

The Cloud of Witnesses

Gideon

Lesson 1: Gideon – Carried On Doing Good Even Through The Bad Times

Reading

Judges 6:1-32.

Carried On Doing Good Even Through The Bad Times

The society in which Gideon lived has similarities to our own. Whilst we do not live in a battlefield or war zone, nevertheless we are challenged by pressures from people who do not follow God's ways. Gideon's lifestyle ran counter culture to his fellow Israelites who compromised their faith and the rampant paganism of the surrounding nations.

Gideon had to make a choice: submit to the enemy and starve to death or be proactive on behalf of his whanau. The opposition came from the Midianites, who frequently invaded the land and confiscated all the crops. The Israelites did all the hard work – preparing the ground, sowing the seed, tending the crops – but the Midianites were opportunists who came in and plundered the harvests.

According to the author of the Book of Judges, the Israelites were in this mess because they had forsaken God and gone their own way, choosing to follow the gods of the other nations. God had then allowed them to be harassed by their enemies in an attempt to get them to return to following Him.

However, most of the Israelites ignored the ways of God and just blamed Him for all that was going wrong. I am constantly amazed by people who though have no relationship with God nevertheless choose to blame Him when their life doesn't work out the way they want it to. It's a bit like blaming the writers of the instruction manual for the mess I make of building the furniture when I haven't bothered to read a single line of the instructions – let alone followed them to completion.

Gideon had chosen to live by his own values and faith in God despite being in the minority and subjected to the same humiliation as the rest of the Israelites. He would carry on living as he chose even if it meant danger or death. It seems God saw in Gideon someone who would stand out from the crowd and who could be used to bring about societal change.

When the angel approached Gideon with a view to commissioning him for the work ahead, Gideon challenged his greeting. It showed that he was a realist and was not going to be sucked in to flattery. He challenged the angel to produce the evidence that God was still working on behalf of His people Israel, as he had not witnessed any evidence himself.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 1 continued: Gideon – Carried On Doing Good...

When the angel reiterated the fact that God was with him, like Moses before him, Gideon tried to excuse himself from the proposed role of leading the people free from their oppressors. He claimed both personal and tribal inferiority.

He proceeded to test God and to verify the call. When God miraculously proved His point, Gideon became overwhelmed that God would respond to his faithless request and yet still allow him to live.

Having had this dynamic encounter with God, Gideon was emboldened to not only destroy the altar to Baal but also use the pagan trimmings as fuel for its destruction. By doing so Gideon not only antagonised the local townsfolk but his father as well.

As the record shows, by his actions, Gideon revealed what was in his heart all along – that he would serve the Lord regardless of those around him. Having publicly made his stand, God was able to use Gideon to lead the nation. As Gideon proved faithful in the little things, God was able to use him in the spectacular .

We need to keep doing the good and hard things during the tough times, because when we are consistent in our Christian walk, not only does it encourage other Christians to be consistent in theirs but it also helps prepare us for what God may want us to do in the future.

Gideon would say to us today...

No situation is perfect. Our job is to trust God no matter the circumstances, do all we can to bring about His Kingdom in every way we can, and leave the miracles and our future to Him.

Prayer

Please help me, Father, to keep my eyes on You and my trust firmly based upon You in the hard times. Please help me seize the opportunities You open up before me in order to release my faith in You. Please help me remember through all the challenges You are good and You are faithful. Amen.

Additional readings

Psalm 46; Matthew 5:13-16; Romans 8:28-39.

Questions

If an angel visited you what would you ask him?

What events in the Bible would you like to see happen again?

What are you doing to show unbelievers that you follow Jesus?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 2: Gideon – The Idiot’s Guide To Guidance

Reading

Judges 6:33-40.

The Idiot’s Guide To Guidance

The pace of life for Gideon increased. Chopping down a statue of Baal was one thing; now he had outright opposition from Israel’s enemies. The armed forces of the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern nations assembled in the Valley of Jezreel in open hostility.

