publicly that they had no heart for battle. When Gideon offered to release anyone who was afraid to fight — he was using a pretty good psychological screening device. Surely there were many who were very frightened of battle but were unwilling to admit it. Those who were so willing to admit their fear in public would also be far more likely to retreat in battle. The reason it was good to send them home is a practical one. Fear is contagious, as we can often see in Judges. When any significant body of soldiers panic and flee, it can sap the determination of everyone and lead to a rout. (See Deut.20:8.) Though it was surely discouraging to lose these numbers, it was still very practical to let them go. This move was concerned for the morale of the army.

The second group is sent home for much more obscure reasons. 9,700 out of the 10,000 remaining are given another test. They are brought to a body of water at a time when they would be thirsty. All but 300 knelt down and put their mouths into the water to drink, while the smaller group used their hands to scoop up water into their mouth and "lap" it. God tells Gideon to only use them. Why did God make this a test? What was its purpose?

People have differed over the answer. It is typical for people to conclude that the 300 were being more alert and watchful. It is often assumed that they held on to their weapons and stayed on their feet while the others drank in such a way that they were defenseless. But surely this is a stretch. The text does not say anything about holding on to weapons. Unlike the first "screening" — this test surely does not measure well how good a warrior a man would be. Besides that, the common idea that this was a small group of "elite" troops goes completely against the purpose of the reduction in numbers.

Why did God reduce the army?

God makes it very clear in v.2 — so that Israel will not think "*her own strength has saved her.*" This is the greatest spiritual danger there is — that we should believe that we can or have "saved ourselves". The lesson we always need to learn is that salvation is by grace and God's action, not by earning it with our actions.

Again we see the principle of salvation we see continually in Judges and the rest of the Bible. God does not save through expected means, or through strength. Most of the Judges are unlikely and the victories defy the world's logic. Gideon is a man from a weak family in a weak tribe, and now he must face the Midianites with only a handful of men.

This points the way to the greater Gideon, who was born in a manger and who won our salvation in his weakness.

2. vv.1-8. "You have too many men for me to deliver..." (v.2). How does this principle shed light on how God has worked in your life? (cf. 2 Cor.12:7-9). What do you tend to "boast" in?

Another way to put this principle is found in 2 Cor.12:7-9. God does not simply work *in spite* of our weakness, but *because* of it. He says that his saving power does not work when we are strong or think we are strong. How does this work practically?

First, this principle is the basis for salvation itself. We cannot be saved if we think we are good or able. God's saving power only works on us when we admit that we have no worthiness or goodness in ourselves.

Second, this principle explains how repentance works. Paradoxically, it is only as we repent and sorrow over our failures before God that his love and grace become more precious and real to us. For example — if someone says to you: "I paid one of your monthly bills", you don't know how overjoyed to be until you hear how big the bill was. The bigger you understand your debt to be, the greater your joy in his payment will be. So it is only as we see our weakness that the strength of knowing God's grace and love comes.

Third, this principle explains how we almost always grow. Our problems come because good things have become too important to us. Anger, fear, discouragement come because of "idols" — good things have become things we feel (at an emotional level) will really save us and give us worth. It is only when these things are threatened or removed that we turn and find our safety and significance in the Lord. That makes us stable and deep. This principle is perfectly mirrored here in this story. Gideon (and all Israel) was going to put its confidence in its fighting men, but God removes them so that the victory will lead them to trust in God in new ways.

You may wish to share specific cases of how a loss or experience of weakness led to a) salvation, b) or growth.

3. vv.8-15. Why does God send Gideon into the Midianites' camp? List all the things this incident tells us about a) about God, and b) about us?

Why does God send Gideon?

It is pretty obvious that the result of the visit to the camp was God's purpose. The result of what Gideon heard was — "*he worshipped God*" (v.15). Then he came back and "*called out, 'Get up!'*" (v.15) So God wanted to assure Gideon one more time and fill him with confidence and joy.

What does this tell us about God?

First, we see that God is the one who takes the initiative. Gideon needs this, but does not ask for it.

Second, we see that God is a teacher. He is always, always instructing us in the way we should go (Ps.25:9-10,12).

Third, the teacher is very kind and sensitive. In v.10 he says: "If you are afraid to go into the camp, take your servant." Remarkable for the King of the Universe to think of such things.

Fourth, God goes out of his way to assure us. The whole book of 1 John is written to say that we can "*know that we know him*" (1 John 2:3). The work of the Holy Spirit is to assure us that we are his (Rom.8:16). God does not simply adopt us as his children, but then he provides numerous ways to know that this is true. If you love anyone, you are willing to assure them of your love — and God is the same.

Fifth, we learn here that God may ask us to take risks on the way to assurance. Going into the enemy camp is dangerous (thus the advice to take Purah). In the same way, we may find that we lack assurance of God's presence with us because we never do anything bold — we never do anything that is beyond our human ability to do.

Sixth, we learn that God can use secular sources — non-Christian people — to give us wisdom and insight. Here we see that God had inspired at least the second and maybe both of the Midianites who Gideon overheard. The second one clearly perceived God's will (v.14). We must not forget that God gives wisdom and grace to all sorts of people, besides believers, from whom we can learn (Rom. 2:14-15; James 1:17).

Seventh, this all shows us the patience of God. Though we need confirmation and assurance over and over again, God does it.

What does this tell us about us?

Evidently, the need for repeated assurance and repeated lessons must be one of the main points of the narrative. Gideon cannot sustain his direction or his energy without repeated lessons and lots and lots of confirmation and re- assurance. Of course, he is no different than we are. When we see the narrative "telescoped" as it is, the impression is that Gideon is very weak. But if we think of our own spiritual history, we will see the same thing. How many times have we felt: "I'll never forget or doubt God again?" Yet soon we have again become indifferent or anxious. How many resolutions have we made that we have not kept? We aren't any different. We never relax and trust him. No matter what he does for us, our deeply unbelieving hearts are quite stubborn.

54

4. What do you need assurance about? [Or what lessons do you need God to tell you over and over?] How does God assure and teach you?

What do you need assurance about?

There are many possible areas you may need God's assurance and instruction. One major area is the basic assurance that God loves and accepts you as his child. After we fail or sin in a significant way — how do we know that he has not rejected us? Another major area is the assurance, during troubles, that he is working wisely within it all, that he has not abandoned us. Another major assurance sometimes comes when we are not sure that we have made the right decision. Sometimes God can confirm to us that we are going in the right direction.

