

# **“Here Comes the Judge!” - A Study on the Old Testament Book of Judges**

**Session 5    October 21, 2020**

**Gideon                      Judges 6:1 – 8:35**

## **Recap: The Judges’ Cycle**

The Judges’ Cycle (found in Judges Chapter 2, verses 10 through 19) is as follows...

1. The tribes of Israel rebel against God, often worshipping the gods of the people of Canaan (Baal, Ashtaroah, etc.)
2. God is provoked to anger by the Israelites actions, and allows another group to rise up and invade, plunder, or oppress the tribes of Israel.
3. The distress causes the tribes of Israel to cry out to the Lord, asking for repentance for their actions.
4. God sends rescue through a chosen leader, a “judge” to put down the oppressors, creating a time of peace for the tribes.
5. When the “judge” dies, the tribes once again turn away from God and rebel again.

## **Session 4 Recap**

In Session 4, we looked at the judge Deborah. Unlike previous judges, Deborah was not a military ruler. Instead, she served as a “mediator” judge for the tribes of Israel before being called to guide the tribes against the Canaanites. Calling on the military leader Barak to lead the troops, Barak insisted on Deborah traveling with them as spiritual support. The Israelites overran the iron chariots of the Canaanites, while their evil military leader, Sisera, escaped. Seeking help and a hiding place in the tent of Jael, Jael ended his life with a tent peg through his temple. The narrative account is followed by a poetic/song account of the story. Deborah ushered in forty years of peace for the Israelite tribes.

## **Session 4: Gideon, the 5<sup>th</sup> Judge**

**Judges 6:1 – 8:35**

In the story of Gideon, the 5<sup>th</sup> Judge for the tribes of Israel, we see a man who from the outset seems timid to the call, but remains faithful to God in the beginning. After he leads the tribes of Israel against the Midianites, the Amalekites, and the “sons of the east” (after seven years of oppression), often relying on his own skill rather than God’s, Gideon allows his accomplishments to go to his head! He creates a “false idol” that eventually leads the Israelites away from God.

### **(1) Cycle Step One: Judges 6:1**

We are introduced to the Gideon story with the familiar refrain, “Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord...” We are not told what “evil” they did, but we can assume it includes turning their back on God and worshipping idols and false gods. The Israelites have failed to remember what God has done through the leadership of Deborah, especially the emotional song that is written to commemorate the Lord’s success.

### **(2) Cycle Step Two: Judges 6:1 – 5**

The Midianites led this oppression, while the Amalekites and other “sons from the east” assisted in the plunder. The Midianites were desert people who descended from Abraham’s second wife, Keturah. (From this relationship, the nation of Midian arose and was in constant conflict with the Israelites.) While the period of oppression (7 years) was not as long as previous accounts, the actual oppression is worse so far! The Midianites drove the Israelites out of their homes and forced them to live in caves in the mountains to stay safe. These desert raiders not only drive the people from their homes, but they destroyed all the crops and took all their livestock. The Midianites, the Amalekites, and the others are described like “locusts”, harboring images from negative times in the Israelites’ past.

The Midianites were not concerned about political control. Their goal was economic exploitation. By destroying the crops and seizing the livestock, this left the people of Israel in a dire situation. With no means of growing food, the Israelites were left to starve to death!

### **(3) Cycle Step Three: Judges 6:6 – 10**

Up to this point, the storyline of the Judges has fallen into place. After seven years of oppression under the Midianites, the tribes of Israel called out to the Lord. Now, our expectation is for God to call up a “judge” to lead them against the oppressors. However, this time God sends a “prophet” to answer this cry and preach a “sermon”.

Why the difference? Based on the words of the prophet, the people of Israel seem to “regret” their actions, but not necessarily “repent” of their misdeeds. There is a big difference in “regretting” and “repenting”. Regret does

not lead to a change in action. Regret is usually based on the consequences of these actions, rather than focusing on the sin itself. The tribe's focus is horizontal – directed at the oppressors around them. God, however, is more concerned about the “vertical” – their relationship with Him. This is why the prophet is reminding them of God's leadership over their history – out of Egypt, over the previous oppressors, and right now. If there was true “repentance” on the part of the Israelites, they were grasp the restored relationship with God, not looking at the past (sin and oppression), but focusing on the now. Regret is about us (how we are being hurt), while repentance is about God (restored relationship)!

