

DHW

BIBLE STUDY CLASS

LESSON 5

JUDGES 6

INTRODUCTION

The pattern of rest, rebellion, retribution, and restoration developed once again. When a period of rest was enjoyed by the children of Israel they gradually slipped into complacency in their religious obligations before the LORD. Israel at this time had been greatly impoverished by marauding tribal groups which stripped them of all their possessions. They sought the LORD their God but like before they cried to Him for help more out of pain rather than of repentance of their sins. They forgot what the LORD had done for them previously, and worst of all they chose to worship the idol-gods of the other inhabitants of the land. This religious pattern seems to be repeated among Christians and churches today. How many Christians forget the Lord their God and choose the “gods” of this world instead. This study should enlighten Christians that when bad things happen to them, and if God is their loving Father in heaven, there is another proper and rightful consideration of the problem. How easy for Christians to shift the blame to God instead of themselves when bad things happen to them.

The LORD our God again demonstrates His faithfulness to His covenant and His love and mercy

towards His people. He does not lack in the ways of chastising, teaching and saving His people. Previously, when His people cried to Him, He would raise a deliverer and judge to save His people. This time the LORD sent a prophet to indict His people for their sins before He chose the man to be their deliverer. What marks a true believer and a counterfeit believer? A counterfeit believer displays characteristics of selfishness in thinking only of his needs and how he can get them by the grace of God. A true believer delights in the Lord and thinks of Him and willingly obeys His commands. God has called Christians to an abundant life of service and victory. Many a Christian might think that he or she is an unlikely candidate for such a high calling. But we will learn the qualities that God looks for in the man whom He chooses to carry out His purposes.

The chapter falls into the following sections:

- 1) Israel is overrun by the enemies (vv.1-6);
- 2) The LORD sends a prophet (vv. 7-10);
- 3) The Angel of the LORD calls Gideon (vv. 11-18);
- 4) Gideon Discovers the Identity of the Angel of the LORD (vv. 19-24);
- 5) Gideon Brings Down the Altar of Baal (vv. 25-32)
- 6) Gideon Puts Out the Fleece (vv. 33-40).

STUDY THE WORD

Israel Is Overrun by the Enemies

Israel blatantly sinned against the LORD their God once again. Previously, the divine writer mentioned the LORD “sold them” to the enemies. But this time, the writer dropped the word “sold” and instead wrote “the LORD *delivered* them into the hand of Midian seven years” (v.1). It strongly suggests that the LORD “gave them over” into the hand of the enemies to do their worst. The affliction upon the children of Israel was going to be severe and great. Although the duration of the oppression was seven years, relatively much shorter than the previous times, the misery the children of Israel suffered far outstripped those of the previous oppressions.

The Midianites were once hospitable to Moses during his obscure years in the wilderness of Sinai. Moses married Zipporah, the daughter of the priest of Midian, and he lived among them for forty years. They were a nomadic people and they spread themselves over many lands of the region. Through the years they maintained a friendly relationship with the Moabites, and with whom they allied in their attempt to curse Israel through Balaam, but failed. Primarily, they were shepherds rearing sheep and cattle; and they had asses and camels too for transportation moving from one place to another. Camels are interesting. These camels were the single-humped Arabian camels unlike the double humped ones. They were known to carry a load of four hundred pounds, and they could travel for three to four days without water. The

Midianites had many camels which ensured their mobility and formidability.

The Midianites allied with the Amalekites and tribal people in the east to oppress Israel. Each year they would invade the children of Israel, plunder the produce of the land, rustle their cattle and sheep, and largely destroy the land. These violent and reckless attacks happened year after year for seven years! It was not their objective to exterminate the Israelites but rather to plunder them. They left nothing for the children of Israel who were greatly impoverished. And in anticipation of their raids, the Israelites had to hide their produce of the land in dug-out dens in the mountains, including the natural caves and crevices which they could find. At the end of seven years, the children of Israel had enough. They were extremely and desperately disheartened and depressed. The children of Israel cried unto the LORD (v.6). Man’s extremity becomes the LORD’S opportunity.

The LORD Sends a Prophet

The LORD did not send immediately a deliverer and judge to save them from the terrible condition they were in. Instead, the LORD sent a prophet (the second time in the book of Judges, the word “prophet” is mentioned). The prophet is unnamed. At the end of his message to Israel was that Israel had sinned by being disobedient to the LORD. God had given them clear commandments but they had broken them. They had breached the covenant God had made with them. The cause of the oppressive state they had been experiencing was

their idolatry. It seems like the LORD had disowned them—delivering them into the hands of the Midianites as a punishment. Of course, it was the LORD’S design that through the sufferings, the children of Israel would repent.