How has God assured you at times you needed it?

Basically — whatever God has done to lead you to deep worship and confidence (v.15) — is an example of how he assures. But there are three categories of ways God helps us that are suggested by the text and the narrative. First, God assures us through his word. (In the story, God apparently has sent a special revelation in a dream to one of the Midianites. God's revelation here confirms the promise he made by revelation previously to Gideon.) When we read his Word and especially his promises, we often find that the Holy Spirit comes and makes the promises both real and sweet to us (Rom.8:16).

Second, God often assures us through other people. Here, God does not give Gideon his promise directly, but rather he gives it through the mouth of another. It is important to have others who are close friends who can do this. Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* discusses how often God puts a word of assurance in our mouths for our friends. Third, God often assures through circumstances of life, as here. Gideon just "happens" to overhear this conversation. Such "coincidences" often bring God's assurance to us.

Those are the categories. Now think of ways that God has brought you his assurance in your life through the Word, the Spirit, friends, circumstances. Celebrate them and thank God for them.

5. vv. 15-25. What did Gideon's battle plan have going for it? Where does the strategy for the "surprise attack" come from? How does the strategy that was chosen fulfill the dream of the barley loaf?

The battle plan

Gideon's battle plan was brilliant in several ways. First, this strategy eliminated the factor of numbers and size of the armies. Obviously, any strategy Gideon used would have to compensate for the huge disadvantage they had in size.

This did so beautifully. The whole point was for the Israelites to appear (and sound) far greater in size than they really were. Second, this strategy eliminated the factor of skill or strength of the competing armies. It did not take any prowess or power to break a jar and blow a horn! In any battle, there is the possibility that the enemy's superior skill would lead to a defeat. But this strategy brilliantly removed military skill level as any

factor at all. In this battle plan, it was only the Midianites who would be doing the fighting — with themselves! The Israelites simply stood *“in their position”* (v.21) while the Midianites slaughtered each other and ran (v.21-22).

Thirdly, the timing was brilliant. Gideon “attacked” just after the Midianites had changed the guard on the middle watch (v.19). The night time (6pm to 6am) was probably divided into three watches of four hours each. One third of the army took turns standing guard around the camp while the other two-thirds first ate and relaxed and then slept. This would have been the situation just after the middle watch (10pm). One third of the army would have been walking back through the camp to their tents, while another third would have been asleep. Thus, when the noise woke up the sleepers, they would have rushed out of their beds to see the camp filled with armed men. In their confusion and fear, they began to fight the returning soldiers. That is what led to the massive slaughter.

Fourthly, the battle plan eventually deploys the thousands of Israelites who had been left behind. If all that original Israelite army had fought the Midianites directly, many of them would have been killed and wounded. Now they are fresh and able to pursue the Midianite army, tattered and bloody from fighting with itself (v.23-25).

Fifth, the “technology” of the Midianites’ camels was eliminated. (Review the notes from last week.) The camels gave the Midianites an unequalled ability to move its army rapidly over great distances. This battle plan made the camels a non-factor. In fact, it is possible that the camels might have added to the confusion and mayhem in the camp.

Where did this brilliant strategy come from?

The text does not tell us that God directly revealed the brilliant strategy to Gideon. There is every indication that he came up with it himself. That would certainly rank him with history’s military geniuses. But on the other hand, we must recognize how God led him so beautifully into his work of genius.

First, it was God that had forced him to confront the Midianites with only 300 men. It was almost as if God had given him a riddle. “You have 300 men to defeat many thousands of Midianites. How can you do it?” Obviously, if God had not forced him into such a situation, he never would have given thought to how to create a rout with a handful of men. God knew Gideon could do it. But if he had not “painted Gideon into a corner”, Gideon would never have thought of his plan. Gideon’s part was this — *he accepted the limits God had given him.*

Second, Gideon had finally grasped the principle — that God chooses *what is weak in the world to shame the strong*” (1 Cor.1:26ff.) It is because he began to think of how weakness can be strength that he was able to hit upon his plan. Gideon’s part was this — *he submitted to God’s saving principle, that his power is made perfect in weakness.*

Third, Gideon had learned in the camp that there was a spirit of nervousness and fear in the Midianite camp. Gideon would never have suspected that if he hadn't done first hand research. But, of course, that first hand research was provided by God.

How does the strategy fulfill the dream?

Barley was the most cheap and common grain available in that time. It was considered the food of the poor. In the dream God sent, a very weak and poor thing unexpectedly becomes a weapon that destroys the powerful Midianites. That is what happened.

6. Where are you feeling "outnumbered"? or in need of some intervention? How can you: a) accept the limits God has given you, and b) accept that 'God's power is made perfect in weakness'? Can you ask the group to join you in your "battle" by praying for you?

This question might lead members to share some sensitive topics, so be quick to listen and slow to speak or "fix" one another.

There are an infinite number of possible answers to this question. But consider the following. When we face a trouble, we often try extremely hard to change the circumstances or we pray to God to have it removed, when God wants to use the trouble to deepen our character so that we can "escape" it by becoming able to "endure" it (cf. 1 Cor.10:13). We fail to see that the limits God has given us (as in Gideon's case) may be the only way for us to reach our potential spiritually.

7. Think back over all of chapter 6 and 7. Make a list of everything God had to expose Gideon to in order to help him reach his potential as a leader?

- God gave Gideon promises — that he would be with him and would use him. (6:14-16) This is like the promises we have in his Word.
- God sent three major miracles into his life as assurance. (6:20; 6:36ff.; 6:39ff.) We too usually experience a couple of very dramatic interventions in our lives where God shows his power.
- God asks him to get his family life in order before he goes out to the larger tasks of leadership in the world. (6:25ff. He cleanses his own family life of idols.) In the same way, we cannot be effective in service to others if we are not doing right by our families.
- God sends the Spirit of the Lord (6:34) to give him courage and confidence. In the same way, we must experience his power and joy in prayer (Rom.8:15-17)
- God teaches him the principle of the gospel — that we are not saved by works but God's grace. (7:2) In the same way, we do not really "get" the gospel until God has had to show it to us again and again. Our guilt, anger, anxiety are all because we don't believe we are saved by grace, not works.

