



***Becoming Fully Devoted Followers  
by Studying the Followers Before Us***

**WEEK 12  
GIDEON**

**MARCH 19-25, 2007**

<b>DAY</b>	<b><i>THROUGH THE BIBLE</i></b>	<b>ABBREVIATED STUDY</b>
<b>Monday</b>	Judges 4-5, Psalm 56	Judges 2:11-25, Psalm 56
<b>Tuesday</b>	Judges 6-8, Psalm 57	Judges 6:11-32, Psalm 57
<b>Wednesday</b>	Judges 9-10, Psalm 58	Judges 6:36-40 & 7:1-8, Psalm 58
<b>Thursday</b>	Judges 11-12, Psalm 59	Judges 7:9-23, Psalm 59
<b>Friday</b>	Judges 13-16, Psalm 60	Judges 8:22-35, Psalm 60

**READ**

Judges 2:11-25

Psalms 56

**REFLECT**

For the next two weeks we will be reading in the book of Judges. This book describes the emergence of a series of individuals known as judges who help rule Israel for a short period. The judges have some judicial roles, but their main contribution is military, leading Israel in pushing back the encroachments of neighboring peoples.

But Judges also provides an interpretation of this cycle of peace and war, relating it to cycles of Israel's obedience to and straying from her God. Our passage today from Judges 2 is the programmatic statement of this cycle, and it gives the events of the book an overarching context. Each judge is raised up by God to deliver Israel from a particular threat, but the deliverance doesn't last, mainly because the each judge has influence only within his or her lifetime, and there is no system in place for a continuous government or the regular transfer of authority. Moreover, the judges are more and more disappointing, and later in the book we find the repeated observation that "In those days there was no king in Israel, but everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (17:6; 18:1; and 21:25, the final verse). Eventually the ad hoc leadership of the judges will be replaced by a hereditary kingship, in order (and this an important point) to deal with the very frustrating inability of the people of God to discipline themselves in the service of their Lord.

But in the meantime the book of Judges has in it some of the most exciting stories in the Bible, and some of the most unforgettable personalities. One of the earlier judges, Deborah, is given military leadership despite the fact that she is a woman, and another woman eliminates the opposing king with her knowledge of what can be done

with a glass of milk and a hammer (4:17-22). Gideon's and Sampson's victories capture the imagination of Sunday schools generation after generation. Seminary students are warned to pursue a calling on some other basis than the material prospect of "ten shekels and a shirt" (17:10). And scholars debate whether this book gives us the only example of the Lord accepting human sacrifice (11:30-35). A chaotic time indeed.

The downward spiral of the spiritual and social health of Israel represents a theme that extends throughout the Old Testament, from the grumbling in the wilderness to the Babylonian captivity of the last kings. For even the kingship will not be able to reverse the disobedience of each generation. What is the answer to this deeply frustrating – even infuriating – element of the story of Israel? Here again we as Christians can see an even bigger picture: the failure of Israel is the demonstration of the failure of all humans to be able to live up to the best of what they know. The answer is not to be found in merely human striving, but finally in the descent of God into the human world to take upon Himself the sinful nature of humankind, and to break the power of sin upon the cross. In Paul's understanding, the giving of Moses' Law resulted in deeper knowledge of the hold that sin has on us. Thus "the Law became our tutor to lead us to Christ" (Gal. 3:24). As we see in Israel and in ourselves the depth of the problem, we are willing to accept the solution.

**RESPOND**

It is a relief to know that cycles of misfortune in our lives are not to be read as God's shifting attitude toward us. We know He loves us, consistently and personally, because He sent His Son to die for us to release us from futility. We can freely love and obey in return.

**PRAY**

"Thou has delivered my soul from death, and my feet from stumbling, so that I may walk before God in the land of the living." Psalm 56:13

**READ**

Judges 6:11-32

Psalm 57

**REFLECT**

Today we begin the story of Gideon, which we will explore the rest of this week. In the cycle of rebellion so characteristic of Judges, Israel has disobeyed and been given by the Lord into seven years of conquest by the Midianites and other peoples of the great desert to the east of Jordan. Our chapter today recounts in great detail the call of Gideon, and the steps he takes as he moves toward leadership and dramatic victory.

