

Sermon 5: Judges 6:1-32: The Conversion of Gideon

OUTLINE

Gospel of repentance
Gospel of peace

INTRODUCTION

My second favourite poem is a poem written by Francis Thompson called, The Hound of Heaven. The poem describes sinner running from God, but God persistently running them down. They would turn to all sorts of things to try and fill their hunger but God stripped them all away. As we come to Judges 6:1-32 we see God the patient and persistent evangelist pursuing and initiating His grace with Israel and Gideon. We come to a portion that I think describes the conversion of Gideon. There are a number of key gospel conversations in the scriptures and this is one of them. So often we find when God draws a sinner into a saving encounter with Him that the conversation focuses on key road blocks in their understanding which are resolved by God's grace. The rich young ruler had an encounter with Christ and his problem was that he thought he was good enough to get into heaven not realizing the idols of his heart which Christ then exposed. The Samaritan woman at the well was a life-style sinner whose life was driven by a deep thirst which Christ told her He could satisfy. Gideon is a syncretist who believes in God but worships Baal; he is living at a time when Israel is being harassed for her sins but instead of seeing his own and Israel's sins Gideon has a theodicy problem, he thinks God is not good because he is suffering. Gideon will have an encounter with God that will resolve this problem both for him and for Israel.

We are familiar with the cycle of judges by now. The people of God sin; God sends an oppressor; the people cry out; God raises up a deliverer; the land has rest. As we come to this cycle there are a few points of expansion, these details that deviate or embellish the typical cycle are important which help highlight what is important about the text before us. The two key differences are the two points that we will be looking at today. Firstly, when the people cry out God does not simply send a savior but rather a prophet to impress upon them the seriousness of their sin and the need for repentance. Secondly, the call of Gideon is the most complete and complex of all the judges. The details all revolve around what was likely the typical opinion of God and his ways during these times of suffering. Typically when people suffer they inevitably doubt God's goodness and purposes, Gideon is a typical example of this. But God is showing Israel that their sins have brought this trouble upon themselves; that their troubles do not mark God's absence and faithlessness but presence and covenant faithfulness. Gideon is a microcosm which shows that if Israel will put away their idols they will have God with them and be able to conquer the land as promised. As we look at God coming in grace to a sinning and undeserving people we will note that the gospel is a gospel of repentance and a gospel of peace.

Gospel of repentance

Our portion opens with a more detailed explanation of the plight of the people of Israel. V1-2, 'The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. ² And the hand of

Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds.' The enemies this time are the Midianites. The Midianites are descendants of Abraham and another of his wives, Keturah, Gen. 25:2. They were the ones who sold Joseph to the Egyptians, Gen. 37:25-36. They were in a good relationship with Israel for a while. They gave a home for Moses, and Moses' wife was also a Midianite, Ex. 2:15-22. Jethro Moses' father-in-law was even a helper in organizing Israel, Ex. 18. It was not until Numbers 25:17 that we see a change in the relationship. They entered Canaan with Israel as a nomadic people but not all integrated with Israel nor worshipped YHWH. Heber the Kenite who was in league with Sisera in Judges 4:11 was a Midianite. We see that the Israelites suffered such terrible affliction they were reliving in caves. There was a coalition of semi-nomadic people that would gather to plunder the harvests of Israel. After seven years of this they could take no more, v3-6, 'For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. ⁴They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. ⁵For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in. ⁶And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to the Lord.'

Now at this point the Lord has usually responded with the raising up of a deliverer to the cries of Israel. We have noted that the crying out of Israel is one of distress and not repentance, yet God being compassionate has responded to deliver anyway. But not this time. God sends a prophet to bring His word before He sends a savior, v7-10, 'When the people of Israel cried out to the Lord on account of the Midianites, ⁸the Lord sent a prophet to the people of Israel. And he said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I led you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of slavery. ⁹And I delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. ¹⁰And I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell.' But you have not obeyed my voice."

The prophet preaches God's grace to the Israelites, he reminds them of God's many kindnesses to them. God led them up out of Egypt by a mighty hand; He released them from slavery, not just once by the Egyptians but more than once in Canaan as well. He gave them a land flowing with milk and honey. He entered into a covenant with them where He will be their God and they will be His people, but they must not worship other gods. All of this they did not heed; they were ungrateful for past grace; did not keep their covenant commitments; and did the very opposite of what they were told and replaced God with idols. And here they are crying out to God, they are suffering, God could answer them and send another deliverer for them to simply do the same thing all over again. God sends a prophet to talk about sin.