- God tells him how *he* sees Gideon — “*a mighty man of valor*” (6:12). It is God’s assessment of us, and not our assessment of ourselves, that we must be controlled by.

The failure of Gideon’s house

Judges 8:1 - 10:5

INTRODUCTION

Though Judges records a series of revival “cycles”, the cycles become weaker as time goes on. Israel is on a downward spiral. We see this in the career of Gideon. For the first time, the people begin to “backslide” during the tenure of a Judge-Savior. And one of Gideon’s sons, Abimelech, is a spiritual disaster when he becomes a ruler.

1. 8:1-17. Observe Gideon’s response to the Ephraimites (vv.1-3) and the men of Succoth and Peniel (vv.4-17). a) How were the responses of all three groups to Gideon similar? b) What do you think Gideon was feeling on the inside when they dealt with these groups?

a) All three groups were showing Gideon a lack of respect. Ephraimites were essentially jealous. They wanted the glory. Their question: “*why didn’t you call us to fight Midian?*” (v.1) is gratuitous. It is very unlikely that Ephraim would have responded to a call from Gideon or would have been willing to march under his command. Remember that Gideon was from a very low-status family in a low status tribe (6:15). Ephraim appears to have been one of the strongest tribes economically and militarily. Gideon (probably rightly) did not call on them because they would not have come with him. However, now they are very eager for “a slice of the pie”. The victors over Midian would become very wealthy with all the booty and plunder. They were angry that they had not been brought in on the deal. Thus they are sharply criticizing Gideon, even though he is the victorious general. Actually they are really only confirming Gideon’s original concerns. Even now they show him very little deference and respect, but rather they begin to berate and scold him. Despite all he has done for Israel, they will not give him any respect.

Succoth and Peniel, in a different way, also show a lack of respect in and gratitude to Gideon. They “*taunt*” (8:15) Gideon. In spite of his weariness and risk and the brilliance

of his military work up to now, the towns refuse to give him supplies and support during his support. They say, "Do you have these Midianites in your hand? No? Then don't look to us for help!" They mock him and predict that he is not going to be able accomplish his objective — to overtake and capture them. If he doesn't accomplish his objective, the Midianites will regroup and return and destroy the towns that helped Gideon, as well as Gideon himself. So they are saying, "You've been lucky up to now! There is no way you are going to be successful. You are in over your head! Don't expect any help from us! Dig your own grave, mister. Leave us out of it." So again, Gideon finds that despite all he is accomplished, he still cannot command any respect from the people he has risked all to save.

b) Gideon's words and deeds give us some indication of what he was feeling. First, his pride has been very hurt. He very pointedly mentions how they *"taunted me"* (8:15). Despite all that he has done, he cannot command the admiration and honor he feels he deserves. Second, that hurt pride and "loss of face" has been turned into a violent rage. He tells Succoth that he will return to *"tear their flesh with desert thorns"* (8:7) and then he does so (8:16). The word *"tear"* means literally to *"thresh"*. Grain was *"threshed"* out of its husks by pulling heavy, sharp objects over it. Gideon evidently *"threshed"* their flesh by flailing them with sharp thorns and briers. It is probable that all or most of them died. He also sacked and killed the men of the town of Peniel. So Gideon acted as a man who has experienced a painful loss of face or respect. He *"teaches them a lesson"* v.16 in respect by torturing and killing them.

2. 8:1-17 a) How is Gideon forgetting the "lesson of the 300" (7:2)? b) What kinds of emotions result when you forget God's grace?

a) In 7:2 God makes the startling claim, *"you have too many men for me to deliver Midian in their hands."* Why? *"that Israel may not boast against me that her own hand has saved her."* God says that there is a terrible spiritual danger involved in the reception of any blessing. Our hearts deeply believe that we can save ourselves by our own ability and power. So we use any victory in life as a confirmation of that belief. For example, imagine a man who works extremely hard at his job because he needs to prove himself through financial success. What is the worst thing that can happen to him? Someone says: *"career failure"*. Of course, someone who is basing their happiness and identity on their work will be devastated by career failure. But at least, through the failure, he may be disabused of his illusion. He may realize that a person's dignity is not measured by his status or money, and he may realize that those things could never fulfill. No, the worst thing that can happen to him is *"career success"*. Success will only confirm his belief that he can fulfill himself and control his own life. He will be more a slave to success and money than if he failed. He will feel proud and superior to others. He will expect deference and bowing and scraping from others.

This is why God wanted Gideon's victory to be so miraculous that everyone — including Gideon — would know it was an act of free grace. God wanted no one to begin to make an idol out of Gideon's military brilliance, nor an idol out of military power. He wanted no pride and arrogance to grow, which always leads to a violence. But we see here that despite all God's precautions, Gideon does expect honor and gratitude for what he has

done. The people of Succoth and Peniel might be excused at disbelieving that Gideon with his little band would be able to finish off the Midianites. But Gideon does not say, “yes, I know it is hard to believe we can beat them. But it is all God’s grace.” Instead, he says essentially, “you dare to doubt *me*? I’ll show you my power when I get back.” Gideon’s need for gratitude and respect shows that his success has been the worst thing for him. He is now becoming addicted and dependent on his success.

b) There are many answers to this question. Here are four possible ones. When we forget that we are saved by sheer grace, not by our performance, then —

- we may become filled with anxiety. “If I slip up, if I make a wrong move here, I could lose everything.” But we must think, instead, “All the things I have are really gifts of grace. They aren’t here because of my performance, but by God’s generosity. He loves me enough to lose his only Son for me, surely he will continue to give me what I need. Console yourself”
- we may become filled with pride and anger. “I am not getting what I deserve! People are not treating me right! Who do they think they are?” But we must think, instead, “All the things I have are really gifts of grace. I have never gotten what I deserve — and I never will! If God gave me what I deserved, I’d be dead. Humble yourself.”
- we may become filled with guilt. “I have blown it! My problems mean he’s abandoned me.” But we must think, instead, “All the things I have are the results of God’s grace. I never earned them to begin with — so I couldn’t have un-earned them. He accepted me long ago even though he knew I would do this. This was in my heart all along — I just didn’t see it, but he did. He’s with me now. Be confident, Self.”
- we may become filled with boredom and lethargy. “Sure, I’m a Christian. Sure I have good things. So what?” But we must think, instead, “All the things I have — every one — is a gift of grace. The very fact I am a Christian is a miracle. Be amazed. Be in wonder, Self.”

