

The Call of Gideon

Fall Quarter: God's Exceptional Choice

Unit 2: Out of slavery to nationhood

Lesson 7

Sunday School Lesson for the week of October 16, 2022

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Lesson Scripture: Judges 6:1-27

Key Text: "Do not be afraid! You are not going to die!" Judges 6:23

Author's Note: This lesson is intended to supplement the lessons in the Teacher's Book. It is written to add other perspectives that might help bring depth, width, and height to the existing lesson in the Teacher's Manual. Also, please note that I use the traditional pronouns used in the Bible itself. However, we must always understand God transcends all labels and thus, gender.

Introduction: Geographical and Historical/Political Background

The Gift of the Mosaic Law and Shema

The book of Judges, like Genesis, contains a repetitive pattern of grace-sin-redemption. Israel has been living their new life in Canaan, the Promised Land. However, the Israelites neglected and abused this gift of grace. Their sin always leads to painful consequences. Joshua has brought Israel to the Jordan, after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. At last, they cross into the land of promise.

During the period of the Judges, Israel exists as a loose confederation of tribes. There exist no central government. However, each tribe of Israel is expected to live in obedience to the Mosaic Law. Remember, prior to the giving of Mosaic Law Israel had developed a lawful manner of living like most near-eastern tribes. There was an understanding of living uprightly, and even living in faithfulness to God.

However, the Mosaic Law added the "laws of distinction." These laws set Israel apart from their neighbors. These laws of distinction served not only to set Israel apart, they were above all to draw attention to Israel's God. This author believes a sense of the Shema (Deut. 6:4) existed prior to the Mosaic Law, and this great Law was the law that measured Israel's faithfulness to God and covenant. The Shema is the "Law of love," the "Law of laws." Jesus proclaimed this law to the highest expression of moral living and emphasized the dimension of personal relationships by saying: "and love thy neighbor as thyself."

Israel's loose confederation of tribes had neglected both the Shema and the specific laws of the Mosaic Law. Their "loose living" opened the door to oppression from neighboring tribes. In Judges we read the repetitive wording, "And Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord." As the consequences became unbearable at last the people would call upon God to save them.

God responds to their need of deliverance by raising a Judge to a role of leadership. A Judge was a prophet/military leader. Israel's judges were not preselected by Israel, they were chosen and empowered by God. Sadly, after a period of liberty and new life, Israel would once again revert to neglecting the Law and their faithfulness to God.

The role of Judge was the predecessor of role of King. Israel did not have a king. They were a Theocracy. That is, God was their King, and their faithfulness to the Law and Shema were the means of being faithful and upright. We could accurately say the Law and Shema served as the moral plumbline for measuring Israel's faithfulness to God.

Do you believe we have a plumbline today? What is it? How is Jesus related to our understanding of "being measured" as faithful to God? How is the Holy Spirit related to it?

The Gift of the Judges

Again, Judges were mostly military leaders under the leadership of God. They were not technically trained for the role. However, they were empowered by God to serve. Deborah is among my favorite Judges as her story illustrates how God chose a Judge and empowered him or her.

Women were hardly ever elevated to a military role in the near-eastern world. Israel experienced great suffering during the time of Deborah and needed a deliverer. If people were searching for one wise enough, militarily skilled enough, and religiously upright, they would not have considered Deborah. God saw in Deborah what others would never see through their cultural eyes.

Deborah is chosen, but not because she is a woman. Her gender has nothing to do with it. Who she is as a person and the state of her heart had everything to do with it. 1 Sam. 16:7 declares that God does not see as man sees. God "sees the heart." This declaration was beautifully expressed in Deborah's ministry. God delivered Israel under Deborah's leadership.

Later, we will study the call of Gideon to become a Judge of Israel.

How guilty are we of judging the capabilities of others related to their gender? To their skin color or ethnicity? Read the story of Deborah in the Book of Judges and note the remarkable gifts possessed by Deborah. What does the story of Deborah have to say to the Church regarding those called into leadership?

Israel's Sin Leads to Oppression by Midian

Who were the Midianites? It is interesting to note that Midian initially had a close relationship to the Israelites. Abraham had more than one wife, and children through another wife. After Sarah died, Moses married Keturah. Midian was a child of Abraham and Keturah. When Moses fled from pharaoh, he was taken in by Jethro. Jethro was a priest of Midian. The fact that Jethro was a priest implies that the early Midianites possessed an acknowledgement of Abraham's God. Thus, Moses felt at home and safe with Jethro. Moses would later marry Jethro's daughter Zipporah.

Since the Midianites and early Israelites once shared a meaningful relationship, how did they become the severe oppressors of Israel during the time of Gideon? The Israelites and Midianites became estranged years later when the Midianites allied themselves with the Moabites, hiring Balaam to curse Israel. (Read Numbers 22) The Midianites became a nomadic tribe inhabiting part of the northwestern Arabian Peninsula. The Midianites invaded Israel along with other tribes during the time of the Judges.

The Midianites were a most oppressive people. For seven years, with great animosity, they made the lives of the Israelites miserable. As the oppression grew, the Israelites began to call upon the Lord for deliverance. Imagine being so oppressed you abandon your home, fields, vineyards and opt to live in caves and in hiding. When we are first introduced to Gideon, he is working in a secret winepress to ensure the Midianites do not discover him and his work.

