



THE CHURCH OF THE
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THE PEACE OF THE LORD

Judges 6:1-35

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The book of Judges contains a series of historical vignettes that are increasingly reminiscent of Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son. Each vignette describes how the Hebrew people, having arrived in the Promised Land, squander their inheritance in the pursuit of pleasure and popularity and power. Whenever they come to their senses, they cry out for a deliverer, and the Lord sends one to save them. However, successive vignettes demonstrate a downward spiral. After every deliverance, their repentance is increasingly short-lived. They go right back to their old, idolatrous ways, and their hearts get a little harder every time. As these vignettes become darker and darker, the need for God's ultimate deliverance in Jesus becomes increasingly clear.

The Symptoms: Seven Years of Locusts (Judges 6:1-6)

There's often a difference between the *symptoms* and the *disease*. Our neurological pain receptors are mostly located on the surface of our bodies rather than on our internal organs. So often a patient in the Emergency Room with sharp pain in their neck and shoulders doesn't have anything wrong with their neck and shoulders. It's actually something deep within—like a heart attack. As a physician, if you treat the *symptoms* without treating the *disease*, your patient may die.

In Judges 6, the *symptoms* were the seventh annual pillaging of Israel by their neighbors to the south and the east. The Midianites and their allies were like bullies who keeps stealing your lunch money. Every year the Midianites would swarm in like locusts—they and their camels being more than anyone could number (6:5). They would devour all the produce, from up near the sea of Galilee all the way down to the Gaza strip. They would leave “no sustenance in Israel and neither sheep nor ox nor donkey” (6:4). So the Israelites were suffering acute pain as they hid from their tormentors. Those were their symptoms. But what was their disease?

The Diagnosis: Idolatry (Judges 6:7-10)

After seven consecutive years of Midianite locusts devouring everything, the Israelites finally came to their senses and cried out to the Lord for a deliverer (6:7). Yet God didn't sent a

prophet instead, someone whom the Israelites didn't know that they needed. (When the bully keeps stealing your lunch money, you want a hero, not a theologian!)

God is the great physician. He's well aware of the difference between the symptoms and the disease. God knew the risk to his patient if he only relieved symptoms and didn't treat the disease. Israel needed more than rescue from the Midianite horde. They needed heart surgery. So the Lord sent a spokesman, an unnamed prophet, to explain their heart disease. In 6:8-10 the prophet reminded them that when God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, he warned them to keep their hearts from idols in the promised land. They must not "fear" the Canaanite gods (6:10). But fear them they did. Consider the diagnosis at the end of 6:10: "You have not obeyed my voice." The Israelites had not heeded God's word, but instead had "feared" other gods. So, because they had given their hearts to idols, the true God "gave them into the hand of the Midianites" (6:1).

God's discipline can be a pain in the neck. But it could be worse. He could **not** discipline us. He could leave us to our own devices, giving no warning signs of the deeper deadly disease within our hearts. He doesn't have to put up flashing lights and road blocks as we accelerate towards disaster. But he does. By his grace, God disciplines his loved ones, calling us to turn back and return to him. If you're feeling some aches and pains, or encountering some road blocks, it's worth considering that God might be trying to teach you something. If so, give thanks. He disciplines those whom he loves.

So if the Israelites' diagnosis was the heart disease of idolatry, what then would be a satisfactory cure? As we'll see in the rest of the story, the Israelites needed to return to a proper "fear of the Lord." And God's treatment plan would begin with a fellow named Gideon.

The Cure, Part One: The Gift of God's Presence (Judges 6:11-18)

From the moment that we meet Gideon there's ambiguity. The angel hailed him saying, "The Lord be with you, O mighty man of valor!" (6:12). But the angel also found him threshing wheat not out in the open where the wind could blow away the chaff, but down in the pit of the winepress, hiding from the Midianites (6:11). So it's hard to tell whether he was a hero or a coward—or maybe just an ordinary guy.

Gideon's faith also was ambiguous. Despite his father's shrine to the Canaanite gods, Gideon apparently still believed in the Lord. He asked the angel:

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).

Gideon was no wise theologian. He believed in the Lord, but he mistook Israel's symptoms for the disease. He must not have understood the prophet's diagnosis. As people often do, Gideon shifted all the blame onto the Lord. In his view, it was the *Lord's* infidelity (rather than the Israelites') that had caused the Midianite problem. You might say that his theology was the prosperity Gospel, because he believed that it was God's job to heal their symptoms, full stop.