3. a) 8:1-17. Why do you think Gideon’s response to Succoth and Peniel was different than to Ephraim? (refer to 7:24-25) b) 8:18-21. What do we learn here is the reason that drove Gideon with only 300 men to pursue relentlessly (8:4) and attack a superior (8:10) force? c) One commentator says that Gideon proves we must “beware of the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit!” What do you think that means? What does it mean for us?

a) So why does Gideon’s responses become increasingly violent? Why does he control himself with Ephraim but grow increasingly uncontrolled as the chapter goes on? We should remember that Ephraim was simply a lot stronger militarily. They had already destroyed two of the kings of the Midianites (7:24- 25) while Gideon had as of yet not captured any. Perhaps Gideon was simply intimidated by them. He could not strike at them, because he didn’t have the power. The snub and scolding by Ephraim was hard to take, but he held his tongue. However, now the “smart” of his humiliation before them made it harder and harder to take the taunts of Succoth and Peniel. Gideon simply

stored his hurt and anger until the accumulated weight of it became too much for him to hold back. So the reason for Gideon's increasingly violent temper is the power of accumulated bitterness.

b) We get a shock when we get to 8:18. He asks them, *"what about the men you killed at Tabor?"* We here learn something that the narrator has not told us until now. These two kings had killed Gideon's brothers. And he admits (v.19) that he would not have destroyed them otherwise. In other words, Gideon's ruthless, remarkable pursuit and brave attack had really been motivated by a desire for personal vengeance. This is why Gideon now asks his oldest son, Jether, only a boy, to kill them. It would be both humiliating to the enemy to have a mere youth do the execution, and it would be "fitting" (in Gideon's mind) to have his son kill the murderers of his own uncles. But this is also both bloodthirsty and cruel. Poor Jether is petrified, and so are Zebah and Zalmunna. (One commentator says that a boy could "hack and bungle the execution". They urged Gideon to do the job, since it would be both less painful and less humiliating.)

c) Michael Wilcock writes:

Gideon has become, even on the testimony of his enemies, a man of majesty (8:18) and strength (8:21). But there is something less than admirable at the heart of him. For all the development of his great abilities. Beware the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit!

- Wilcock, p. 86.

The "gifts of the Spirit" are abilities for doing, while the "fruit of the Spirit" are character qualities of being. "Gifts" are God-given abilities to lead, speak, think, counsel and otherwise perform. "Fruit" are qualities of love, joy, peace, humility, unselfishness, and so on. One of the greatest dangers for Christians is to "rest on our gifts" while neglecting the cultivation of fruit. We may flatter ourselves because we help so many people, or because we are able to lead ministries, or because we have deep Biblical knowledge that therefore we are walking with God. But underneath we may be harboring selfishness, pride, rage, anxiety that is not being dealt with by prayer and God's grace. Gideon is an example. He has become remarkable in his abilities. He is now a great leader, with God's help. But he has not cleansed his heart of pride, fear, and anger with a knowledge of God's grace. This means that we too must not neglect the "interior life" of prayer, repentance, and self-examination.

Background Note:

The ephod of the high priest (Exodus 28) was a breast plate that covered the wearer's front and back. It was covered with ornamental gold patterns and studded with gems. On the front of the breastplate were the Urim and Thummim — two stones that were used to receive 'yes' or 'no' answers from God. (Many believe that they were two sided stones, much like coins. When they were 'flipped', two 'up-sides' meant yes, two 'down-sides' meant no, and a mixed result meant 'no answer'.) Gideon's ephod (8:24-27)

was some sort of reproduction, and it was an effort to ascertain God's answers to their questions. People came to worship it as an idol.

4. 8:22-35. a) Why did Gideon decline the offer of kingship? b) How could Gideon resist the invitation to rule in the place of God (v.22) yet worship an ephod in the place of God (v.27)?

a) Gideon is offered the kingship of all of Israel. The offer in v.22 is for one man to be the ruler of all the tribes, and to have that rule be a dynastic one, passing on down to Gideon's descendants. This is a major departure from the rule of the judge. A judge was anointed by God as evidenced by his (or her) abilities to deal with the crisis at hand. But kingship would be appointed by human beings and would pass on down to others automatically. The purpose of kingship over judgeship was ostensibly stability. But Gideon rightly discerns the underlying motivation for kingship. The people want a king rather than to be ruled directly by God (v.23). In other words, Gideon realizes that Israel's problems had not been due to the fact that they needed a stabilizing human king, but they were due to the fact that they had not obeyed their true, divine king fully. The desire to create a human king was really a slap in the face of God. It was an implicit statement that their problems had come because of their inadequate forms of government, rather than from their lack of loyalty to the Lord.

Ultimately, the desire to have a human king was really the desire to "wrest control" of their governance away from God. With a king, there would be no need to wait for God's choice of a savior. So the desire of kingship is another effort at self-salvation. They do not want to be dependent on God's grace and salvation.

b) Ironically, Gideon almost immediately contradicts the very thing he has just said. He asks for a financial reward for their deliverance. Then he takes the new wealth and creates his own copy of the ephod of the high priest, which is at the Tabernacle in Shiloh (18:31). The ephod was something that designated the true tabernacle where God chose to dwell, and it was also a way to discern God's will in times of crisis. But Gideon, in order to enhance the standing of his own house, makes his own copy. This means that he essentially sets up his own rival tabernacle. This is just as much a way of trying to "control" God as setting up a kingship. (In many ways, it is even more overt!) Gideon wanted people to come to him for God's guidance, instead of the tabernacle God himself designed. Gideon was using God to consolidate his power, instead of serving God.

How could Gideon do this? It is simple. He knew something intellectually which had not really gripped his heart. He had a mental grasp of the doctrine of God's grace, and he could give the right answer in some situations. But his heart had not really understood how this truth worked itself out in all of life. A good example of this is Galatians 2:14. Peter believes the gospel that we are saved by sheer grace, so no one Christian is no better than any other. But though he knows this in his head, he instinctively recoils from eating with Gentile Christians. (He had been trained all his life to believe that pagan

Gentiles were unclean and morally inferior to Jews.) Paul confronts him and says, “you are not walking *in line with the gospel*.” What Peter knew quite well in his head he still had not completely grasped internally. Therefore he was functionally operating in a different way than he taught with his head and mouth. It is the same here. Gideon had enough idea about the dangers of self-salvation to reject the kingship, but he fell into idolatry somewhere else.

