

The Book of Judges

Lesson 11 - Chapter 6

Judges 6 began with the chilling but familiar words: ***“But the people did what was evil from Adonai’s perspective....”*** Thus also is introduced the 5th in the series of stories (the 5th cycle) about Israel’s stubborn pattern of returning to idol worship AFTER they had been delivered from the oppression of an enemy, and this caused by their idol worship.

The tendency of Israel towards worshipping Ba’al had become so strong in Israel that even Gideon, that distinguished hero of God, eventually would yield to the temptation himself. For that reason his family and clan would later be visited with calamity and misfortune for such depravities.

Today’s lesson on Judges 6 is just one sobering sermon after another; it’s unavoidable because it just bursts from the pages of God’s Word as He pleads with His people to open their ears and hearts to Him and NOT to be as hard soil that even the gentle rains cannot penetrate.

The first 10 verses that we studied last time explained that after 40 years of rest against foreign oppressors, Israel went right back to their old ways, again worshipped the Canaanite gods, and the Lord responded by drawing nomadic marauders from the east and south to plunder Israel’s food supply. These invaders did this for 7 years, always coming at harvest season. The marauders are identified as Midian (which would have been the head of the coalition) along with Amalek, and then some unnamed smaller bands of robbers called “the children of the east”.

Their behavior was metaphorically described as that of locusts; they would descend in countless numbers (from seemingly nowhere) upon the Hebrews in Canaan and stay until they had collected all the food they could eat and carry away; and this time they even **destroyed** what they couldn’t haul off (probably as a punishment for Israel not being forthcoming with all they had expected).

Israel was depressed and, feeling hopeless, lost all will to resist these descendants of Ishmael who came riding upon their fearsome camels. Now whether it was from remembering the earlier generations when their ancestors would sin, be punished by conquerors, and find themselves in a similarly deplorable state, or whether it was more a knee-jerk reaction to the condition of being so deep in a pit of despair, Israel finally cried out to YHWH to help them. I am sad to think that the human way of exhausting all other possibilities BEFORE finally and reluctantly submitting to God is probably generally how it has always been among mankind; for

sure it is that way in our day even among those of us who know Him.

I would like to remind you of a 50-cent word I taught you a few weeks ago: syncretism. Syncretism is the act of blending; it is what happens when one culture assimilates into another. Israel was blending their ways and worship with that of the Canaanites and at its core was the blending of YHWH with the Ba'als. It wasn't done with some kind of official council meeting that resulted in a well-defined decision; it wasn't something that the leaders of the 12 tribes ordered their people to do. Rather slowly, almost imperceptibly, it just kind of happened. A compromise here, and an attempt to show respect to another's religion there; marriage between a lovely Hebrew girl and nice Canaanite boy, the forming of friendly and prosperous business relationships with Ba'al worshippers; that's how it happened. Typically no Hebrew set out to offend Yehoveh and submit to Ba'al and Ashtoreth but they all wanted peace and good relations with their neighbors so it meant tolerance for all the gods that were so very valued by each culture. Canaanites weren't horrible people; they weren't barbarians and murderers. Canaanites and Hebrews were very much alike, both coming from Mesopotamian roots; they were farmers, herders, craftsmen and merchants and their societies were much more complementary than contrasting.

Biblically speaking 40 years of time is just a hiccup in history; but it is more than enough time for men to forget very recent lessons of the past and to take a long series of baby steps that result in substantial changes that don't seem so substantial because it was so gradual in coming.

I can recall when I was in High School that I had no idea what homosexuality was (and I mean that fully literally). Until I went into the military I was completely ignorant that such a thing even existed. I remember that years later when the "out of the closet" movement of the gays began that it was that they had no interest in changing anyone, or advocating their lifestyle; rather, they just wanted to be left alone and not treated as criminals. The wise men of that day fought against it and warned that once it was considered something to be allowed and left as but a personal choice, that is was a human right even if it was wrong, that in no time at all it would spread like a malignant tumor.

Today it is taught in our schools and commended as a perfectly legitimate way of life. Children are required to see same sex couples as no different than traditional marriage. One of our political parties holds it up as part of its platform and declares what a wonderful and lovely thing it is. New terms like homophobe have been created to describe anyone who would dare to say that homosexuality is inherently wrong. Those evangelical Christians who continue to advocate against it are seen as ignorant, small minded, backward and even mean thus we have a large and growing homosexual church. We have whole industries that have sprung up to serve the gay and lesbian community, and now in many western nations to speak out against homosexuality means going to jail and then a re-education process before being allowed to re-enter society. This is syncretism. This is what happened to Israel.