So Gideon wasn't especially brave, and he wasn't particularly wise. Why then did God choose Gideon? Why would he pick such an ordinary guy to be his man of the hour? It's because ordinary people are the only kind God ever has to choose from. Courage and wisdom aren't innate qualities; they're gifts from the Lord. God calls ordinary people like you and me to do extraordinary things.

Nevertheless, it took a very long time in this story for ordinary Gideon to get to the extraordinary acts of deliverance. The routing of the Midianites won't even come until chapter 7. But we still have a long way to go in chapter 6, through all the banter between Gideon and the angel of the Lord, and then the strange goat roast, and then the night raid on his father's shrine. If you think this chapter runs a little long, then you're on to something. There's a reason for the slow motion narrative in this chapter: to spotlight the tender, deliberate kindness of God. It's wonderful and amazing to see God's generosity toward such an ordinary guy.

In what remains of Judges 6, we'll see God generously give Gideon 1) his presence, 2) his peace, and 3) his Word. It begins with the gift of God's presence. When God took the initiative with Gideon, before he gave him anything to do, he assured him of his presence. Take a look at the dialogue between Gideon and the angel in vv 11-18.¹ In this dialogue, there are seven spoken lines. Gideon's three questions are interspersed between the angel's four statements, but the whole exchange is about one thing: *the promise of God's presence*.

Angel: The Lord is with you, mighty warrior.

Gideon: Is he? Then why do we keep getting ransacked?

Angel: Go deliver your people. Don't you know it's me, the Lord, who sends you?

Gideon: But how? I'm weak.

Angel: I will be with you.

Gideon: Will you stay for dinner?

Angel: I'll stay right here with you.

Gideon's questions ranged from *why* to *how* to *can you stay for dinner?* The angel could have answered each question with more precision. Instead, it was a teachable moment, so he drove his main point home by repeating it four times. "You thought that it was the Lord who was unfaithful? No way! Emmanuel. Emmanuel. Emmanuel. Emmanuel."

¹ While it is the angel of the Lord who speaks with Gideon, the angel speaks as God because he speaks for God.

The foundation for our covenant relationship with God is his fierce commitment to stay. "I will not leave you or forsake you," he says. This was the starting point for Gideon's relationship with the Lord, and it's the same starting point for you and for me. The gift of God's presence is ultimately about the Lord Jesus, God incarnate. Nothing can separate us from his love. The apostle Paul writes: "For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39). When Jesus comes into your life, he comes to stay.

The Cure, Part Two: The Gift of God's Peace (Judges 6:19-24)

Next, after the dialogue between Gideon and the angel is the bizarre goat roast in vv 19-24. This section is a little harder to understand because it assumes we're familiar with the Old Testament sacrificial system. But underneath it all is something that is very familiar to all of us, and that's our longing for the peace of the Lord.

When I bought my new eyeglasses, the optometrist sold me on adding anti-glare coating, which in theory eliminates reflection *from* lenses, improving one's sight *through* the lenses. But it comes with a cost: the lenses are a hassle to clean. You'll scratch your lenses if you don't do your cleaning at the sink. My problem is that my glasses are always getting smudged. When I'm not able to clean them, I may go all day with a kind of oily haze over my lenses. But because my lenses are anti-reflective, only *I* can see the oily haze. It's my dirty little secret.

You may not wear glasses, but you probably do know what it's like to have a dirty secret. Perhaps a nasty habit that you do when no one else is looking. Maybe a deep wound buried in your past. Most everyone has at least something like this. It's an unwelcome companion, with us wherever we go, yet invisible to everyone else. Wouldn't it be great to be free and clean? To have it totally and permanently wiped away? That's what the peace of the Lord is all about.

Gideon had heard the promise of God's presence four times. But what about Gideon's dirty secrets? Did God know? Could God see past Gideon's anti-glare coating? If God really knew Gideon deep down inside, would he still stay? Gideon wanted to know the peace of the Lord.

He took many hours to prepare to worship the Lord by making a great feast (6:19). He slaughtered and prepared a young goat for roasting. He made enough pita to feed hundreds, and also a vat of home brew. All of this at a time when livestock and grain were extraordinarily scarce. What was Gideon doing? He was assembling all the essential components for a Peace Sacrifice according to the Old Testament Law (Leviticus 7).

When Gideon brought out the elements of his offering, he must have been very encouraged to find the angel had kept his promise and was still there. The angel immediately recognized what Gideon had prepared, and gave him careful instructions regarding how to present them on a makeshift stone altar (6:20). Then the angel's staff touched the offering, the whole thing went up in flames, and the angel disappeared. It had worked! God had accepted Gideon's sacrifice! They had shared a meal together! Then suddenly Gideon cried out in fear (6:22).