The LORD reminded Israel through the prophet. The LORD their God had been faithful like a husband to his wife, Israel. He had brought Israel out of the land of Egypt, and out of the land of slavery and bondage. The LORD had delivered Israel from her oppressors and even drove them out of their land and gave it to Israel. The LORD had clearly and emphatically told them: “I am the LORD your God” (v.10a). They were not to fear the gods of the Amorites (the generic name for the inhabitants of Canaan) in the land. This was to remind Israel that the LORD (Yahweh) had been faithful in His covenant promise to her. It was to remind Israel that the LORD always wanted the best for her. His intentions were good. These reminders should also impress upon Israel that the LORD God had a claim on her; Israel belongs to Him. But they the children of Israel disobeyed the LORD. This indictment revealed the cause for their present plight. If they obey they would be blessed but if they disobey they would be cursed.¹ God had permitted them

¹ Deuteronomy 11:26 Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; 27 A blessing, if ye obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day: 28 And a curse, if ye will not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which ye have not known.

to be severely oppressed by the Midianites and their allies in the hope that Israel would repent and return to serve and worship Him only. After this indictment, there is no record that the children of Israel did cry in repentance of their sins as a nation together! It seems that they cry to the LORD out of pain rather than out of genuine repentance.

The Angel of the LORD Calls Gideon

The prophet spoke generally to the children of Israel. After his message, the Angel of the LORD “sat under an oak” near a house in Ophrah, a city which was in the territory of Benjamin. It was the house of Joash, the Abiezrite whose son was Gideon. Gideon was threshing wheat by the wine press to hide from the Midianites. The fact of Gideon’s hiding to thresh wheat tells of the terrible condition the Israelites were under the Midianites. Usually when one threshes wheat it should be done in the open where the wind would blow away the chaff separating it from the grain. But Gideon had to thresh the wheat under cover of the vine trees. Gideon displayed some measure of timidity and fear.

The Angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon. He was the only judge in the book of Judges whom the LORD called personally through a *theophany* (a visible appearance of God). This was a visit by the pre-incarnate Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. This was not the first *theophany* to man. Previously, the Angel of the LORD had appeared to

Hagar when Abraham sent her away.² On another occasion He appeared to Abraham.³ When Jacob was serving his unscrupulous Laban, the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a dream.⁴ And the Angel of the LORD appeared to Moses in the midst of the burning bush.⁵

This call of Gideon by the LORD to be Israel's next judge and deliverer is interesting and instructive. The LORD greeted Gideon that God was with him and honoured him as "a mighty man of valour" (v.12). The LORD could see that Gideon was fearful and timid, but Gideon could become what he was not, a mighty warrior, by the grace and power of the LORD. Apparently, Gideon did not recognize the true identity of the Person who was addressing him. He did not respond to the greeting but instead he was complaining—"Oh my Lord, if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us"? When Gideon addressed the Angel of the

² Genesis 21:17 And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he *is*.

³ Genesis 22:11 And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here *am* I.

⁴ Genesis 31:11 And the angel of God spake unto me in a dream, *saying*, Jacob: And I said, Here *am* I. 12 And he said, Lift up now thine eyes, and see, all the rams which leap upon the cattle *are* ringstraked, speckled, and grised: for I have seen all that Laban doeth unto thee. 13 I *am* the God of Bethel, where thou anointedst the pillar, *and* where thou vowedst a vow unto me: now arise, get thee out from this land, and return unto the land of thy kindred.

⁵ Exodus 3:2 And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush *was* not consumed.

LORD as "Lord," he used the simple ordinary term of respect (in English, "master: or "sir"). If the LORD was all-powerful as his forefathers had told him and how the children of Israel were delivered from Egypt, it did not make sense to him that they were now suffering under the Midianites. It looked like the LORD had forsaken them. Gideon was blaming God for Israel's plight. The LORD did not respond to his complaints. Instead the LORD commissioned him to save Israel from the Midianites by the power of the LORD (v.14). Gideon still did not know the real identity of the Divine visitor. Still addressing him as "Lord" (master), he asked how he could save Israel; his family was poor and insignificant in Manasseh, and that he was the youngest in his family (v.15). The Angel of the LORD then assured him that He would be with him, and promised that he would smite the Midianites "as one man." This last phrase did not mean that Gideon would fight alone, but that the victory by the children of Israel led by him would be completely resounding and swift. These words were not enough. Gideon asked for a sign to prove the certainty of what his Guest had just assured him. Gideon then asked his Guest not to leave while he prepared "my present" (can also mean an offering; or a meat offering) "before thee" (not "unto thee").

Gideon Discovers the Identity of the Angel of the LORD

Gideon prepared an offering consisting of a young goat, some unleavened bread, the meat he put into a basket, and he put the broth in a pot. Having prepared them, he brought

them out to his Guest who was still seated under the oak tree. The Angel of God instructed him to take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them orderly on a rock to which He directed, and then pour out the broth on them. Gideon did accordingly as he was instructed. Then the Angel of the LORD held His staff and touched the meat and the unleavened bread with the tip of the staff. Suddenly there was fire rising up out of the rock and consumed all the meat and unleavened bread. Then the Angel of the LORD departed out of Gideon's sight.

