

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

Gideon, The Man Who Could Have Been King – (Judges Chapter 6:11-8) If the story of the judges who delivered God's people from the various oppressors used as instruments of judgment teach us anything, it is that God uses broken and fallible people to accomplish his kingdom mission on earth. Not unlike the story of Barak, the account of Gideon is full of surprises. Interestingly, more time is devoted to Gideon than any other judge mentioned in the book. Sampson, follows close behind. With such attentiveness given to this one man, we should take note what the human as well as the divine author is seeking to convey.

Part One: *Gideon, The Man at Peace* – the story of Gideon begins with a visitation by “the angel of the Lord”. We have encountered this term before both in the book of Judges as well as the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua. As witnessed by the use of the term in Genesis 22:11, Exodus 3:2-4, Exodus 23:21, and Judges 6:11-22, the angel of the Lord is frequently (though not always) used to denote a theophany, an appearance of God or Christ in the OT. Judges 6:11-24 provides an account of Gideon's conversion. The fact that Gideon feared for his life after realizing that the angel was a messenger of the divine (or in this case an appearance of the divine), suggests that the visitor was understood to be an appearance by God to Gideon instead of a mere heavenly being. Verses 22b-24a states, “...Alas, O Lord God! For now, I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face. But the Lord said to him, ‘Peace be to you. Do not fear; you shall not die.’ Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and called it, *The Lord is Peace...*” This is indicative that there is some association on the part of Gideon between the angel and God himself.

However, it is the message of the Lord that is more notable than the actual identity of the angel. When the heavenly being first appears he states, “*The Lord is with you, O mighty man of valor*” (6:12b). Gideon, on the other hand, would have appeared to the author as well as he does to the reader: anything but a mighty man of valor. When the angel came to him, he was beating out wheat in the winepress to hide from the Midianites. This would have been a seemingly impossible task since the threshing of wheat requires wind that will blow the chaff away. A winepress would have been a natural or man-made indentation in the earth that would have been below the surface in order to hold the grapes for pressing. Little to no wind would have been capable of reaching where Gideon was, so the wheat and the chaff were no doubt mingled. One does not have to think hard to see how this would well have symbolized the state of Israel at the time – and in every time since: chaff and wheat mingled together so that one might not be easily separated from the other. When the angel (or 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*” (6:14), the statement was made after Gideon's inquiry as to why the Lord who was renowned for delivering his people from the hand of the Egyptians, now seemed distant. One would expect such an allegation to meet with rebuke instead of praise. Let us explore in detail the initial response of Gideon to the divine greeting.

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Gideon's response to the angel was as follows: *"And Gideon said to him, 'Please sir, 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'"* (6:13). At first glance, the statement seems insignificant; however, when we think deeply about what Gideon is asking, the source of his inquiry, we realize that he had a periscope through which he was viewing his reality that was shaped by the Word of God. All that was lacking on the part of Gideon was faith in God's character. God would not have forsaken his people needlessly. Indeed, God had not forsaken them at all. It is they who forsook him. The beginning of chapter 6 (our reading from last time), relates the account of a prophet declaring to the apostate people of God his faithfulness and their lack thereof. No judgment was pronounced in this statement, just a simple stating of the facts. He not only reminds them that he has delivered them from the land of Egypt, and the hand of all whom oppressed them, he also reminds them that he gave them the land on which they are living. The final point of the prophet's message is the part missing from Gideon's observation above, perhaps because it is challenging to see the way God has been rejected when such rejection has become so ingrained in one's culture that evil is relabeled as good, and good evil. The last part of the prophet's message was simply, *"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"* (6:10).

Had Gideon understood the last part of the statement above, he would not have been puzzled as to why God was no longer among them. It was this very hope: that God had covenantally delivered his people in times past (and only because of his gracious covenant, not because of their moral superiority) to which the Lord was referring when he said to Gideon, *"Go, in this might of yours and save Israel from the hand of Midian; do not I send you?"* (6:14) It is true that God calls into existence the things that do not exist (Romans 4:17); however, the bedrock of Gideon's interaction with God is the belief and expectation that God *would* be faithful to his covenant. His dismay concerned the fact that God appeared to be unfaithful during his lifetime. This was because Gideon did not understand the seriousness of sin, which would be the very first lesson he was to learn.