In our current culture we often define salvation as solely a personal experience. The books of the Old Testament repeatedly reveal God saving a nation, a community of people. Of course, we are concerned about our personal relationship with the Lord. However, we must be as concerned about our relationships with others, the injustice inflicted upon others, and become passionate about helping all to know the Lord and His deliverance.

How do you think we define or understand the Lord's salvation today? Do we regularly pray for others in other places? Do we regularly teach that God's salvation in Christ is for the entire world? If not, what obstacles have led to such neglect? How can we better understand the breadth of God's deliverance?

God had asked the Israelites to be diligent in their refusal to engage in the idolatry of their neighbors. The Lord spoke to Israel as they cried for deliverance from the Midianites, saying, "But you have not listened to me." Over the years Israel has paid little regard to their one true God, while allowing pagan tribes to influence them through their polygamy and idolatry.

Sadly, for years the Israelites slowly accepted the loss of their life under God. As it is with most of us, when things hurt severely enough, we call upon the Lord to save us. Of course, this behavior doesn't offer a pleasing picture of humankind. We are guilty of desiring "convenient grace." However, God's response offers a beautiful picture of God. Why should God help a people who have repeatedly abused grace? Why should God deliver a people who have received so much and often given so little? Yet, God, again, responds with grace and redemption. Many often read the Old Testament as a book of judgement and penalty. However, it is equally a book sated with grace and love.

How would you define "convenient grace?" How can we better ensure our church engages in gratitude, thanksgiving, and devotion while avoiding convenient grace?

God Speaks!

In the darkest of times, God speaks! It is the same redemptive voice speaking to Gideon and the nation that spoke during the Exodus. No other event in the Old Testament represented God's redemption of Israel like the Exodus. The Lord to whom they pray is the same Lord that allowed

them to possess the land of Canaan. God calls upon Israel to consider their past experiences with the Lord. This consideration of the past, especially the Exodus, can be encapsulated in the simple statement: “I am the Lord who redeemed and blessed you. Do you believe I am going to abandon you now?”

All of us should regularly consider our past with the Lord. Past moments of grace were not moments independent of one another. Each moment prepares us for circumstances to come in the future. We are a covenant people. As Christians, we are a people of the “new covenant.” As Israel was to continue to embody the covenant made with Abraham and Sarah, we are to continue to embody the covenant of love established by Jesus. Considering our past with the Lord can be the creator of faith. Dare we believe that God saved us in the past only to abandon us in the difficulties we face today? When God asks Israel to consider the past, he is reminding them they can trust him in the present. As I’ve stated previously, one of my favorite statements (author unknown) reads: “I have seen my yesterdays with God, therefore I am not afraid of today or tomorrow; for, the God of the past is the same God today and forever.”

Can you share experiences with the Lord from your past that have empowered you later? Can you recognize a continuity in your walk of faith? Can you recognize God’s constant grace in spite of our failure?

The Call of Gideon

An angel of the Lord approaches Gideon as he toils in his secret winepress. It is of great interest to note the angel’s words, “The Lord is with you mighty warrior!” Gideon is stunned. Yet, I truly believe most of us would have been equally surprised. In the present moment, Gideon is just another oppressed Israelite. He is eking out a living in a hidden winepress. How could he possibly be a “mighty warrior?”

Gideon is filled with self-doubt. In no manner does he envision himself as a military leader of the nation. The man hiding in the winepress is far from the man standing at the head of a national army. He defines his qualifications, or disqualifications, based on the way life looks at the time. He has not considered the God of his people, who is Lord over all. Every year nominating committees in churches ask people to serve in leadership. Many turn them down. Some just are not ready to devote their time. Others truly do not see themselves as capable, even though a prayerful committee has seen God’s gifts and graces within them.

Gideon initially hesitates based on what he sees in the world around him. Israel was suffering under a vicious enemy. Gideon is asking, “If you want me to help deliver your people, then where are you?” Gideon did not see God in his present life. The way life happens to be doesn’t mean it is the way life will remain. The angel of the Lord is asking Gideon to gaze into God’s future redemption.

My call into pastoral ministry keenly mirrors Gideon’s call. When I spiritually heard, “The Lord is with you, pastor,” I responded as Gideon, “Pardon?” Nothing in my present circumstances qualified me for the call of ordination. However, again, God does not see as we see; God sees the heart. The God who calls us is the Lord who empowers us.

Gideon must have received an impression that this angel wasn't leaving. He uses what he considers is his most evident disqualification. Gideon reminds the angel that he is from the least of the tribes of Israel. Then, he adds further disqualification: "I am the least of my tribe." Gideon claims he does not have the pedigree to serve as Judge. The position from which we've come has little to do with our calling. Where God wills us to go has everything to do with it.

God calls each of us into an expression of ministry. God's past acts of grace in Jesus call us to remember this is the same Lord calling us at present. The last statement in our biblical text provides the perfect ending. God says, "I will be with you."

Can you relate to Gideon's hesitation in responding to God? Do you struggle in responding to God's call upon your life? Do you believe yourself unqualified to serve? Do you measure yourself against others, or do you recognize that if God called you then God will be with you? Have you ever considered, "What could I do for God if I knew for certain that the Lord was with me"?

Prayer

Almighty God, we praise you for your constant mindfulness and care for us. Forgive us for our fear in facing great opportunity. Open our eyes to see as you see. Open our hearts to receive your courage. Empower us to act with confidence as we acknowledge You are with us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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