But did you notice – when he became surrounded by the opposition – suddenly he was filled with the Holy Spirit? At his lowest point God didn’t leave him – in fact, God invaded him. Just as Jesus found in the wilderness – when Satan attacked Him, Jesus was still filled with the Holy Spirit. God doesn’t desert us in our hour of need – even though we may not be able to sense His presence.

The Spirit of God came on Gideon and he blew a trumpet. We may find that an odd thing for the Holy Spirit to cause Gideon to do and yet isn’t the Holy Spirit *the Ruach* – the breath of God?

What was the result of that trumpet blast? 32,000 men came to join Gideon for battle. God may ask us to do seemingly insignificant or even foolish things, and yet He can use that simple obedience to achieve tremendous results – far beyond our wildest dreams. I’m sure that Andrew got a huge surprise when he took the little boy’s lunch to Jesus and saw it expand to feed 5000.

I have to admit to being surprised at what Gideon did next. How much more did he want God to do to prove that He was on Gideon’s side and would accomplish all He said? Obviously, a couple of miracles...

The famous incident when first he asked for his fleece to be made wet and the ground dry and then for God to do it the other way around – the fleece dry and the ground wet – and God did.

I call this episode ‘the idiot’s guide to guidance’. Ask God for some sign, and once you have the answer ask God to reverse it just to make sure He wasn’t joking. I can make that judgment because I have read to the end of the book. I can be critical of Gideon because I didn’t have to stand in his shoes. And because I haven’t been asked by God to achieve a massive victory or to trust Him in such a huge way.

I believe God deals with each one of us at our unique level of faith and also takes into consideration the level of risk required for the task in hand. The greater the need for faith and the greater the job to be done, the greater the evidence He gives that He is both in control and will provide the ultimate victory.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 2 continued: Gideon – The Idiot’s Guide To Guidance

For me it is another sign that God is a God of love, faithfulness, mercy and grace. I would have become impatient with Gideon and told him to shape up or I’d take him off the job – but God says to Gideon, “*Give Me your doubts – yes, all of them – and let Me prove to you who I AM.*” I don’t believe God will ever ‘play games’ with us. When we are open and honest with Him, He will prove Himself totally trustworthy and faithful.

Gideon would say to us today...

God wants us to know His will and to walk in it. It’s O.K. to ask God for help and clarification. He knows who we are and how we are made, and treats us accordingly. We are not all faith-filled warriors of God all the time.

Prayer

Father, I am so glad that You allow me to have doubts and to express those doubts to You so You can answer them and help my trust in You have a sure foundation. Please remind me that to have doubts is O.K. because then You can show Yourself real to me when I ask for more assurance. Help me to be real with You and those around me. Amen.

Additional readings

John 21:15-23; Proverbs 3:1-18; Matthew 6:25-35.

Questions

Why did Gideon need God to do the fleece miracle twice?

What are the issues you struggle with as you try to trust in God?

What miracle do you want God to perform for you right now?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 3: Gideon – The Watershed And The Midian ‘Son Et Lumiere’

Reading

Judges 7.

The Watershed And The Midian ‘Son Et Lumiere’

When Gideon saw the opposition I'm sure he would have wished to amass the largest army on record; a least a two to one majority. Once he had blown his trumpet and saw the response, I'm equally sure that whilst he was amazed at the number who responded, he was disappointed that there weren't more.

The enemy had some many camels that they couldn't be counted so how ever many men were there? Nevertheless, with 32,000 fighting men there was a semblance of an army, which for those times was indeed a miracle. He must have felt some comfort but not totally sure of victory.

I wonder how the Midianites felt. I wonder if they looked across at the Israeli recruits and laughed, thinking that they could destroy the 32,000 in an afternoon. (Or as we say – eat them for breakfast!)

