

Judges – Part 3

Rinse and Repeat – Judges 6-9

The former judges Ehud, Shamgar, and Deborah each took their turn in delivering Israel from the Cycle of Sin. Ehud and his army destroyed 10,000 men of valor before they could return over the Jordan, and Shamgar single-handedly killed 600 Philistines with only an ox goad for a weapon. Two women stand out in Israel's history: Deborah, who encouraged Barak, the army's leader, to obey God. He led his army to victory over 10,000 men and their chariots until none were left. Jael stood for Israel by killing Sisera, the captain of King Jabin's army. God shows by using these women that He values them as they use the gifts He has given them to serve Him.

For Israel's obedience in following the deliverer God gave them, the land had peace. As usual, as soon as the leader died, "The children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD." After the death of Deborah, the LORD delivered them into the hands of Midian. (Judg. 6:1).

Midianites were descendants of Abraham and his wife Keturah, whom he married after Sarah died. (Gen. 25:2). Moses had married Zipporah, a Midianite, when he fled from Pharaoh. (Ex. 2:15). Hobab (Jethro), Moses' father-in-law, had helped to guide Israel through the wilderness. (Numb. 10:29). Their relationship began to sour when Midian joined with the Moabites and hired Balaam to curse Israel. (Numb. 22).

When Israel fell into idolatry and sexual sin with the Moabite women (Numb. 25:15-18), a prominent woman, Kozbi, was involved. The Lord had told Moses to "Smite the Midianites for they vex you with their wives." Israel attacked them in meeting out this command; five kings and Balaam were killed. (Numb. 31:8).

Now, Midian has been oppressing Israel for the past seven years, almost destroying it. They have taken everything and "left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass." Year after year, the people had planted crops, but when it was time to harvest, hordes of Midianites and Amalekites, so many that they seemed like locusts in number, descended on their fields. What they couldn't take with them, they destroyed. Everything seemed hopeless. They are forced to hide in dens and caves for protection, their loved ones are going hungry, and their land feels more like a prison than a home. Finally, starving and in misery, Israel cries out to God, and God, in His love and mercy, sends someone to save them. (Judg. 6:4-8).

What took them so long to cry out to God? Because they were a lot like us. They looked at the trial as a punishment, when, in reality, God allowed the trials as a gift of grace—because it could have been a lot worse! God loves us too much to let us keep living in sin. He always designs our troubles for our good, but we forget that part, don't we? Israel waited until there appeared to be no other option, and when they couldn't take it any longer, they decided that God was their last resort!

I. An Unlikely Deliverer

However, before the LORD sent a deliverer, He first sent a prophet to remind Israel of His faithfulness in delivering Israel from bondage, and in going before them to drive out their enemies so they could inherit the Promised Land. He also reminded them that "You have not obeyed God's voice." God wanted to extend His compassion to this

generation, but they continued to rebel. *Sometimes, God uses tough times to get our attention and bring us back to Him.* To God, every experience that He gives us is a test; every trial is tailor-made to draw us closer to God.

Then, He sends His angel to get the attention of the next judge He has chosen. The angel sat under an oak tree watching while Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, attempting to hide it from the Midianites. Normally, wheat would be threshed in the air where the wind could blow away the chaff, but Gideon may have tried that before and got all his hard work taken away! So, here he is, hiding in the winepress, filled with frustration, discouragement, and fear. This grain was the firstfruit, but instead of sacrificing it to God, he was thinking of his family's hungry bellies instead of asking God to provide for him.

The angel called out to Gideon, "The LORD *is with thee*, thou mighty man of valor" (Judg. 6:12). We can only imagine how startling that must have been! He may even have turned around to see who the angel was talking to! "Who, me?" Of all the things that God could have said, His first priority was to comfort Gideon by reminding him that he was not alone. The Great I AM was there with him, just like He is with each of us as we go through frightening circumstances.

Then, He calls Gideon a "mighty warrior." He wasn't acting like it as he hid in fear, nor did he feel that he was. When God told Gideon that He had chosen him to deliver Israel from the hand of the Midianites, he responded, "How will I save Israel? Behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house!" He downplayed his worth and saw himself as a failure.

God reminded Gideon that it wasn't through his own strength that he would succeed. "Go in this thy might [Go in the strength that you have... because it was God who was sending him." Because God was sending Gideon, He would equip him for the job He had chosen for him to do. (Rom. 8:37).

We would probably label him as a reluctant, fearful individual, but God saw his future potential and strength through God's power. God saw past Gideon's immediate circumstances, fears, and insecurities. How great the contrast is between our view of ourselves and our circumstances and how God sees us. "Surely *I will be with thee*, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man." (Judg. 6:16). Not only was God with Gideon in that moment, but He would be with him as he obeyed God's directions.