The angel of the Lord (also called “the Lord,” v.16) meets Gideon in the course of his workday, and summons him to deliver Israel from the enemy. Gideon is hesitant, and requires assurances, but eventually obeys the instructions he is given to make a stand against Baal and for the Lord. As his action is recognized by others, his reputation grows, and they are willing to join him in battle.

It has been noticed that this story has many echoes of the account of the Exodus. The Midianites are like a plague of locusts (as in Egypt) but the Lord is the One who delivered Israel from Egypt (vv. 5, 8-9). As with Moses and the burning bush, so Gideon under his father’s tree expresses his doubts about the call (vv. 15, 17). Supernatural signs are granted to ensure that this is the Lord (vv. 21, 36-40). All in all, we are led to expect the return of a great leader “like Moses,” with equally great results.

But if so, we will be disappointed, for there is much irony in this chapter as well. The great sweep of epic drama in the background contrasts painfully with the imperfections of the man in the foreground. The angel of the Lord addresses Gideon as a “mighty warrior,” but he is

threshing his wheat on the hopelessly inadequate wine press, rather than at the more exposed threshing floor, so as to hide from the enemy. We can envision a Hollywood double-take: “Who, me?” Commanded to pull down and burn the local image of Baal, which we’re told belonged to his father, he does so, but “by night” (v. 27). When the leaders of the city demand an explanation, we hear nothing from Gideon; it is his father who steps in to defend him (v. 31). Only when the battle is about to be joined does Gideon step up and show real courage (as we will see tomorrow).

The call of Gideon, then, is really about what happens to a whole town, and then the tribe and the nation, as the Lord begins to call for renewed devotion and fresh courage. “It takes a village” to help Gideon respond. But it’s even more about the ability of the Lord to intervene and to initiate new measures that will bring change and blessing to the people as a whole. If Sunday school has left us with an impression of Gideon as a solo terminator, this chapter reminds us that the Lord is the real hero, and the people of God as a whole are the target of His blessings.

**RESPOND**

It is often said that our culture, and the stories it tells, is better at instigating solo heroism than teamwork. But our culture can also witness to the fact that teamwork leads to the bigger achievements. As Christians we might do well to remind ourselves of the values of team participation, especially as our God heads the team.

**PRAY**

“I will give thanks to Thee, O Lord, among the peoples. I will sing praises to Thee among the nations. For Thy lovingkindness extends to the heavens, and Thy truth to the clouds.” Psalm 57:9-10

- D.D.

**READ**

Judges 6:36-40 and 7:1-8

Psalm 58

**REFLECT**

Today's reading recounts two events that prepare for Gideon's big battle with the Midianites. In the first, Gideon shows something of his characteristic timidity, as he asks the Lord for a special sign that it is really He that is behind this project. We might be forgiven if we thought that Gideon had already had clear reason to know Who he was dealing with, but the Lord nevertheless complies. On one night, a wool fleece left on the threshing floor is drenched with dew, while the floor around it remains dry. On the second night, the fleece is dry, and the floor is dewy. There are some commentators who suggest that given normal atmospheric conditions the second occurrence was more miraculous than the first; my experience with dewy newspapers on dry driveways seems to confirm that.

Once Gideon tests the Lord, however, the Lord tests Gideon. He makes it clear that only He is to be glorified in the coming battle, and when Gideon assembles an army of 32,000, the Lord proceeds to pare it down. First, evoking the guidelines for military exemption given in Deuteronomy 20:8, He has Gideon send home the fainthearted. More than two-thirds of them leave. Then the Lord requires a second test, asking Gideon to watch the way the men drink water from a stream. Those who kneel to drink are dismissed; perhaps it is implied (though the text doesn't say) that the ones who remain have shown themselves to be instinctively more vigilant by not kneeling, but rather (apparently) bringing handfuls of water to their mouths and lapping. And so Gideon goes into battle with a mere 300. (Shades of Sparta!)