5. a) What good thing becomes an “ephod” and a “snare” in your life? b) How is prosperity a greater spiritual test than adversity?

a) This story means that any good thing can become a “snare” to us. When we think of “idolatry” we think of the worship of terrible blood-thirsty deities. But here, the worship of the priest’s ephod is a way to tell us that very good things can be, in many ways, worse snares. God wants us to have friends, to have family relationships, to use our gifts in vocation and career—but this shows us vividly that we can make these good things into ways to control God and to put him in our debt and to save ourselves through our performance. Anything that we use in that way “snares” and enslaves us. We have to have them, we have to succeed because they are the way we are going to make it in life.

This story is a very vivid warning for also for Christians who are the most active in church and ministry. The Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon once warned his ministry students, “don’t go into the ministry to save your soul”. He knew that it was very possible to actually rely on your service to God *as* your salvation. You can very easily “rest spiritually” in your service to God as the reason he should favor you and help you and bless you. That is to make Christianity a savior rather than Christ. It is to worship the priest’s ephod. How subtle. How deadly.

b) Thomas Carlyle was reputed to have said: “only one in a hundred passes the test of prosperity”. When Gideon was a reluctant, frightened recruit he so deeply distrusted his own competence that he needed multiple assurances from God that he would be helped by divine grace. But by the end of his life, Gideon has built an empire and is pursuing advantage for his own family and his own glory rather than God’s. He no longer goes to God for assurance. He is quite sure of himself, and so he falls.

In many ways, adversity is not as spiritually dangerous as prosperity. In adversity we are shown our true weakness and need for God. In adversity, we come to see the things our hearts trust rather than God. In prosperity, we are not forced to see any of this. We saw in early chapter 8 that Gideon had neglected to work into his heart what he had learned that night of the trumpets — that God’s salvation was by grace. Continued success enabled him to continue to neglect the examination of his own heart. In the end, Gideon did not change Israel because his own heart was not changed.

6. 9:1-57. a) How is the story of Abimelech distinctly different than that of every other leader we have profiled? b) Why would the narrator devote so much space to this? c) How

did Gideon's actions sow the seeds for the disaster of Abimelech (8:29-31) d) How does the parable of the bramble bush (vv.7-21) shed light on the meaning of the narrative?

a) Up until this chapter, there has been a very familiar cycle or sequence. First, the people fall into sin, then they cry out to the Lord for help. Third, God raises up a Judge or savior who then leads a rescue. But now we have a complete departure in the person of Abimelech. First, why he rises. Every other figure is brought into leadership by God. But this man — Abimelech — is brought on to the scene because he is a son of Gideon. Second, how he governs. The other figures govern on the basis of some revelation from God. But here authority is not a matter of judging or delivering but rather is a naked exercise of power. Third, his source of strength. It takes some time for the reader to realize that nowhere in this narrative, from 8:34 to 10:6 is the Lord mentioned by name.

b) What we have is a picture of society and leadership with God completely out of the picture. There is nothing more important to see.

c) Gideon lived the life of an Eastern potentate, having many wives and concubines. This always is destructive to the lives of the women and children. Abimelech means “my father is king” — a very odd name, considering that Gideon turned down the kingship. It may mean that Gideon was very proud of his power and/or wished he had been made king. Abimelech, as a mixed race child of a concubine, would have certainly had lower status growing up. His resentment and lust for power and respect would bear bitter fruit.

d) The trees are looking for a king. The olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine all produce very valuable products. Oil, figs, and wine were the staples of the Palestinian economy. If anyone should be king of the trees, they surely are qualified. But finally, the bramble bush volunteers to be king. But the bramble bush does not provide anything useful for anyone. First, it is too short and scraggly to provide shade from the heat, and the only thing that can come out of it is not oil or fruit, but fire. Bramble bushes often caught fire which spread to the other plants and trees to destroy them. Wise horticulturists always removed bramble bushes that were growing near any valuable plants. So the kingship of the bramble bush will inevitably lead to disaster. Only fire can be the fruit of such a plant.

Jotham is simply saying that “your sins will find you out”. Evil always destroys itself. Breaking God's laws set up strains in the fabric of the universe that will always lead to disaster. Gideon's actions distorted the heart of Abimelech. Abimelech's rise to power sowed the seeds of the destruction of Shechem. There is no escape for or from evil.

7. 10:1-5. What is so striking about the simple record of the two judges, Tola and Jair?

These verses don't tell us much about Tola and Jair, but they tell us volumes about God.

The terminology that Tola “*rose to save Israel*” and that “*he led Israel*” is the same language used of Deborah in 4:4-5. Remember that Deborah was, possibly the best of

the judges, and here we see that God has raised up someone else who saved and led Israel in the same way.

But why? Did Israel cry out asking for mercy and help? No. If anything, the ninth chapter of Judges is the bleakest in the whole book. The people have completely abandoned God. He is not even named in the narrative. They have sunk to the depths and they are not even crying out in repentance, yet God sends them back to back (Tola, then Jair) Judge-Saviors. This is astonishing. Justice demands, surely, that this people be cut off. By rights, Israel should not survive as a nation. Yet God responds by sending 45 years of peaceful administration under these two men.

Here we see what we have seen all along — the tension between the conditionality and the unconditionality of God's dealing with his people. On the one hand, he has allowed them to get very "burned" by their sin. They chose a bramble-bush as king, and whenever we sin, fire comes out from it and burns us painfully. Yet now he responds by sending salvation *unconditionally*. In fact, it is probable that the only reasons the Israelites repent in chapter 10 (and they do it very thoroughly, we will see) is because God through Tola and Jair has provided "space" — rest — that enables repentance and renewal to grow again. Tola and Jair is sheer grace — they are not a response to *anything* good that Israel does at all.