Fear isn't what one would expect at the end of a Peace Sacrifice. I was expecting Gideon to be happy and relieved. But after re-reading this passage, I realized that in this case, Gideon's fear was highly appropriate. It signified the cure for Israel's disease. Remember the prophet's diagnosis was that Israel had not obeyed God's word, but instead had *feared* other gods. To be healed, they needed to return to a proper fear of the Lord. If Gideon was going to become their deliverer, then he had to be a true God-fearer first.

Nevertheless, fear wasn't Gideon's only emotion. He also experienced peace. Did you notice how, after the angel vanished in v 21, Gideon talked with the Lord again in vv 22-23? Gideon cried out to the Lord in prayer, and the Lord answered him, saying, "Peace be with you. Do not be afraid, for you will not die." So even though Gideon no longer could see the angel, he continued to enjoy God's presence and now also God's peace. As a result, Gideon turned the place of the sacrifice into an altar and named it "The Lord is peace," memorializing what happened there that day (6:24).

Every altar in the Old Testament foreshadows the cross of Christ, when Jesus was sacrificed for our sins, so that we might have clean hearts before Almighty God. Paul says, "since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 5:1). Do you want to be clean? Do you want to be free of your own dirty secrets? If you will make Jesus Lord of your life, then as far as the east is from the west, so far will our heavenly Father remove our sins from us (Ps 103:12) through Jesus his Son.

As Christians, when we gather for worship, we who have been reconciled to God through Christ practice reconciliation with one another. We pass the peace, not only as a sign of the peace of Christ within us, but also as a way of cancelling any debts between us. It is a time for more than shaking hands. If you have something against your brother or sister, don't wait until the service is over. Go be reconciled. For whenever we come to the Lord's table, we come as one body at peace with one another, feasting with the one who purchased eternal peace for us by his own flesh and blood.

The Cure, Part Three: The Gift of God's Word (Judges 6:25-32)

Finally, having received the gifts of God's presence and God's peace, Gideon was ready to receive and respond to the gift of God's Word. Again, remember the prophet's diagnosis? Israel had not obeyed God's word, but instead had *feared* other gods. Now Gideon,

having *feared* the Lord, was ready to *follow* the Lord by obeying his word. And not surprisingly, God's word was a command to destroy his father's idols.

Decades earlier, Joshua had addressed the Israelites and said, "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether false gods or the Lord. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." The people responded by renewing their covenant with God. Then Joshua commanded them to, "Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord." (Josh 24:23). Joshua knew that they still had their idols, and he knew that they wouldn't keep their promises if they didn't destroy the false gods. Now God commanded Gideon to do the same.

The Great Physician knows what he's doing. After healing your heart disease, if he tells you to cut out Big Macs and french fries, he's not trying to be mean. God's Word is a gift to us, because God knows what's best for us. Because he's given us his presence and his peace, we have the power for purity, to obey what he commands.

So Gideon pulled down the shrine using his father's bull (6:27). Then he built another altar to the Lord, and he used the debris from the Canaanite shrine as fuel to make another sacrificial offering. When Gideon's fellow townspeople woke up the next morning, they were outraged and called for his death. Why? Because even though their idols had been destroyed, the townspeople still feared them. But not everyone agreed.

The fear that had gripped Gideon's father was beginning to fade. He mocked the others, asking them, "Will you contend for Baal? ... If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because his altar has been broken down." Therefore, the narrator tells us, Gideon was known as Jerubbaal, the guy who fought Baal. Just as the angel had said when he first hailed him, Gideon was a "mighty man of valor."²

So how did ordinary Gideon become extraordinary? Through the patience and generosity of the Lord. First, the Lord gave Gideon his presence. Then he gave Gideon his peace. And lastly he gave Gideon his word. Through God's patience and generosity, ordinary people become mighty for him.

The Great Physician is at work on each of our hearts even now. He refuses to merely alleviate the symptoms without treating the disease. And the cure he offers us involves being filled with these same gifts. As we open our hearts to him, the Lord will give us more of himself, filling us with his presence, cleanse us and giving us his peace, and guiding us by his word. Ask him to fill you as he did Gideon.

As the Psalmist says, "Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Receive these good gifts of the Lord, and he will do extraordinary things in your life as well.

² We will see how he led his people against the Midianites in chapter 7.