In accepting the Lord's requirements in this way, Gideon is taking his first truly heroic public step. He is showing his willingness to follow the

specific commands of the Lord, as Moses did at the Sea, and as Joshua did at Jericho and Ai. He sets aside the qualms that had to have accompanied the departure of so many men, and he places himself in the Lord's hands. Here is his glory, that he allows the Lord to have the glory. As we will see, he won't maintain the attitude for very long after the battle.

Many of us would like to be able to test the Lord's intentions for us as Gideon did. Maybe we are familiar with the phrase of "putting out a fleece" to see what the Lord's will is: the idea is to ask the Lord for some very specific "sign" of confirmation. Billy Graham suggests (as I remember) four interrelated ways of testing the Lord's will, for Christians living with the New Testament as well as the Old as a resource: (1) understanding what the Bible says on the issue, (2) seeking advice and prayer from Christian friends and professionals, (3) seeing confirmation in circumstance, and (4) having personal assurance in one's heart. None of these four are necessarily simple, and the way they resonate together is surely part of the discernment. And if one does feel one would like to see one's newspaper dry for once, and the driveway running with dew, then that might certainly be integrated into the broader methodology. I do believe that the Lord is doing miracles today, but it's hard to deny the wisdom of Dr. Graham's four specific interrelated tests when we have important decisions to make.

**RESPOND**

The Lord is an active partner and companion in our lives, as we draw on the resources He so freely gives. Where do you look for His help today? Where do you look for His help in the lives of loved ones today?

**PRAY**

Dear Lord, Thank you for the very personal ways You work with us, as is so clear in the story of Gideon. Open our eyes afresh to Your love today.

- D.D.

**READ**

Judges 7:9-23

Psalms 59

**REFLECT**

Our passage today describes the beginning of the battle with the Midianites, and the surprise midnight attack that set the huge army running from Gideon's small band. It begins with a final assurance that the Lord provides for Gideon, as He invites Gideon and a servant to sneak down to enemy lines and hear one soldier recount a dream to another, who interprets it to mean that their own army is doomed to lose to the Israelites. The barley loaf which flattens the Midianite war tent may reflect Midian's habit of looting grain from Israel (6:3, 11): Midian's violence is about to return on its own head. Gideon perceives the fear in the enemy camp, which would be encouraging enough. But he also sees that it has been fanned by a dream and its interpretation, which in Israel's tradition is one way in which the Lord communicates. (As Joseph said to Pharaoh in Gen 40:8: "Do not interpretations belong to God?") In effect Gideon gets to glimpse the fact that the Lord is working in more than one way to achieve the victory, and not just through Gideon's efforts.

Having placed himself in God's hands, Gideon follows through with an attack that takes full advantage of the fear in the enemy camp. He divides his 300 men into three companies, and equips each person in a way that will make it appear that each is the leader of many other men. Choosing the vulnerable moment of the changing of the enemy guard, he gives the signal for the 300 trumpets to be sounded, the 300 jars to be smashed revealing the 300 torches, and the 300 men to shout the battle cry. Thinking they are surrounded by a massive host, the Midian army panics and runs. In the confusion, the Midianites turn their swords on each other, which compensates for the fact that none of the Israelites

has actually carried a sword into the battle. And we read that all this confusion is very much the work of the Lord.

The surprise attack has stampeded the enemy army, and now it is a matter of following up the initial success with real fighting. Chapter 8 describes the course of the running battle. Gideon calls upon all the neighboring tribes of Israel to join in, and so the numbers of his army are again swelled, and the soldiers presumably confident. The chase covers a vast area as the Midianites retreat southeast across the Jordan River and on into the desert some 80 miles. Gideon's forces pursue them the whole way, capturing the leaders, and eliminating the threat to Israel from this particular tribe permanently (8:28).