After the miraculous appearance of the angel of the Lord, the Lord instructed Gideon to *"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 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"* (6:25-26). Gideon's first order of business was not to defeat the enemies of God's people (at least the enemy from without), but to set his own house in order and defeat the enemy within. Gideon's response was one of fear, not so much that he was doing the wrong thing, but that the town's people would see him and kill him for desecrating their idol. In order for Gideon to be obedient, he would have to set himself against culture in hope of revealing to the people of his town their culture of idolatry and by contrast demonstrate the worship of the one true God, the God of the covenant (YHVH). Due to fear of people's response, he performed this task at night with the aid of ten servants.

Three things should be noted in passing: 1) that Gideon's family could not have been as insignificant as he suggested when first approached by the angelic being because they were influential in the town and had at least ten servants. 2) The bull was a symbol of the Canaanite Deity El and his alleged spouse was Asherah. Collectively they provided fertility and were worshipped by an agrarian people. The Lord asks Gideon to take a bull seven years old and sacrifice it as a burnt offering to the Lord (YHVH). The people

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of God had been under the bondage of their Midianite oppressors for a period of seven years, so the lifetime of the bull coincided with the period of Midianite oppression. This detail, though small, should not be overlooked. 3) Even after Gideon's conversion in which he obeyed God and tore down the altar to Baal that his father had erected (6:25) Gideon still struggled with doubt, not regarding God's existence, but concerning whether or not he was the right man for the job. He twice asked for a fleece to be the sign of God's election, once in terms of it being wet and the surrounding earth dry, and again that it be dry and the surrounding earth wet. In both instances God confirmed his call to Gideon. In some respect we have a parallelism occurring within the text between the call of Gideon and the call of Moses. Moses, too, was told that he was to be the deliverer of God's people. He too, did not believe and asked for signs. God promised Moses as well as Gideon that he would be with them. In an age in which every man did what was right in his own eyes, it would have been a welcomed occurrence for God to send a messenger like Moses or Joshua who could once again be the leader of God's people. This subtle comparison would not have been lost on the text's original audience and perhaps entails a subliminal longing on the part of God's people for a leader among them.

Part Two: *Gideon, the Man at War* – When Gideon obeyed God and the Spirit of the Lord came upon him (6:34), he sent throughout the land gathering an army. This army numbered 32,000 men, a vast array of troops. God told Gideon that the size of his army was too large. When victory came, the people of God would be tempted to attribute the victory to the size of their army instead of the greatness of God. God instructed Gideon to send home 22,000 men; however, even an army of 10,000 was too large. God eventually whittled Gideon's army down to 300. This is an interesting occurrence especially in light of that fact that the impetus for Gideon calling such a large army in the first place was the accompaniment of the Spirit of the Lord (6:34-35). It is obvious from this interaction between God and Gideon, that God is after Gideon's heart. He wants to prove to Gideon that he is indeed the same covenant keeping God spoken of by their fathers, and so he does. Even with an army of 300 men, the victory against the Midianites was won by the Lord. The army of 300 never lifted a sword. Instead, they were sent to surround the camp of the enemy and shouted in the middle of the night, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" When the Midianites heard the shouting they were confused and started attacking each other. Thus, the enemy was routed by their own sword. It was only when they fled in confusion that the armies which had previously been spent home were called back up to pursue them and utterly destroy them.

Despite this great victory, we see the beginning of the downfall of Gideon. Compare the battle cry of Gideon with the battle cry of David. Gideon shouted, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" David told Goliath, "You come to me with a sword and a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel whom you have defiled." The contrast bespeaks the raw material of the heart. From this point forward we do not see the Spirit of the Lord leading Gideon (even though God continues to use him to deliver his people), rather we see the demons of his past coming back to haunt him. For instance, when in pursuit of the Midianite kings, Gideon encounters the elders of Succoth and asks for bread for he and his men. However, the elders of Succoth are not convinced of Gideon's imminent victory and refuse his request in an attempt to avoid being reprimanded by the Midianites should he fail. The men of Penuel (which means, "face of God") likewise refused his request for sustenance. His response was to kill the men of Penuel and to torture the men of Succoth. So much for the lowly coward hiding from the enemy in a winepress. His renewed confidence allowed him to do exploits for God and his people, but he soon forgot the source of his strength. This will be a common occurrence in the lives of Israel's saviors from this point forward.

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Part Three: Gideon, almost a King – After the victorious campaign against the Amalekites, scripture records the following account: *“Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, ‘Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian’* (8:22). This is the first time in the history of Israel in general and of the period of the judges in particular that we have interest on the part of God’s people to be governed by a king. It seems that the only impetus behind their request is the fact that Gideon delivered Israel out the hands of their enemy. However, when one explores the degree of tribalism pervasive during the period of the judges along with the repeated cycle of apostasy, a few other characteristics which are not explicit from the text rise to the service.