#### **(4) Cycle Step Four: Judges 6:11 – 40 (The Call of Gideon), Judges 7:1 – 8:12 (The Defeat of the Midianites)**

THE CALL OF GIDEON – Similar to the difference in God's response to the cry of Israel, the call of Gideon (and his acceptance of the call) is a little out of the ordinary. The Lord sends an “angel” to speak to Gideon, son of Joash the Abiezrite (a part of the tribe of Manasseh), as he is beating out wheat, while hiding in a wine press “hole” to prevent the Midianites from seeing him. Gideon was literally trying to salvage food for himself and his family. This picture captures the level of oppression that the Israelites are under. Who is this angel? There are multiple examples of “angels” appearing to individuals throughout the Old Testament. The increasing tension in this conversation is the moving back in forth of referring to this divinely sent being as an “angel” and “Lord” throughout this call narrative. Some biblical scholars believe that this “angel” could be a special appearance of Jesus Christ prior to the New Testament. Other scholars believe that this angel is simply a messenger from God who has the authority to speak for God. Either way, Gideon's response to the angel reveals the true nature of his character.

The angel initially calls Gideon by saying, “The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior”. (Remember, Gideon is hiding in a wine press to stay out of view from the Midianites!) What was initially meant as a praise is quickly jumped on by Gideon about “the Lord” being present. The first objection made by Gideon, he places the blame on the tribes' troubles for the Lord's lack of help. (He forgot that it was the Israelites' actions that lead to this calamity.) God, instead, is working through the oppression to bring good to the Israelites. The angel tells Gideon to rise and go deliver Israel from the Midianites. The second objection

made by Gideon is his status within the tribe. Gideon is the poorest, both economically and socially, in one of the weakest clans of the less prominent Manasseh tribe. He is then reassured of God's presence with him as he goes. (The Lord will be Gideon's strength, not his own...remember this for later!)

Gideon then requires signs from God to "buy in" to what he is saying. He is really questioning whether this "messenger" is divine or not, and the call to lead the Israelites is from "God". Gideon continues to look at himself, instead of God's strength. Gideon prepares a sacrifice to God and asks the "messenger" to hang prove that he is who he says he is. The sacrifice of a young goat, unleavened bread, and broth is brought to the "angel" who tells Gideon to place the sacrifice on a rock. The angel touches the sacrifice on the rock with the end of his staff (imagery to Moses) and flames immediately consume it. The angel of the Lord then disappears. Aware that he has seen an angel of the Lord, face to face, Gideon realizes that most humans that see an angelic figure or God is immediately killed. While fearing for his life, God reassures Gideon that he is safe. Gideon erects an altar (similar to Jacob), "The Lord is Peace", to commemorate this encounter. Strengthened by the encounter, Gideon knows that the Lord is present and has not left the Israelites.

Gideon is then charged to pull down the altar of Baal that was built by his father. This action was a test of Gideon's faith! An act towards a Canaanite altar was considered a "political" crime (an attack on the political scheme and leadership), with the belief that it could bring punishment from the "gods". Gideon was challenged to not only tear down the altar, but also build an altar to God on its remnants, using some of the torn down wood to light the sacrifice of bulls (the bull was the common image for Baal). Aware of the implications, Gideon decides to complete this act at night instead of the light of day. (God was identifying the central problem – the Israelites' lack of faith and obedience. Before they could deal with the Midianites, they need to clean their own home!)

When the townspeople awoke and found the Baal altar destroyed, the Asherah pole cut down, and a new altar lying there, they wanted to find the culprit. Gideon is discovered as the instigator, and they go to his father Joash demanding he present his son for punishment/death. Joash, being the wise father, confronted the people with their "beliefs" – if Baal is real, let him deal with Gideon. Obviously, Baal does not intercede, and Gideon is given the second name, Jerubbab, meaning, "Let Baal contend against him".

The “Spirit of the Lord” descended on Gideon as he prepares for battle. He calls through his tribe for soldiers to assemble. He then calls out to the tribes of Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali to send their warriors as well, all in preparation for the Midianites and Amalekites gathering at the valley of Jezreel. (This location was the center of the agriculture hub for the entire region. Those who controlled this area controlled the economy for the region. Every major trade route traveled through this valley. This became of the location of the battlefield!) What may seem like confidence by Gideon again turns to uncertainty as he asks for another “divine” sign. First, he asks God to make a fleece wet during the night, without dampness around the ground. God answers. Gideon then asks God to allow the fleece to be dry the next morning, with the ground being damp. God again answers the challenge. (The first challenge – the wet fleece – could happen naturally during the night. Fleece absorbs water and it could be damp long after the sun had dried the ground. The opposite – a dry fleece – would reveal the nature of God. “Putting out fleeces” – a phrase that has been passed down through the years – is a poor method to make a decision! Instead, we should rely on God.) Some biblical scholars argue that Gideon was showing a lack of confidence and faith in God, demanding the additional signs. Other biblical scholars contend that he was seeking to understand the very nature of God, for example, control over nature. Whatever the case, God answered, Gideon’s faith grows stronger, and he is ready to lead.