Syncretism has happened and is happening as I speak to the Body of Believers; for centuries we have slowly but surely integrated and adopted pagan worship practices and traditions that (in Christianity's infancy) were considered outlandish abominations and were thoroughly

rejected. But with the passing of time, a compromise here and a hope to appeal to seekers in order to expand our numbers there, these practices have become a regular part of us for so long that they are considered not only normal but also necessary and desired. Most Christians have no idea where some of these cherished traditions came from, what they meant in their original, or why they were ever introduced. And frankly most don't WANT to know because it might mean being faced with some unpopular (if not drastic) changes in our lives and our congregations and especially our doctrines. It would mean things that we truly enjoy and are more than comfortable with might be challenged. This is called Religious Syncretism.

I'm telling you all of this so that you can picture what was going on at the time of the Judges, because we are reliving that same time and doing essentially the same things.

Let's reread a portion of Judges 6 to continue in our study.

RE-READ JUDGES 6:11 – 24

God begins the process of deliverance of His people in verse 11. The **malach YHWH**, the Angel of the Lord, presents himself to Gideon near some kind of tree. The place is called **Ofrah**; and some of you who have been to Israel with me have visited a place in the so-called West Bank territories called **Ofrah**. This is not the same place; the **Ofrah** we visited was in Benjamin's former territory. As we have found on numerous occasions the same name was used for a number of places in Canaan. This one is more fully described as being "**Ofrah** that belonged to **Yo'ash the Avi-ezri**".

In other words this particular village of **Ofrah** was located in the territory of western Manessah. And Yo'ash of the clan of Avi'ezer owned the village, which was part of the tribe of Manessah.

Now theologically speaking this section of Judges can be quite a help to discovering just who this Angel of the Lord actually is (although I can tell you that Judaism would disagree with the rather straightforward evidence and conclusion). And frankly the result of studying this once again requires us to re-examine the structure of the rather standard Christian doctrine of the Trinity. I say "structure of the doctrine" because in the main I think it is correct, but the rigid requirement that any possible physical manifestation of God MUST be a pre-incarnate Jesus is very questionable at best.

Before we go there let's get our bearings: this **malach YHWH** is NOT the prophet from God that was spoken of in verse 7. The Angel of the Lord is not the same as this unnamed prophet who God sent to the people of Israel to explain to them why they were in this oppressed condition, and it is summed up in verse 10 when the prophet (who is simply delivering a message from God, verbatim) says, "**But you paid no attention to what I (God) said**".

So some time after the prophet came and chastised the people of Israel the Angel of the Lord came to Gideon and spoke ONLY to him (not to the people in general or the leaders of Israel). Gideon was the son of **Yo'ash**. And when the Angel of the Lord showed up the scene is of Gideon threshing wheat in a wine press. That small statement tells us a couple of important

things: first, this event happened in the summertime around what we'd call June because that's when the wheat harvest occurs. Another thing it tells us is that something is drastically awry because we have Gideon using a wine press to thresh wheat. Wheat is normally threshed by being laid out on a well-tamped and slightly elevated piece of ground, or on a large section of rock outcropping that has been flattened, so that as the wheat is tamped upon the breeze will blow away the chaff. Further even for a relatively small family unit it takes a lot of wheat stocks to be threshed to obtain a useful amount of wheat kernels. Therefore an animal (preferably an ox) is used to pull a log over the wheat in order to separate the heads of wheat from the stalks en masse.

But here we have a situation whereby a wine press is being used for threshing, therefore only a very small amount of wheat could be processed at one time thus making it an arduous proposition to extract enough wheat for sufficient bread for a single family. An ancient winepress was basically a hole in a rock where grapes were placed, and then someone would either trample on the grapes in bare feet or use something like a blunt staff to squash the grapes for their juice. Typically the rock receptacle was slightly slanted so that as the process proceeded gravity would cause the juice to run down towards another depression in the rock where it would pool.

Thus what we have is that not only is wheat in short supply due to the marauders from the east, but that threshing had to be improvised in a way that didn't draw the watchful gaze of these human locusts.

The Angel of the Lord speaks and is said to have come and sat under a Terebinth, or Oak, or Pistachio tree (depending on your translation). The kind of tree is unimportant, but what is important is how the Angel of the Lord begins the conversation; he calls Gideon "you valiant hero". Then proceeds to tell Gideon that the Lord is with him.

Nothing in this scene would illustrate Gideon as anything but a rather typical member of a passive and oppressed population; so why the accolade of being called a "valiant hero"? I'm sure it stunned Gideon as well. This was a prophetic statement of what Gideon was about to become. Or, in another respect, it was who Gideon already was but couldn't be manifest until the Lord intervened. It was an honest expression of how God viewed Gideon as opposed to how Gideon viewed himself.

