

Material from Tim Kellers Leaders Guide on Living in Pluralistic Society

Gideon meets God

Study 1 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?