Despite God's reassurance, Gideon was hesitant. He asked for multiple signs to confirm that it was truly God who was speaking to him. But God is loving and patient as He waits for Gideon to take his first step of faith. (Judg. 6:17-18). God understands our doubts and fears. He meets us where we are and waits for us to trust Him as we struggle with uncertainty.

As Gideon reflects on what he has heard, he requests the Angel to stay there until he has brought him a present. The Angel agrees. Gideon goes and prepares a kid along with unleavened cakes of flour and broth and brings it to Him. The Angel instructs Gideon to lay them on a rock and pour the broth over it. After Gideon obeys, the angel reached out with His staff and touched the offering. Fire rose out of the rock and consumed the meal...and the angel departed.

Suddenly, it dawns on Gideon just who he has been talking to; it was God! God's priorities now became his priorities. He built an altar and called it Jehovah-shalom,

meaning “The Lord is Peace.” Peace is not just defined as an absence of conflict, but as the presence of God in our lives. Do you have God’s peace?

II. *Passing the Tests*

Sometimes we think that God saves us, and we’re immediately ready to do battle, but sometimes soldiers need to remove things from their lives so they can focus and be effective. Before Gideon can be effective, he must remove the idols of his life. God starts by asking him to clean up his own area before tackling the world. On Gideon’s father’s property, there was a grove and an idol of Baal in it. Apparently, his father must have been the caretaker of the area. God told him to take his father’s bullock, the second (or fat) one, and use it to destroy the altar of Baal and cut down the trees of the grove. He was to build an altar to the Lord, using the trees, and sacrifice the second bullock on the altar. *Before God can use us effectively, the idols of our lives need to be removed.*

Gideon takes ten of his servants with him to do what God has asked. He was afraid of the others in his father’s household and the men of the city, so he worked through the night to accomplish the task. When morning came and the people saw what had happened, they became angry and threatened to kill Gideon. Standing up for God certainly got attention! Gideon made a stand, and his father stood by him. “Will ye plead for Baal? Will ye save him? He that will plead for him, let *him* be put to death while it is morning. If he be a god, let him plead for himself, because one hath cast down his altar!” (Judg. 6:24-32). Gideon’s name was changed to Jerubbaal at this time. *Standing up for God is not easy, but when God’s hand is in it and you are obedient to Him, God will use your faith.*

Now, the Midianites, Amalekites, and other nations of the east were getting ready to make their annual raid on Israel’s harvest when the Spirit of the LORD came over Gideon and told him that He wanted him to lead Israel to war with Midian and bring peace. (Judg. 7). As Gideon begins to put together a fighting force, these same men who had threatened to kill him would be the first to support him. Other tribes followed their example and joined them in preparation to fight Midian.

Gideon’s faith was beginning to grow, but he needed reassurance that he was on the right path. He asked God to show him two additional signs: let dew fall on a piece of wool (fleece) but not anywhere else, and when that happened, the next night Gideon asked for the fleece to be dry and everything else wet. After God performed those miracles, Gideon took up the position of judge and prepared for battle.

III. *Gaining Victory*

After Gideon received confirmation with the signs from the fleece, 32,000 men were gathered and ready to attack...but God said, “Wait a minute! The people that are with thee are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against Me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me...Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead.” So, 22,000 returned home, leaving 10,000.

God still wasn’t happy about the numbers. He had Gideon reduce his ranks again by dividing the men who drank at the stream. They were separated by whether they drank like a dog and lapped up the water or whether they scooped the water up in their hands and drank. God chose the 300 who lapped up the water, “By the three

hundred men that lapped will I save you...let the rest go home.” The 300 who stayed picked up food and their trumpets, ready to fight.

Three hundred men seemed like an impossible disadvantage. Gideon would be forced to rely entirely on God. God knew that this would be a fearful thing for Gideon to do, especially at such a young stage of his new belief. He told Gideon that if he feared, take his servant and go listen to what the Midianites were saying. So, Gideon and his servant went to the enemy encampment three miles away to spy on them.

The enemy was spread across the valley like locusts; their camels covered the area like sand on a seashore. There were about 135,000 Midianites camped there; that's 450 Midianites to every Israelite! How were 300 men going to succeed against so many? But then, Gideon began to listen to the Midianite soldiers' conversation. One had dreamed about a loaf of barley tumbling into a Midianite tent and knocking it over and overturning it.” Another man replied, “This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon...for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host.” After hearing this, Gideon first worshipped before returning to his men.