This account shows wonderfully how serving the Lord can result in the best kind of outcome. Gideon submitted to a period of training, and so was ready to follow the Lord's lead when the moment came. Unfortunately his moment fades as quickly as it came, as we will see tomorrow. But at this point he can rejoice in having attained an understanding of how to serve the Lord, and his reputation as a leader in Israel (celebrated in Hebrews 11:32-35) is assured by this selfless act of faith – and, we might point out, by nothing else.

**RESPOND**

Perhaps it is the case that we feel that we often must carry burdens and fight battles as individuals, alone. Our challenge today is to be ready to see that the Lord is working His will on all fronts, even in the hearts of others.

**PRAY**

"As for me I shall sing of Thy strength. Yes, I shall sing joyfully of Thy lovingkindness in the morning, for Thou hast been my stronghold."

Psalms 59:16

- D.D.

**READ**

Judges 8:22-35

Psalm 60

**REFLECT**

The last section of the story of Gideon recounts how he descends from a man of God to become a leader of calculated human strengths, and ignored human weaknesses. The Biblical story is remarkable in that it does not draw a sharp line between the edifying parts of Gideon's story, and the cautionary parts. It just tells the story, hopeful that we as the readers are picking up on the positive and negative messages.

Gideon's decay begins really as soon as the extended battle with the Midianites is over. On the way back from the desert victory, Gideon punishes two towns cruelly for what he perceives as insolence, though we hear not a word of direction from the Lord on the matter (8:5-17). Later, as he faces the two captured kings Zebah and Zalmunna, and is arranging for their execution, they challenge him to kill them himself: "For as is the man, so is his strength" (8:21). He complies, and in so doing he becomes more like these bloody kings than the anointed leaders of his own nation's history. He seems to fall for their viewpoint that a man's worth is to be found entirely in his own strength; he has already forgotten that he defeated them on another principle altogether, namely, that true strength is found in reliance upon the Lord.

In a brief clash with the tribe of Ephraim, he shows himself capable of uniting the tribes, but he does so on the basis of flattery rather than spiritual leadership (8:1-3).

But his worst action is to take personal charge over a mass of loot, and use it to create a sort of religious tourist attraction in his hometown. Asking for and receiving some 50 pounds of gold from the soldiers, as well as other rich accoutrements, he fashions an "ephod" (this might have been a rich priestly gown, or a freestanding image of some kind) and apparently installs it in a sort of sanctuary. Gideon probably

intended this as a way of honoring the Lord, but it is obvious that it is ill-conceived and unauthorized by any word from God. We read that it actually leads the people away from the Lord, resulting in the deep irony that the man who rose to prominence by destroying his village Baal has now created some sort of idolatrous shrine that has corrupted his now-prominent family.

But there was lasting peace in Israel, and Gideon in the long run was remembered for what he did right.

Gideon wasn't the worst of the judges, as we'll see. But the book of Judges is definitely pessimistic about consistent leadership. Some scholars suggest that this was intended to show that when the kings come along, they represent an ideal solution. But others point out that Judges can be pretty pessimistic about kings too, and in fact the pessimism seems to extend beyond leaders to humanity in general (e.g., 21:25). The prophet Jeremiah was to speak in the Lord's name about a very radical solution to this human problem: "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people." (Jer 31:33) If this was a distant promise in those days, we as Christians can know the rich blessing (and responsibility) of God's indwelling presence.

**RESPOND**

Thinking about someone you know well, make a brief list of the areas in which they truly lean on the Lord, and those in which they rely on personal strengths. How would their lives change if they sought the Lord more consistently? Now apply the same exercise to yourself. (It may work better if you get that friend to help you write up your own list!)

**PRAY**

"O give us help against the adversary, for deliverance by humans is in vain. With God we will do valiantly; it is He who will tread down our foes." Psalm 60:11-12

- Dave Dorman