These Israelites had been practicing emergency religion, crying out to God for happiness not holiness. God now uses the loss of their earthly security and provisions to highlight what their sin has done. Their suffering is not a failure on God's part to be good and fulfill His promises and be faithful; it is because Israel has been sinful and violated the covenant that they are suffering. God in His mercy draws back the curtain on what has caused this situation and shows that

repentance can help put things right. An evolutionary worldview that teaches that evil just happens and is inevitable and cannot be reversed is a sad worldview. The fact that sin has brought our sufferings upon us, that God who is holy is active in bringing us to an awareness of our sins to prompt our repentance. The fact that there is a God who is Holy but also gracious and is willing to forgive sins and reverse the self-caused harm we bring upon ourselves because of sin is a tremendously gracious thing. Imagine the worldview of karma was true that ultimately you have to pay for every sin in this life or the next in your next reincarnation. No, this is the good news. Although it may start off sounding bad that we are sinners who deserve to be punished, God is gracious and is willing to forgive those who repent of their sins. In His kindness He confronts us in our sins that we might repent. When we speak of sin to the world we are not trying to leverage shame as a political tool to maintain the status quo; we are seeking to reconcile sinners to God, we are seeking to help sinners avoid the worse judgement that will result if they do not repent. When we like this prophet speak of sin it is to produce godly sorrow that leads to repentance. Like Paul, like this prophet we confront sin not merely to make people feel bad but that they may repent, turn from their sin and be reconciled to God avoiding His judgement, 2 Cor. 7:9-10, 'As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.'

Gospel of peace

V11, 'Now the angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth at Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites.' Hebrews 11:32 lists Gideon among those who did mighty things by faith, but this is not how his story begins. I remember a sermon by a Pentecostal preacher who claimed that God chose Gideon because he saw some smarts in him. Look at how smart he is, beating out wheat in a winepress to avoid the crop being stolen. Sadly this translates into, God only uses smart people, but this is not what we see in the portion before us. What we have here is a man whose father is a major sponsor of Baal, he is a syncretist, he believes in God and probably does some casual worship stuff, but he is also a worshipper of Baal. I think Gideon is a good parallel to the Christianized Westerner, there is enough Sunday School knowledge to know some of the basic facts, but there is no true knowledge of God's holiness, love or His Word. There is a basic distrust and doubt towards God, and all the while there are other gods that are being served, in the case of the West the gods of materialism; lust; self-identity; humanism, etc. We are not looking at God finding a good man among men and using him to do great things, but in His grace coming to a man who was not good and making a man of faith of him. This is not a story about the triumph of the human spirit, or human ingenuity, or chutzpa; but God's grace that takes a faithless man and turns him into a man of faith.

Gideon is a fearful faithless person who God comes to and teaches. God speaks to him through the Angel of the Lord, most likely a Christophany. He speaks with irony, because Gideon is not strong or brave, and prophetically indicating what Gideon can do if God is with him. V12, 'And the angel of the LORD appeared to him and said to him, "The LORD is with you, O mighty man of valor."' Gideon is not aware of who he is speaking to, we see that he uses the typical polite

address of 'sir'/Lord in v13. Gideon then exposes his ignorance asking about the presence of God in their midst prompted from the statement in v12, 'The LORD is with you.' V13, 'And Gideon said to him, "And Gideon said to him, "Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has forsaken us and given us into the hand of Midian.' Here we see Gideon's Sunday school teaching coming through. Ironically the very thing Gideon says God is not doing He is presently doing with Gideon. The commentaries point out the similarities between the calling of Moses and Gideon as a deliberate comparison showing how God is faithful in hearing and delivering. We must say a few things here about Gideon's view of suffering. Gideon like so many today look at the suffering in the world and instead of realizing the connection between sin and suffering they blame God. Sin causes suffering through the fall; through the sinful things other people do to us; through cause and effect of our own foolishness; of God's just and holy providential pressure to use suffering to draw us to Himself. It is amazing to me how Gideon, who lives in a house that has an idol to Baal can accuse God of being unfaithful while literally being unfaithful to God. Gideon is a picture of the way in which we do not see our own sins, our own faults, and how in our unbelief we would rather paint that God who cannot sin as a sinner than ourselves. Here is proof that we are self-deceiving and are not honest about our sins. We see that when life is hard because our comforts are attacked we attack God. There is a reminder here to look at our own sin and not attribute sin to God when things go badly. The Lord pushes Gideon towards the point He is trying to get at, that Gideon is going to be the Lord's deliverer, and will be with Him to make Him strong and succeed. God tells Gideon to get going and deliver, v14, 'And the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?"' God is not suggesting that Gideon is more heroic and stronger than other men, the strength would be the Lord's strength who goes with him. Gideon makes excuses based on looking at himself and not God, v15, 'And he said to him, "Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.'" This is probably a false modesty on Gideon's part, we will see that he is able to rouse 10 servants in the night to help him in tearing down the idols. Gideon isn't quite getting the message that the secret ingredient is God, so God points it out. V16, 'And the LORD said to him, "But I will be with you, and you shall strike the Midianites as one man.'" God uses weak instruments. When God commands us to do anything He always provides where He commands, and the provision is His own presence. We have been called to the most impossible task, making disciples of all nations. We can't change hearts, we barely get on with people from other cultures, how can we make united churches of people from all nations? We can't, but God can and He is with us in our task. When we are weak He is strong, our inability is never a sufficient excuse to not do what God asks of us. Gideon doesn't know who he is dealing with and so asks for a sign, v17, 'And he said to him, "If now I have found favor in your eyes, then show me a sign that it is you who speak with me. 18 Please do not depart from here until I come to you and bring out my present and set it before you." And he said, "I will stay till you return.'" The Lord uses this exchange not to rebuke Gideon for not recognising that he was talking to the Angel of the Lord. No the point of this interchange is to remind Gideon of the vital lesson of faith, when we are weak He is strong, and if He goes with us nothing can stand against us. This is the lesson we need to learn from Christ's own words in the Great Commission that He will be with us to the end of the age to help us complete our task.