Gideon divided the 300 men into three companies. Each man carried a sword, a pitcher, light, and a trumpet. This may seem like a lot to take into battle, but swords would not have been carried in their hand, but in a scabbard by the soldier's side. The pitchers would have been shattered as the attack began, so it would have freed the men to wave the torch in their left hand and hold the trumpet in their right hand, just as Judges 7:20 says. Also, there is no evidence that Gideon's men struck a single blow with their swords; they did not need to do that.

Gideon's men quietly surrounded the Midianites. In the middle watch of the night, about midnight, when most of the army would have been fast asleep, Gideon's company blew their trumpets, broke their pitchers, and cried, “The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.” Confusion reigned in the camp of Midian! In their panic, they began swinging their swords at anything that moved in the darkness, not realizing that they were killing their own soldiers! “And the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow.” They literally destroyed themselves!

About 15,000 soldiers and two kings were all that remained of the 135,000 that had originally come against Israel. They had escaped, but Gideon did not let them get away. Apparently, those men who had been sent away because God said there were too many of them to fight had not left the area. Gideon sent runners to gather them men and send them after the fleeing Midianites to cut off their escape routes to the Jordan River before they could cross it and escape Israel.

IV. Finishing the Job

Unfortunately, as with any great victory, there are always critics. No matter what you do or how good you do it, there are always those who feel like they must tear down what you are doing for the Lord. The men of Ephraim, who lived just south of Manasseh, were upset that they hadn't been called to help fight. Instead of an angry response, Gideon recognized their effort. Capturing and killing the two princes, Oreb and Zeeb, was just as important as what the others had done. They couldn't do anything better than that! Although Gideon's army had quantity, the Ephraimites had quality. He diffused the situation. (Judg. 7:23-8:4).

As for Gideon himself, he would not rest until he had killed the remaining enemy kings, Zebah and Zalmunna. To him, they weren't just Midianite leaders; they had killed his brothers! (Judg. 8:18-19). As they pursued these kings, his 300 men became faint from hunger. As they passed through the city of Succoth, Gideon requested bread from them, but they doubted he would be successful and refused to give the needed supplies for his army. They feared that helping them would cause repercussions from Midian when Gideon's mission failed. The men of Penuel refused as well.

Though they were greatly outnumbered, Gideon didn't give up. When he had succeeded, he returned to punish the leaders of the Israelite cities with thorns and briars from the wilderness for refusing to help. (Judg. 8:4-21). He then killed the kings who had killed his brothers. This outstanding victory caused Israel to want a king to rule over them so they could be like the other nations. Gideon was the logical choice, but he refused. "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you" (Judg. 8:23).

Despite his refusal to be Israel's king, Gideon tended to follow a lifestyle pattern that was typical of kings in neighboring nations. He built up a large household with many wives, concubines, and children. Although Gideon continued to exercise some leadership in Israel, he was not as great a leader in peace as he had been in war.

Although Gideon's time as judge had begun well, the pendulum began to tilt even further away from God into an even greater downward spiral. As Aaron had once done, Gideon collected the golden jewelry from the Ishmaelites, the purple clothing of the kings of Midian, and the chains from their camels' necks. Gideon made an ephod from the gold that was intended to honor God for the victory. However, it soon led to idolatry and moral failure. The people went "a whoring after it" (Judg. 8:24-27).

This phrase, "a whoring after it" is a common form of speech when idolatry is practiced. The whole Jewish nation is represented, as are believers today, as being united to God as a wife is to her husband. When that relationship is broken by worshipping in an idolatrous way, it is considered an act of whoredom. It breaks the covenant just as adultery does between a man and his wife. God calls Himself the husband, and these idolatries are acts of whoredom, adultery, and fornication.

After being subdued, Midian never again bothered Israel. The country was at peace for the next forty years. When Gideon died, the people easily slipped back into Baal worship. In their security and prosperity, they forgot the God who had saved them and were again thrown into chaos. They showed no kindness to the house of Jerubbaal (Gideon), even though he had shown it to the people.

The family of Gideon hit a low point when his son Abimelech killed all 69 of his brothers and tried to take the position held by Gideon. (Judg. 9). Only Jotham, the youngest, was left because he hid himself after delivering a prophecy concerning Abimelech's end. Abimelech is often excluded from the list of judges because of his disgraceful, short-lived reign, but he does occupy an entire chapter and conforms to the book's overall pattern of society's decline into sinful ruin.