Is God being unjust? If we did not have the New Testament, we would have to conclude that he is. Only the cross will show us that God's truth and justice are not being abandoned in favor of his mercy. Because of the death of Jesus, God is both "just" and "justifier" of those who believe (Romans 3:26). It also means that we have the confidence that he will never leave us or forsake us.

Deborah: The woman leader

Judges 4:1 - 5:31

INTRODUCTION

Chapters 4 and 5 of Judges is very interesting, because each chapter deals with the same event, but one from the perspective of the historian, and the other from the perspective of the poet/musician.

1. 4:1-24. What are the gifts and skills Deborah possesses (4:4-14) What were the effects of her career (5:6-9)

First, Deborah was a “prophetess” (v.4). We see her exercising this gift v.6 when she tells Barak, “*The Lord commands you...*” This means that she preaches and teaches the Word of God. Second, she was very wise. She “*held court*” under the Palm of Deborah (v.5). Notice that this did not so much mean a “queen’s court” as a real judge’s courtroom. People came to have “*disputes decided*”. This means that for some time she had been recognized as a wise counselor and judge and people came to her with all sorts of social, legal, and relational “cases”.

Third, she was a leader. 4:9 says she was “*leading*” (NIV) or “*judging*” Israel. We have seen before that to lead and to judge was the same thing. She was given authority to rule. This call to leadership is put in a very vivid way in the Song — 5:6-9. Deborah says that under idol-worship, Israel fell into great social decay. Shared, common life ceased. “*Village life in Israel ceased.*” 5:7. This means that things got so bad that it was every family for itself. There was not a common life of culture, commerce, etc. But Deborah became “*a mother in Israel*”. The implication is that she acted as a “parent” for the larger community, so that individual families could become part of a larger “family” of the whole nation. She “rose” into power in order to do this.

Fourth, she seems to have had a tremendous inspirational gift. This probably is an extension of her abilities as a prophetess and a leader. She “stirs” up Barak and the army — “*This is the day the Lord has given Sisera into your hands! Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?*” Fifth, Deborah was a poet/musician. Her “song” is considered by most scholars to be one of the great artistic works of the ancient world.

Her tremendous gifts led Barak to refuse to go into his campaign without her. (See #2).

2. How is the judgeship of Deborah both like and unlike the judgeships of the Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar?

Deborah’s judgeship is **like** the others in its most basic patterns. Though it is not mentioned directly, clearly God’s Spirit came upon her (making her a prophetess) so that through her God could deliver his people from a military oppressor. Secondly, Deborah’s judgeship is *like* most of the other judgeships because it is so unexpected. Remember last week’s study. Women, especially in ancient times, were not usually rulers and leaders. Deborah becomes one of the many “unexpected”, paradigm-busting saviors who point to the ultimate Savior, who saves in the most “inside-out” ways, clean contrary to the wisdom of the world.

But Deborah’s judgeship is mainly **unlike** the others. (1) First, it was unlike in that it was in many ways the greatest of all. Of all the twelve judges mentioned in the book, none is depicted as the wise, talented, brilliant, and godly person that she is. Only Othniel is seen in such unmixed positive terms — all the rest are seen as very flawed. But even Othniel seems to have been simply talented in one way — as a military leader. He “went

to war" (3:10). That is the only talent we read of which is used by God to deliver Israel. But, as we have seen, Deborah is multi-talented.

(2) But second, Deborah is also very different in that she alone is not a warrior. Though she goes with Barak to the military campaign, that was not originally her plan. There is no indication that she literally led anyone into battle (3:14). That leads to a third related difference.(3) In every other case of deliverance, God raises up one person — the judge — to deliver Israel alone. In Samson's case, the deliverance is *literally* alone. He has nearly super-hero-type strength which enables him to fight battles with the oppressors single-handedly. But even in every other case, from Othniel on through, there is never any more than one single hero and protagonist. In every other case, one person gets all the honor. Only in this chapter of Israel's history do we see a "team" of deliverers — Deborah, Barak, and Jael. *All* the honor goes to no one person (4:9). Jael uses subterfuge, Barak is not really the leader of Israel, and Deborah is not the military hero. Deborah, however, is the one who creates a team. She identifies, recruits, and encourages Barak with her Spirit-anointed leadership gifts. She is the one who "puts it all together" — but no other judge does anything like this at all.

(4) Finally, we can say that Deborah was a different in that she led from wisdom and character rather than sheer might. She came closest to being a fully-orbed *leader* of her people instead of just a general. There is no indication that any of the other judges actually "judged" cases as Deborah did. She wisely directed people in how to live. She restored "village" life — meaning she re- wove the social structure. She was as good a judge in peace-time as in war- time. The other judges simply broke the power of the oppressors. In all this, Deborah was more a fore-runner of the monarchy and even the Messiah, who was "*wonderful Counselor... Prince of Peace*". (Isaiah 9).

3. How does Deborah's career modify both the "strong conservative" and "strong liberal" views of women's leadership?

Please forgive me for bringing up such a vast and "hot" topic, but the career of Deborah very obviously leads us to reflect on this subject. The question is chosen to moderate the discussion away from polarizing view points.

A "strongly conservative" view will insist that women should not as a rule be in positions of leadership in family, church, or society at all. Though women often have to step in and take such a role, it should be the normal scheme of things. A "strongly liberal" view, however, will insist that "gender roles" are basically a fiction, that women and men are simply interchangeable when it comes to leadership. Women will and should not differ from men in when and how they lead.

The conservative view is challenged by the fact of Deborah's career. In 4:9 it is stated that Deborah was "*judging*" or "*leading*" Israel (the words are the same). Of all the judges, Deborah (except for Othniel) This had been going on for some time. If women are never to be in positions of social leadership, why was Deborah clearly called by God as both a prophet and a judge?

This view often responds that Deborah was an anomaly caused by the “abdication” of Barak and other men. This view has been bolstered by the NIV translation’s rendering of 4:9. Barak says he won’t go to war unless Deborah goes with him. The Hebrew is translated to read, *“but because of the way you are going about this, the honor will not be yours...”* If this reading is correct, then Deborah is rebuking Barak for timidity. That means that both Deborah’s accompaniment of Barak and the victory of Jael are ‘punishment’ to Barak. This fits the conservative view. It means that the prominence of women in leadership is really an anomaly caused by the unwillingness of males to take up leadership.