Their mirth and scorn, however, would have turned to incredulity very shortly as God told Gideon to release all those who were afraid to fight – 22,000 returned home. That left Gideon and Israel with an army of just 10,000 men. Hardly enough to make a dent in the gathered enemy throng.

However, God hadn't finished His work on the Israeli army. He told Gideon to take the remaining 10,000 men to the river for a drink and He would cull some more. 9,700 men got down on their knees and drank vigorously from the water. 300, on the other hand, remained alert and on guard by scooping some water in the cup of their hand, and quenched their thirst that way.

God told Gideon to dispatch the 9,700 and to keep the 300. From 32,000 to 300 in just so short a time. How could 300 stand against the enemy, let alone be ready to attack – it looked desperate and nonsensical. Probably both to Gideon and the Midianites.

I like the way we are told the 300 took over the trumpets and provisions of the 9,700 who were released.

God had yet another trick up His sleeve in order to help Gideon's faith to grow. God remembered the incident with the fleece and wanted to share something else, which would add confirmation of the victory to come. He told Gideon to take his servant Purah and to go down to the entrance to the enemy's camp.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 3 continued: Gideon – The Watershed And The Midian ‘Son Et Lumiere’

On arrival Gideon heard one of the men recounting his dream. A barley bun had rolled down the hill and hit a tent so it collapsed. His friend remarked that it must have been a sign that Gideon and the Israelites were about to win a mighty victory.

On hearing this Gideon ran back to the Israeli Camp and aroused everyone for battle. However, their offensive weapons were somewhat strange. No swords or guns; just a torch, a large pottery jar and a trumpet. They were to divide into 3 groups and spread out. On Gideon's signal they broke the jars, lifted up their flaming torches and blew their trumpets and then shouted out: *“A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!”*

The Midianites saw the lights and heard the sounds and fled. Many killed each other – a blue on blue is nothing new. A massive Israeli victory ensued with the enemy leaders all killed.

Gideon and his men prepared for battle but the victory was all God's. He planned it, He orchestrated it and He delivered it. When we are surrounded by threats and challenges, it is a good idea to hand it over to the Lord, seek His face and follow His directions.

Gideon would say to us today...

Make plans and strategise but in the end leave it up to God. He is the One who will bring victory, so let Him do it in whatever way He chooses. Most times it is so we take the focus off ourselves and put it back where it belongs – on Him.

Prayer

Father, please help me to remember that the extension of Your Kingdom is not by might or by power, but by Your Spirit. Please keep me humble enough to listen to Your voice and obey Your will for my life and my ministry. Amen.

Additional readings

Zechariah 4:1-10; Proverbs 21:1-8; James 1:1-8.

Questions

Why did God reduce the army to just 300 men?

What was the significance of the dream Gideon heard about?

Why do we expect the Creator God to do things our way?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 4: Gideon – You Can't Please Everyone

Reading

Judges 8:1-21.

You Can't Please Everyone

Here we read that Gideon had to run the gauntlet of criticism and skepticism.

Every leader has to do so. In fact, what I have learned over the years of ministry is that anyone who does something will be open to the same. So let's have a look and see how Gideon got on.

Although Gideon had won a great battle on behalf of the whole Israeli nation – all the tribes – the Ephraimites accosted him because they felt rejected and neglected. They had been called in to help but they felt that they should have been involved from the beginning.

Gideon was quick to point out that their victory was superior since God had done most of the work before they got involved.

Having placated the Ephraimites, Gideon and his exhausted posse kept on in pursuit of the Midianite kings. They first went to Succoth, and then to Peniel, seeking refreshment and supplies. However, the leaders of both towns declined to assist. They probably looked at Gideon and his exhausted band of followers and wondered how on earth they were going to capture those kings who were leading such a vast army.

They just mocked and jeered at Gideon and his team who marched on... to victory. Everyone loves a winner, don't they? Sometimes we need to look beyond the external, beyond the obvious and see by faith what God can do with a person's life. Over the years I have been amazed how people can be totally transformed by the power of God.