Gideon is willing to listen and goes about preparing a meal. A whole goat, unleavened bread made from 22 litres of flour, and a pot of broth. The angel uses this to make an offering to the Lord, by miraculously causing fire and disappearing, v19-21, 'So Gideon went into his house and prepared a young goat and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and the broth he put in a pot, and brought them to him under the terebinth and presented them. 20 And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened cakes, and put them on this rock, and pour the broth over them." And he did so. 21 Then the angel of the LORD reached out the tip of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened cakes. And fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened cakes. And the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight.' Gideon thought he was having an ordinary conversation and suspected it could be the Angel of the LORD, we see that he suspects this in v17 where he says 'if it is you who speaks with me.' But now it is all confirmed. Imagine it, someone comes claiming to speak for God; but speaks like the Angel of the LORD who appeared in the burning bush to Moses bleeding in and out of the first person when speaking, v16, 'But I will be with you.' Gideon fears that he will die, v22, 'Then Gideon perceived that he was the angel of the Lord. And Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face." Gideon knew that no one could see the face of God and live, Ex. 33:20 and as a result is deeply fearful that he will die, v23. But then he hears these words, v23, 'But the Lord said to him, "Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die." 3 powerful statements speaking of Gideon's standing before God. I believe that this is Gideon's conversion experience and here we see Gideon's reconciliation to God. He has seen His sin in the eyes of a holy God, like Isaiah who cried out 'woe is me I am undone,' Gideon cries out. But God in His grace does not simply terrify this sinner but ministers His grace to Him and speaks peace not war; he calls him to put away his terror; and He assures him that he will not die. What an experience. Imagine the emotional rollercoaster of this day, it began with fear of the Midianites and ended with a fear of God; it began with accusations of God and His goodness and it ended with Gideon deeply aware of his own unfaithfulness before this God. He was moved from not thinking about God; to doubting God; to being confronted with the overwhelming reality of God and his sin; now with the grace of God. How does one respond? Gideon responds with worship, v24, 'Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and called it, The LORD Is Peace. To this day it still stands at Ophrah, which belongs to the Abiezrites.' Here is a man who has tasted the gospel, he knows peace and his worship is a testimony to the God he has experienced, 'The LORD is peace.' YHWH Shalom. Every Christian who is truly saved knows this same experience, Rom. 5:1, 'Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.' When we put our trust in Christ, God the judge rules in our favour counting us as righteous as His Son, and the war of hostility between is ended. We are at peace with God; He is at peace with us; peace is the overflowing experience of our hearts; and peace is what we pursue in all our relationships.

Before God leads Gideon into battle to fight the Midianites, He gives Gideon more important instruction which relates to the removal of idolatry. The removal of Midianite oppression is not as serious as removing the Baal worship from his own town. Gideon has to remove the idols his family has served, destroying them and worship the Lord, v25-27, 'That night the LORD said to him, "Take your father's bull, and the second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it 26 and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of the stronghold here, with stones laid in

due order. Then take the second bull and offer it as a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah that you shall cut down." 27 So Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had told him. But because he was too afraid of his family and the men of the town to do it by day, he did it by night.' A bull is used to topple the altar of Baal which was often represented as a bull. True conversion includes true repentance. What we see here in Gideon is to be a microcosm of what needs to happen in Israel. More important than the lifting of oppression is the restoration of true worship.

The men of the town wanted to kill Gideon but an unlikely defender in the sponsor of Baal worship his father was an instrument of the Lord to defend him, v28-32, 'When the men of the town rose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was broken down, and the Asherah beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar that had been built. 29 And they said to one another, "Who has done this thing?" And after they had searched and inquired, they said, "Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing." 30 Then the men of the town said to Joash, "Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has broken down the altar of Baal and cut down the Asherah beside it." 31 But Joash said to all who stood against him, "Will you contend for Baal? Or will you save him? Whoever contends for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down." 32 Therefore on that day Gideon was called Jerubbaal, that is to say, "Let Baal contend against him," because he broke down his altar.'

What do we learn from the call of Gideon? We learn that God is gracious in using suffering to call sinners to their senses; that the sin confronting message of God's word is a mercy to restore us to Himself; that God is patient with stubborn and accusatory sinners who is willing to pursue and make peace with us. We learn that we have this peace through Christ and that all true conversion includes repentance and a tearing down of the idols that we used to serve in the place of God.