A point in favor of this rendering is the fact that the withholding of honor from Barak does seem to be some kind of penalty. But there are some very good reasons to reject this view. The Hebrew can also be translated as the NIV footnote says — *“but on the expedition you are taking, the honor will not be yours...”* Here’s why that rendering is more likely. (1) First, why would Barak’s desire to take Deborah along with him constitute disobedience? When Moses is given the same command to go forth, he says to God *“not unless you go with me”*. God’s response is identical to Deborah’s *“I will go with thee.”* (See Exodus 33:12-17). We have seen how godly and anointed Deborah was. Why would it be disobedient of Barak to want such a godly woman with him? Second (and this is telling) Heb.11:32 lists Barak as a great hero, who *“through faith conquered kingdoms... and routed foreign armies”*. That is quite significant. Barak is put in the same sentence here with Gideon, Samson, and Jephthah. We are told that his victory was done in great faith. Notice that Deborah is not named in this list. It was a greater act of faith on Barak’s part than Deborah! So in the NT we learn that Barak showed great faith to ask for

Deborah’s presence and help, and to go into a battle knowing that he would *not* get all the honor — that a woman would begin the campaign and another woman would end it.

All this undermines the conservative belief that Deborah was only a judge because Barak and others were too timid. Deborah’s career makes it hard to insist that the Bible forbids women to take leadership positions in society.

The liberal view is challenged too, by the shape of Deborah’s career. The liberal view denies the relevance of gender differences with regard to leadership. Why? Some conservatives have insisted that a woman’s “feminine” characteristics make it difficult for her to lead. This has led the more liberal to insist that “anything a man can do a woman can do”, and to dismiss gender differences as socially constructed fictions.

But Deborah’s leadership skills and strategies are very distinct from those of her male counterparts. First, she is not a warrior — she cannot physically lead the army. Therefore she has to recruit someone who complements her gifts. Related to that, we see that secondly she is a team builder, not a “lone ranger”. [As we noted in #2 above, she is the only judge who does not accomplish the deliverance single-handed. There are, not one, but three “channels” by which God destroys the oppressors: Deborah, Barak, and Jael.] While the male judges are highly independent and warlike, Deborah is

a team builder who creates interdependence between leaders. Thirdly, the other judges are excellent in warfare, but show little ability during peace time (cf. Gideon). But we saw in 5:7 that Deborah was excellent in building community.

This supports the idea that gender distinctions have an abiding effect on the way leadership is carried out. Many thoughtful people today are pointing out that the way women lead *is* different than the way men lead, and these differences lay along the same lines as we see in Deborah's history. Unfortunately, many of these same commentators are insisting that the woman/leader approach is inherently better. But it seems much wiser to say that male and female leadership approaches are appropriate for different situations.

It is a mistake to say: a) men should always lead, b) women are always better leaders, or c) women can do anything men can do and men can do anything women can do.

Conclusion Deborah's career can by no means be the basis for drawing conclusions about male and female roles and leadership. Judges 4 and 5 are written to simply tell us what happened, not what should have happened! It is not written to teach us about gender roles per se. Inferences we draw about gender must be tentative and tested against the rest of Scripture. We cannot put a implicit inferences up against explicit teaching elsewhere in the Bible. But Deborah does point to something we *do* see taught elsewhere, namely that women are equal in dignity and ability, but differences in gender are to be expressed through some differentiation in role within the church. In the Old Testament, there were three great offices — prophet, priest, and king (or judge). Some women were prophets and some were judge/queens. But there were no women priests. In the New Testament, women are free to use their gifts in any role but elder (1 Tim.2:12).

Why? This is God's way to express this "equal but not equivalent" nature of gender. Gender differences are to be rejoiced in and embraced as a gift, not used to oppress (on the one hand) and not feared and loathed (on the other hand). This Biblical view does not fit in with current views of doctrinaire traditionalists or secularists today.

4. Read 4:6-16 and cf. with Hebrews 11:32-34. Barak is praised for the faith he exercised in this campaign. a) In what ways does he show faith? b) In what ways does he point the way to the ultimate Savior/judge?

a) In what ways does he show faith?

Only three or four people out of the whole book of Judges get named as one of the "heroes of the faith" in Hebrews 11. We mentioned under #3 that the unhelpful NIV translation of 4:9 makes it much harder to see why Hebrews would have such a lofty view of him. But with some reflection we can see why.

First, Barak's faith exercises itself in courage. He is told that he must lead an army into battle against a force of vastly superior technology. Yet Barak went. At this time the Bronze Age was ending and the Iron Age beginning. Those nations with the ability to

develop iron tools and weapons were virtually invincible against those who could not. An iron chariot could charge through foot soldiers like a hot knife through butter. The Israelites could muster 10,000 men (4:10), but Sisera had 900 chariots along with *"all the other men"* (4:13). This was more than a match for the Israelites. In human terms, it would be a slaughter.

Second, Barak's faith exercises itself in humility. He is told that he must be prepared for the fact that, despite all the valor he would have to exhibit, *"the honor will not be yours"* (4:9). A woman (Deborah) was the impetus for the campaign, and another woman (Jael) would strike the final triumphant blow. So Barak would not get *"the glory"*. Yet Barak went. Even if the withheld glory was a punishment, it was remarkable that Barak would go. [But see under #3 for the reasons why this is unlikely.] It would have taken remarkable maturity for a man to be willing to share the honor of battle with a woman. Many people today will admire Barak as being a modern, *"enlightened"* man who shows that his male ego is under control. But it is wrong to read our modern sensibilities back into ancient history. Barak was able to subjugate his normal fierce masculine independence and pride out of faith in the Lord, who was speaking through Deborah. That brings us to a third aspect to his faith.

Third, Barak's faith exercises itself in obedience to God's Word. Deborah is a prophetess, and her directions to Barak is more than *"advice"*. She says, *"The Lord, the God of Israel, commands you: 'Go...'"* (4:6). That is the first time Deborah says, *"Go!"* The second time she says *"Go!... Has not the Lord gone ahead of you?"* (4:14), he charges down the mountainside. Barak's faith is not just a kind of general humility. That would mean he was simply an *"enlightened"*, non-macho type man. Rather, his humility springs from his obedience to the Word of the Lord as it comes through Deborah.

b) In what ways does he point to the ultimate Savior/judge?