Abimelech set himself up as king and reigned for three years. God allowed a spirit of ill will and betrayal to come between the men of Shechem and Abimelech as punishment for his actions. They dealt treacherously with him. When Abimelech found out what

was happening, he captured and killed the people, destroyed the city, and “sowed it with salt.” This was a custom that cursed the city with permanent barrenness.

After Shechem, Abimelech went on to Thebez, where all the inhabitants were hiding inside a tower. He attempted to storm the tower to do the same to them, but a woman dropped a millstone on his head, fracturing his skull. Too embarrassed to be slain by a woman, he asked his armorbearer to stab him with his sword instead. God’s vengeance was fulfilled on Abimelech and Shechem, and Jotham’s prophecy was fulfilled.

After Abimelech’s death, Tola, a man of Issachar, judged Israel for 23 years. Following his time, Jair, a Gileadite, judged Israel for 22 years. After he died, Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord, serving Baalim, Ashtaroth, and the gods of Syria, Zidon, Moab, Ammon, and the Philistines. This section of former judges concludes when Israel again forsakes the Lord and stops serving Him. In His anger, the Lord sold Israel into the hands of the Philistines and Ammonites for the next 18 years.

Conclusion:

Repeatedly, Israel repeats the cycle of sin. Through the life of Gideon, God remains in control even though His instructions don’t always make sense. Some things require extraordinary faith, but when we obey, it can lead to a miraculous victory. At other times, God may strip away what *you* think you need so you can trust Him fully.

When you feel unprepared or overwhelmed, remember that God is preparing you for *His* victory. God may ask us to take giant leaps of faith that seem radical to us, but we must place our trust in His perfect will. Strength and valor don’t come from within our own selves, but from trusting in God’s power and presence. Gideon is a powerful reminder that when God calls us, He also equips and empowers us even during the times of our doubts and struggles. God’s strength is perfected in our weakness, His peace is present even in chaos, and His victory is assured when we step out in faith and obedience.

Don’t short-change yourself when God calls you to do something for Him. He is looking to glorify Himself through people fully dependent on Him. Although He doesn’t need us at all, He invites us to join Him in doing His will. When we do, we reap the benefits, and He gets the glory!

Can we say like Paul, “And He [God] said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong” (II Cor. 12:9-10).

A Downward Spiral (Judges Part 4)

- 1)** Read Judges 12-16. As you read, continue to fill in the details on the “Judges of Israel” chart and the location and reference of the judge on the map.
- 2)** Continue to highlight all phrases “And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord” in the same way you did last time.
- 3)** When Israel cries unto the Lord, are they repenting of their sin or just asking God for help? Defend your answer.
- 4)** What is true repentance?
- 5)** What rash promise did Jephthah make to God? What was the result? Did he honor his promise? Would such a sacrifice have pleased God?
- 6)** What were the rules of a Nazarite vow?
- 7)** Describe the personality of Samson. How did this help or hinder his time as judge?
- 8)** Why do you think Samson used riddles?

Conclusion:

In the book of Judges, we find some have stood out and been highlighted by God. Others have had only a few sentences written about them. Although they were remembered and impacted Israel, they were not as significant as some others. One such seemingly insignificant judge is Abdon. Judges 12:13-15 records, he was a Pirathonite who had 40 sons and 30 nephews who rode on ass colts. He judged Israel 8 years, and he died and was buried in Pirathon in the land of Ephraim, in the mount of the Amalekites.

At first glance, this verse may seem unimportant, no more than a transition of history. But it captures crucial insights into legacy, remembrance, and the way we handle our journey through life. According to the context, it was a tumultuous time for Israel. They struggled with both internal and external challenges and threats. People were unstable in their following of God which led to cycles of sin. But here was Abdon, not well known or celebrated like some, but served in a leadership role that speaks of faithfulness in a quiet, ordinary way of life.

Abdon's identity is rooted in his lineage and suggests that his actions and choices had a lasting impression on his family and community. His life was not a life of fame and recognition but one of faithfulness for eight years. His name means "servile, or serving," reflecting a character of humility and dedication, an inheritance passed down through generations. Although he faced challenges and adversities with the Amalekites, often considered enemies of Israel, he served and left a legacy of faith, hope, and resilience.

What legacy are you creating in your community, family, or workplace? Our lives will echo in the passing of time whether for good, or bad. Life teaches us that every act of faithfulness counts. It is not the size of our accomplishments that matter, but the intention of our hearts and impact of our deeds. We must have a life with the purpose of glorifying God, not in comparison to others, but in the pursuit of that which God has placed before us. How will you be remembered? How will you adjust your thinking?

"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us" (Heb. 12:1).