**THE DEFEAT OF THE MIDIANITES** – God wants to insure that the Israelites place their faith in Him, not themselves. 32,000 soldiers arrive for battle, but God wants to reduce that number significantly. (Imagine Gideon’s reaction when God asks him to do this!) First, Gideon calls out to the soldiers and says if anyone is afraid, then go back home. This order is directly from the book of laws in Deuteronomy. The reason for this law is not to allow that “fear” to creep into the other soldiers’ minds. Two-thirds of the army – 22,000 soldiers – returned home, leaving 10,000 to fight.

The Lord then states that there are still too many. This time the Lord orders Gideon to take his soldiers to the water to get a drink. He commands Gideon to separate the men who “lap the water up” with their tongues and those who kneel and use their hands to drink. 300 lap the water with their tongues, while 9,700 drank the water using their hands. Some biblical scholars believe that

this test was a test of awareness. Those who used their hand could be more alert for their surroundings, while drinking with your tongue directly exposes yourself to attack. I feel this is a stretch! God commands Gideon to keep the 300 and send the rest home. The 300 troops then move into an area ready for battle, above the camp of Midian lying in the valley.

One would assume that the troops are ready to fight. However, God knew Gideon needed more reassurance. He orders Gideon and his servant Purah to sneak down to the Midianite camp to gauge the emotions of the enemies' army. The Midianite, Amalekite, and the "sons of the east" armies were described as numerous as "locusts". Their camels, the primary transportation for this marauding desert army, were as numerous as sands on the seashore. Gideon hears a dream recounted by one of the soldiers, of a "barley loaf" tumbling down the mountain destroying the Midianites and their tents. The soldier's friend interprets the dream as Gideon, a man of Israel, being the leader of the Israelites and lead by God to destroy the camp.

When Gideon hears the story, his confidence increases. No longer worried by the numbers of his enemy, he now puts his faith in God. He worships God (for the message!), and returns to camp to ready the troops for battle. Gideon divides the army into three groups of 100, giving each a trumpet and a pitcher with a torch inside. He commands them to surround the valley (from above) and to follow his lead. When he blows the trumpet, all should do the same. They are also called to break their pitchers, creating a blinding light above the encampment. This will create mass confusion for the Midianite soldiers, causing them to attack each other. The soldiers are called to exclaim "For the Lord and for Gideon". Even in this proclamation, Gideon is starting to take some credit for the battle, instead of it solely going to God.

The soldiers gathered at the beginning of the middle watch, around 10:00 pm. This would take place around the changing of the guard time. Three key advantages would take place. First, attacking at night would accommodate for the size disparity between the armies. The Israelites would look and sound larger than they really are. Second, attacking this way would prevent the use of camels by the Midianites, one of their strengths. The camels may have led to increased confusion within the camp, hearing the sounds and having many startled camels running around. Third, attacking at the change of the guard would have created one group of troops returning to their tents, while another is just waking up. A

watch was typically divided into three “four hour” watches, with a third of the army taking each. With the chaotic noise, those troops waking up would have emerged from their tents with “armed soldiers” coming their way (even though they did not realize it was their own soldiers). Increased chaos in the middle of the night was the strategy for victory. This attack was similar to Joshua’s attack on the city of Jericho in Joshua 2. The only key difference is Joshua had the troops proclaim, “The Lord has given you the city”, while Gideon takes some personal credit, “For the Lord and for Gideon.”

God proclaimed the victory and it happened. Without entering the camp itself, the noise and light created chaos for the Midianite troops. Many of the Midianite soldiers turned on themselves. The others fled in disarray towards the areas of Zererah and Tabbath. The 300 troops did not have to raise a sword – the victory was truly the Lord’s. The Israelites troops pursued those fleeing. Meanwhile, Gideon had asked the tribe of Ephraim to be ready along the escape route. Two leaders of the Midianite army, Oreb (which means “Raven”) and Zeeb (which means “Wolf”), were captured and beheaded by the awaiting tribe.