I've had the privilege of leading *Alpha* courses for over a decade now and have seen so many people arrive the first night timid, shy, disturbed, angry, suspicious or determined not to enjoy themselves. By the end of the course, however, these same people are radiant, purposeful and excited. They have met with the living God and can't keep quiet about it.

These people should not have under-estimated Gideon. He and his men went on to capture those kings and kill them. The leaders of those towns had to eat humble pie and pay the consequences of their cynicism.

How we deal with criticism and opposition is critical. We need to be wary of becoming arrogant and dismissive but we also need to be firm when the criticism is unjustified. It's especially important that we don't let our own team down.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 4 continued: Gideon – You Can't Please Everyone

Gideon would say to us today...

Just because you are a God-anointed leader does not mean everyone will love you or follow you. You need determination to follow God wholeheartedly and see His plan through to the end. Keep your eyes on Him, and like David – strengthen yourself in the Lord – He may be your only source at times.

Prayer

Father, please help me find my total security in You. Make me sensitive to others but not dependent upon them for approval. Above all, help me live with Your approval. Amen.

Additional readings

Philippians 2:5-16; Joshua 14:6-15; 2 Corinthians 6:3-10.

Questions

Why do we want people to like us?

What are the challenges we face if we are surrounded by 'yes men'?

How should we treat those who oppose us?

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 5: Gideon – Didn't Get It All Right

Reading

Judges 8:23-35.

Didn't Get It All Right

Just because you are a leader doesn't mean you are perfect, always right or invincible. That is why it is so important for spiritual leaders to remain in a position of accountability to others. We all need to be able to allow other spiritually mature people to speak into our lives and challenge our motives and actions.

When the people wanted to force Gideon to reign over them as king he refused. He reminded them that it was God who had won the victory and it was God they were supposed to follow. He did not feel adequate nor was it appropriate for the people to follow him instead.

We all need to remember that, too. God may bless us with a wonderful ministry. He may cause many folk to join our church, etc, but we must always encourage everyone to follow Jesus, rather than us. Jesus is still Head of The Church and we must never forget that. Jesus said, *"If I am lifted up I will draw all men to Me."*

I believe that is a divine principle. I must raise Jesus so high that people follow Him rather than me. As John the Baptist said, *"I must decrease, He (Jesus) must increase."*

Gideon did well. Then he made a huge mistake. He invited the people to do something for him. He asked them to give him a gold earring, which was made into an ephod. It was like a memorial statue. In principle, a harmless act – in reality, it became an idol.

Yes, Gideon started well. He trusted God for an overwhelming victory against Israel's oppressors. Indeed, Israel went on to enjoy peace for the duration of Gideon's life. But as soon as he died, the people returned to their idol worship and forgot about Gideon and his family. And the problem was exacerbated by the ephod Gideon set up.

We are not responsible for the actions of others but we are responsible for all we do. None of us is perfect and that is why it is such a relief that Jesus died on the Cross to pay the penalty of all our sins. However, that does not give us licence to live just as we like, but rather challenge us to live holy lives and allow the Spirit of God full reign in us.

The challenge for each of us is to finish well – like Paul, the apostle. We need to run the race and finish the course.

The Cloud of Witnesses

Lesson 5 continued: Gideon – Didn't Get It All Right

Gideon would say to us today...

Beware good can lead you into Hell as easily as the abhorrent or vile. The way to Hell is paved with the flagstones of good intentions. Never turn away from following Jesus. Keep your eyes on Him until the very end.

Prayer

Father, please protect me from allowing the successes of life to lead me away from my total dependence upon You. May my focus never stray from seeking Your face and Your glory, and the extension of Your Kingdom and Your Kingdom alone. Amen.

Additional readings

Romans 1:18-25; Exodus 20:1-21; 2 Kings 18:1-4.

Questions

Why did God say – *Don't make any idols?*

What are the potential idols in your life?

How do we avoid making something into an idol?