Gideon had asked for a sign. This was the sign. Gideon then realized that his visitor was *the* Angel of the LORD, and not a mere man or angel. And he exclaimed: "O Lord God! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face" (v.22). Note that Gideon addressed the Angel this time as "Lord" in Hebrew is "adonai" meaning YAHWEH, the LORD God instead of the earlier usage "adoni" which means just "master" or "sir". Gideon thought that he would die because he had seen God for no man can see Him and live.⁶ But the LORD assured him that he needed not to fear. He would not die. The LORD'S peace would be with him. Gideon built an altar there unto the LORD. He called the altar "Jehovah-Shalom"—Jehovah is peace. Each time he saw the altar, it reminded him of his encounter with the LORD.

⁶ Exodus 33:20 And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.

Gideon Brings Down the Altar of Baal

The very night after Gideon had erected the altar, the LORD gave him the first work to do. Gideon was told to demolish the "altar of Baal" which belonged to his father, and the "grove" or a wooden pillar which stood beside it. This pillar was the stem of a tree which had been stripped of its branches and carved with emblems. It was called "Asherah" the Canaanite symbol of the moon-goddess. This was Gideon's first task. It was an appropriate action for Gideon to do before he could judge and deliver Israel. He must clean up his own backyard first. He must deal with his sins first before dealing with the sins of his fellow Israelites. He was to use two bullocks, one of which must be seven years old. After he had pulled down the altar of Baal and the Asherah, he must erect an altar unto the LORD God on the top of the very rock itself. The altar of God could not be erected until the idolatrous altar was removed. Then offering of burnt sacrifices unto the LORD could be made. One cannot serve Baal and the LORD at the same time. After the demolition of the altar of Baal, Gideon must offer the burnt -sacrifice with the seven-year old bullock.

One could imagine that it was not easy for Gideon to demolish his father's idolatrous altar. But Gideon did not hesitate. He used ten of his servants and did as the LORD commanded him. But he was afraid of his father's family and also the men of the city that he carried out his task at night. The important thing is that he obeyed the LORD. It does not matter

whether it was done in broad daylight or in the night. Anyway, the LORD did not tell him to do by day or by night. When morning came, the men of the city were furious and began to search for the culprit who did that. When they were told that Gideon was the man who did it, they demanded from Joash to bring his son out so that they could put him to death. A very strange thing happened. One would have thought that Joash, Gideon's father, would be angry with him, when told that it was his son who pulled down the altar of Baal. Instead of protecting his son, he said to the men of the city, "Will ye plead for Baal? will ye save him?" Joash further added that anyone who would plead for Baal, let that person be punishable with death. Then Joash said the most remarkable statement: "If he be a god, let him plead for himself, because one hath cast down his altar." Why worshipped a god who could not save himself! All became silent. Joash then named Gideon "Jerubbaal", which means to say, "Let Baal plead against him." In other words, if Baal was a god, he could go and contend with Gideon because he pulled down the altar of Baal.

Gideon Seeks Further Assurance.

In the meantime the Midianites were preparing to invade Israel. The Amalekites were all set to join the Midianites, and together they were joined by the easterners. But what about Gideon; was he ready and prepared? The Spirit of the LORD was upon him. That means Gideon was empowered by the Spirit. He blew a ram's horn summoning the locals to gather after him. He sent messengers

throughout Manasseh, and then to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and all the men in these tribes gathered together.

Gideon was having cold feet. He knew precisely what the LORD wanted him to do. He asked the LORD for another sign. He had a hard time taking God at His word. When one has a low view of God and His revelation, God's power is doubted. Gideon asked the LORD to let the fleece be wet by the dew and the ground surrounding the fleece dry. God condescended to do so. Gideon rose early in the morning to check whether it happened as he requested. He took the fleece and wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water, and the surrounding ground dry. Gideon was not satisfied. He humbly asked for the LORD'S indulgence and that was to reverse the miracle—the fleece to be dry and surrounding ground wet. And God did so that very night.

PRACTICAL VALUE

Do we still feel tired of repeating that the LORD is faithful to His covenant promises, that He is gracious and forgiving? We should not lest we forget God who really loves us and wants the best for us just as He wanted His chosen people, the Israelites, the best for them that they might enjoy the fruit of their labour.

One important spiritual and practical lesson we learn is that we should clean our backyard first before teaching others. And having done that, we should build an altar to the LORD and spend time to commune with Him and worship Him. Gideon was so

spiritually far from the LORD that he could not discern that the apostasy of the children of Israel was the cause of their sufferings. Gideon like many Christians and non-Christians often blame God first for all their troubles and tribulations. Seldom do they sit back and remain calm to evaluate the situation and take appropriate action.

Another lesson we can learn is that we can trust God's Word. We should not be like Gideon who asked the LORD three times for a sign. Unbelief leads to asking for a sign. Mature Christians should read God's Word on a daily basis to the extent that they will learn to trust in the LORD with all their hearts, and not to lean on their own understanding; and in all their ways to acknowledge Him and He shall direct their paths (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Finally, many Christians always give excuses when they are called to serve in the church. Like Gideon they would say that they do not have the talents, the gifts, the knowledge, the expertise, and the list can go on and on. Just as the LORD encouraged Gideon, He will do the same to us: "Surely I will be with you." It is not thinking what we are today but thinking what God can make you and I to become. Gideon was a timid and fearful man but the LORD was going to make him into a great warrior.
AMEN