Gideon and the army of 300 pursued the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna. The tribe of Ephraim, however, even though they were asked to ambush the fleeing army, was not happy they were not invited to participate in the initial attack on Midian. They probably wanted “credit” and “honor”. (Also, they would have likely ignored Gideon’s call because of the prestige of their tribe in comparison to Gideon’s – and Gideon’s perceived weakness even among his tribe.) Being a good diplomat, Gideon states their achievement was greater than his tribe’s gain. Gideon and his army of 300 continue to pursue the two Midianite kings. Upon coming to the area of Succoth, he asks the city to provide bread to the weary soldiers. The city refuses, however, because the troops had not captured the kings yet. (The city knew that if the Midianites regrouped, they would return and bring wrath on anyone who provided help to their attackers.) Gideon responds by promising to return and “thrash your bodies with thorns”. The city of Peniel rejects helping them also, and a promised “tearing down of their tower” by Gideon upon his return.

For the first time, we are told the numbers of the Midianite army – 135,000 – compared to the 300 plus of Gideon. The Midianites were escaping to the familiar, the desert area where the nomads live. He attacked the camp

unsuspectingly and captured the two kings, routing the entire army. The battle was finally won!

### **(5) Cycle Step Five: Judges 8:13 – 32**

One would assume that the final step would be as spoken before, “there were \_\_\_\_\_ years of peace under Gideon”. However, this is not the case. Gideon, on his own accord, returns to Succoth and Peniel to punish their lack of help. After capturing a youth from Succoth, he discovers the leadership of the city, 77 total men. He punished the Succoth leadership with “thorns of the wilderness and briers” – humiliating! He then returns to Peniel and tears down the watchtower there, then killing the men of the city. Gideon’s wrath...

Gideon then questions the Midianite kings to determine some of their past discretions. From the conversation, we learn that these men had been responsible for the killing of Gideon’s brothers. Gideon states because of this, the kings would die. Gideon commands his oldest son, Jether, to draw his sword to kill the kings – as revenge. Out of fear because of his youth, Jether refuses. (Being killed by a boy would be the ultimate form of humiliation for the kings.) Gideon instead kills the two kings, taking the crescent ornaments (gold) from their camels’ necks.

The men of Israel then ask Gideon to become their king (and his sons and grandsons that follow). This is the first sign that the tribes recognize their need for a united leader. Based on Gideon’s increased confidence and his “personal” actions in the end, most would assume he would say “yes”. However, Gideon returns the focus (temporarily) back to God. If he said “yes”, this would be a king anointed by humans, not by the Lord. Instead, he asks soldiers to take a gold earring from their spoils and give it to him. The total gold equaled 1,700 shekels, along with all the other plunder from the kings. With the gold, Gideon made an “ephod” and placed it in his home city of Ophrah. (The high priest in the tabernacle at Shiloh, an indication that this location was God’s dwelling place, wore an ephod. On the ephod, two stones – the Ummin and Thummin – were used to receive “yes” and “no” answers from God.) With Gideon creating his own copy of an ephod, he was setting up his own hometown as a holy place of worship. Essentially, he wanted people to travel there, to him, to receive counsel and answer. Gideon was consolidating his power (even though he did not want to

be king!) The tribes obliged and they prostrated themselves at Gideon's city, similar to how they prostrated themselves before the false idols and other gods.

At this point, we are told the years of peace created by God through the judge Gideon – forty years. However, we are not done yet! Gideon is then said that he returned home finally. We are told that he had 70 sons as his direct descendants, for he had “many wives”. However, he had another son, Abimelech, through his concubine in Shechem. This son would tear Gideon's family apart and bring destruction to the tribes of Israel! (However, you have to wait until next week to find out the story!)

### **Questions to Reflect On...**

*In the story of Gideon, we see the “inner conflict” of wanting personal recognition or placing honor to God. Are there aspects of your life where you struggle with this “inner conflict”? How will God's gospel of grace help you deal with “your” successes?*

*How does it encourage you to remember that the “opposition” that you might be facing (or will face in the future) – especially towards your faith and obedience – is no match for the strength of God? How can we let that “encouragement” play out in our lives and reveal God to others?*

### **Next Week...**

**“Here Comes the Judge” – Session 6**

**Wednesday, October 28 6:30 PM**

**Focus – Abimelech, the “False” Judge          Judges 9:1-57**