In his faith, Barak conforms to the pattern of the great Deliverer — he empties himself of glory and becomes obedient (Phil.2). Through his humble, obedient faith, God redeems his people. He would do the same thing on the cross.

"...the New Testament Savior-god is reflected in Barak, who like him is a man under authority and does nothing apart from that authority (Lk.7:6-8; Jn.8:28 - 29), cannot act independently of the one who sends him (Jn.5:19), and is victorious through obedience (Rom. 5:19; Phil. 2:8-11; Heb. 5:8-9)."

– Wilcock, p.123, n.24.

5. 4:17-22 and 5:24-31. a) How does 5:29-30 perhaps shed light on the motives of Jael? b) How does God's concern with the thing he wants done relate to his concern with the methods of the person who does it?

a) Jael's motives.

Deborah's song is rather fierce at the end of the Song! As a woman, Deborah knows how Sisera's mother and her ladies-in-waiting will be waiting for him to come back victorious from battle, as usual (5:28). But as they talk about the "usual" campaign of Sisera we get a glimpse of his normal results of one of his campaigns. "A girl or two for each man" (5:30). It was normal for Sisera's armies to steal and rape and subjugate women — one or two for every soldier as "spoils of war". [The NIV translation "girl" is not illuminating. The Hebrew word roughly means "wench" or "girl-slave". It means the women would become sex-slaves.]

Now we know something of the justice and irony of what happened to Sisera. After making the lives of many women into hellish nightmares, now two women finally bring him down. Deborah engineers the military campaign and Jael strikes the actual blow. This probably accounts for Deborah's triumph song being so pointed and vehement. It also is deeply ironic that Sisera's women should now finally know the grief that he had visited on so many other women and families for so many years.

This probably gives us some insight into Jael's motives. It is possible that she simply had faith in the God of Israel and wanted to strike a blow against the enemy of God's people. Such noble impulses may have been the dominant ones. But since she was not an Israelite, and since this was an age of terribly low-grade spirituality it is much more likely that Jael hated Sisera for his cruelty and even perhaps for the havoc he wreaked on people that she knew. Jael's husband and tribe were political allies (or at least formal non-belligerents), but Jael obviously had personal reasons to despise Sisera and his king Jabin.

b) Jael's method.

The method of Jael's attack on Sisera deepens the irony of the passage even further. Setting up and taking down tents was considered the work of women. Therefore, the tent peg and hammer were essentially a woman's household appliance! It was especially ironic that the abuser of women would die by a female hand with a woman's tool — not even a spear or lance. In that age, death at the hand of a woman was particularly humiliating, of course. All this was probably designed by Jael to make Sisera's death the most devastating possible defeat for him and his army.

Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the fact that Jael's methods is a clear violation or at least a "flouting" of the 10 commandments (e.g. those vs. killing, lying). Some would say that, since she was not a believer, she was not responsible to obey God's law. But Jael also broke all the very strong policies and rules of Middle Eastern hospitality. It was treachery by the standards of any culture. Deborah's blessing of Jael does not mean that she is a model of faith or virtue.

In the final analysis, we have to remember that God often uses people to do what he wants to happen without violating their personal responsibility or condoning their methods. Judas is perhaps the classic example. Other places we read of God using a

people (such as Assyria) to punish Israel, even though God held Assyria responsible for their brutality.

6. 5:1-31. How is the Song's description of the same events different from the historical account in chapter 4?

Observers will find many differences to note, and we do not have to describe them all here. First, the main, foundational difference is that the Song's approach is more *theological*. It looks beneath the surface of the historical specifics and sees God's hand behind it all. In the historical report, the Lord is named in only three verses (and each time in a quote from Deborah). But in chapter 5, the Lord is literally everywhere. It is *he* who marches out to war when Israel amassed its troops (5:4-5). In other words, Deborah reveals that it is God who is the Judge behind the judge, and the general behind the general.

Because of this theological perspective, we actually learn a historical fact that is not evident in chapter 4. According to 5:19-23, the rout of Sisera's army was because of a flash flood in the Kishon valley. In the Song, it is the stars of heaven and the rising river (cf. 5:4 – *the heavens poured down*) that fight for the *Lord* (v.23). Barak is not even mentioned! Truly, the victory was God's. Sisera would never have come out to fight Israel on the plain in his chariots if it was the rainy season. In rain and wet ground, the iron chariots become immobilized and "sitting ducks" for foot soldiers. But God's miracle evidently was that the rain came out of season at a time Sisera would never have expected it.

[**Note:** This sheds much light on 4:14-15. One commentator suggests that Deborah saw the thunder clouds coming and realized what God was doing, so she cried to Barak, "*Look! God has gone out ahead of you! Go!*" and Barak charged down the mountainside with 10,000 men as the "*heavens*" poured down against their enemies. What a picture!]

Besides the main theme, the Song tells us other details we did not know about, such as the effects of idolatry on the social fabric (5:6-9), and that many of the Israelites failed to come to the aid of their brethren (5:15-18).

[**Note:** Many people question how fierce and blood-thirsty the Song is. This raises the broader issue of how often Old Testament texts (especially some of the Psalms) seem to speak hatefully of enemies, while Jesus tells us to love and pray for our enemies. This is not the time to deal with that issue. Suffice it to say that when the people of God saw God's justice falling on sin and evil on to Jesus Christ dying on the cross, it changed our attitude toward our enemies. It is good and right to want to see justice done, and evil destroyed by a holy God. The Old Testament saints had a much dimmer view of how that was to be done. We now can yearn for justice and still pray for our enemies. Jesus, praying for those who were killing us is now our model for dealing with those who oppose us.]

7. Choose application questions for discussion:

a) Do you have a Judges 5 perspective on what is happening in your life, or only a Judges 4 perspective? How could Deborah's perspective on some recent events help you? b) Is God calling you, like Barak, to do something for which you won't get much credit? How can you respond in faith? c) Can you pray like Jesus does for your enemies, or only like Deborah?

a) Keep in mind that Judges 4 is certainly a believing perspective, but it doesn't look beneath the surface, nor have the continual note of "Praise!" that Deborah's Song has.

b) We should remember that while Barak certainly did not get much credit for his victory during his lifetime, he came down to us as one of the heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11. Thus we should remember that it only God's opinion that matters.