- 1) Since the death of Joshua, no leader within Israel had the ability to unite the twelve tribes (thirteen including the Levites) into one collective body. Apart from this unity, God’s people were at the mercy of their own local leaders as well as marauding and invading armies from outside Israel and from within the Canaanite confederacy.
- 2) Israel’s faith in YHVH, which was initially to be the uniting variable referenced above, had become comingled with the various Canaanite religions to the point that synchronized religion varied across tribal lines and within geographical regions. This is why certain judges exerted more influence in some areas than others.
- 3) A mouthpiece for God and for the people of God did not exist apart from the random prophets (and prophetesses) that arose during a time of apostasy to rebuke the people for their rejection of God. Therefore, the sentence that characterized the period of the judges best was, *“In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes.”* (Judges 17:6). The implication, of course, is that a king would have provided guidance for the people of God as did Moses and Joshua.

Given the variables mentioned above, it should be no surprise that Israel came to Gideon with their request to make him king. What is surprising (especially in light of what would transpire shortly thereafter) is Gideon’s response. Gideon responded to the men of Israel by saying, *“I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you”* (8:23). Gideon reminds the people that God is to be their King. Israel was designed to be a theocracy, not a monarchy. A monarchy is permissible only if the king considers himself a vassal of the Lord, and one responsible to the Lord for the faith and well-being of his people. The people of God did not see God as their king because a king requires exclusive allegiance. Their religion had become so comingled with the religions of the Canaanites in whose land they were dwelling that they could no longer give exclusive allegiance to the Lord.

Gideon did make a request of the people. Not that they would make him or his son king (he had already rejected that), but that they give him their ear rings of gold. What could Gideon possibly want with such gold? Did he plan to retreat into his retirement villa plush with wealth and happy memories of war? Such activity would have been unbecoming of a mighty man of valor. No, he sought to do just as he instructed Israel to do – make the Lord his king. He did so by using the gold to make an ephod, an instrument used by the priests to determine the will of God in a specific situation. He went wrong in two ways: 1) he was not a Levite, and since he was not a Levite and had rejected the kingship he had no legal right to have an ephod. 2) He made the ephod an object of adoration (8:27b). Instead of the device becoming a means by which the dominion of God could be furthered in his life and the lives of his family, it became a snare to he and them.

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One final point should be made regarding the life of this man of contradiction. Although he rejected the kingship, he took a concubine and conceived a child by her. He named the child, Abimelech, which means “my father is king” in Hebrew. Could it be that Gideon sought the kingship through manipulative faith? Was he hoping the ephod would have given a divine justification for the desire expressed previously by all Israel, to make Gideon and his sons and grandsons king? We do not know. What we do know is that Gideon is a man of many contradictions whom God used to bring deliverance to his people at a time when they could not distinguish true religion from false, and as such, he characterizes the mercy and grace of a covenant-keeping God. For this reason, Gideon is mentioned as first in the line of the Judges (even before his predecessor Barak) in the hall of faith given in Hebrews chapter 11. He is the mighty man of valor who hides from the enemy, takes some of the glory due only to God, avenges himself on the people of God, rejects the kingship, makes an ephod that becomes an idol and names his son “the son of a king”. We are like him more than we realize.

Conclusion: As we conclude our reflection on the life of Gideon, we can no doubt draw a plethora of pastoral applications from the text to our own lives and glean principles that can be as justly applied to the contemporary Christian life as to the OT people of God. There are two in particular that I suggest we ponder.

- 1) In what way(s) are we so engrossed in our own culture that we are unaware of the syncretism that has occurred between the values (and idols) of our culture and pure Christian religion? Think of Gideon and his lack of understanding why the covenant-keeping God had not delivered his people even though his own father had erected a Baal and Asherah in his community.
- 2) How do we allow our own “ephods” to become an object of our affection instead of a means to discern God’s will? In other words, what are our proverbial sacred cows that were designed to aid us in the exercise of pure religion but have become objects of veneration that distract our worship of the one true God?

As we continue in the story of the judges, allow yourself to feel the momentum that will reach a crescendo at the very end of the book. With each judge, the role of the judge and the purity of Israel’s faith ventures further and further from the standard of God’s covenantal design. We must hear the moan of frustration and hopelessness that accompanies the people of God as they long for a true judge, shepherd, leader, that will save them from themselves.