One of the great realities of YHWH and those who follow Him is that He sees us for who He made us to be, not necessarily how we have behaved up to this point in our lives. I spent the major portion of my career in boardrooms, flying around the USA and Europe running high-tech businesses. I was a pretty run-of-the-mill businessman simply trying to do my job and create wealth for the corporation while creating a prosperous and comfortable life for my family. If anyone asked me WHO I was I said a businessman; that's how I saw myself.

Interestingly it was my wife who saw me as something else; she would tell me (rather often in fact) about how I should be a teacher. I would laugh at that every time she said it; nothing could have been further from my mind or interest. But in my 40's something happened; I lost interest in being a businessman but didn't know what I should do with the rest of my life. A

man's identity is all wrapped up in what he does; if you ask a man WHOM he is he'll usually tell you WHAT he does for a living. But that is in no way how God sees us. The Lord had to, in His time, let me know that my wife was right: in His eyes I was a teacher; that is how He made me regardless of what I thought about it. My purpose would become as a teacher of His Word to His people.

Here in Judges 6:12, the man who was hiding from the nomads who plundered his family, the man who was merely surviving and was to himself nothing special, was to YHWH a "valiant hero" and would courageously lead his people in battle. It just hadn't happened yet.

My dear friends, the Lord sees you in light of your role in the Kingdom of Heaven; and every one of those roles is glorious and important. He sees you for the wondrous way in which He made you and for who you REALLY are IF you will trust Him enough to believe Him. Gideon was thinking of himself as anything but a valiant hero. Essentially what was spoken to Gideon was a promise from God.

The Lord apparently appeared as a traveler to Gideon in much the same way as he did to Abraham about 800 years earlier, although He wasn't specifically called the Angel of the Lord in that instance. Some Rabbis say that *malach YHWH* did not appear as a heavenly angel to Gideon because angels are always spoken of as either flying or floating in the air or heavens, or they are standing erect, never sitting. Further Gideon didn't seem all that taken by this person; the nearly universal reaction to the appearance of an angel is for the viewer to fall to pieces in fright and awe. In any case this is a visible revelation of Yehoveh in human (not angelic) form. And besides giving a promise to Gideon that he is a valiant hero, the mysterious traveler also tells Gideon that YHWH is with him. Let me pause just momentarily to explain that anytime I tell you that the text says Yehoveh (even though you may not see it in your bibles), I mean that literally; it's not my speculation or opinion. 99% of the time where in our Bibles it will say Lord, or God, or as in the CJB Adonai, in the original it says YHWH (God's formal name as first revealed to Moses).

This is key; because dealing with the Lord by His name makes the situation very personal. Yet it also makes it clear that in the ancient world mindset of multiple gods, the god that is speaking is named YHWH and that YHWH is the God of Israel. Sadly, Israel seemed to forget that regularly.

Gideon says to the divine traveler, "if what you say is true (that YHWH is with Gideon) then why is all this terrible oppression happening to us?" You see when the Angel of the Lord said that "God is with you" to Gideon, Gideon took it as a reference to God being present with Israel not with him individually. He didn't understand that the Lord had come to strengthen and empower Gideon, as an individual, to deliver Israel. Then Gideon says, "so where are all the miracles that our ancestors experienced when God brought them up out of Egypt. Instead, YHWH is gone and has allowed us to become servants of Midian".

So where are all the miracles? Isn't that something we've probably all wondered in our private thoughts from time to time? Why, when a growing part of the world (and even our American society) openly shuns even the concept of God, doesn't He show up and humiliate His

doubters in some spectacular way like in times of old? How come the Bible is simply loaded with dazzling appearances of angels, the parting of waters, entire wicked cities being leveled, an enemy army of 180,000 suddenly and inexplicably dying, men like Samson being given superhuman abilities to carry out God's will, other men simply speaking and causing the blind to see and the lame to walk?

Gideon looked around him and asked a very reasonable question: if God is here among us how is it that we are so downtrodden and under the thumb of foreigners? If YHWH is our God and is present, why do foreigners mock Him and get away with it? Gideon more or less answers His own question: No, God isn't here with us rather He has abandoned us.

And you know, in some ways what Gideon was thinking was accurate; he had it right. Even though God was still there He indeed HAD turned His holy back on Israel and turned them over to Midian for punishment. Where Gideon was wrong was that he blamed God for it, not Israel, which is where the blame lay.

You see Judges 6 shows us that it's only the generations where obedience and a singular faithfulness to the Father are actively practiced that the miracles abounded. We can look around us and know that there is a problem today between the Lord and His followers; thus the miracles and the power are in short supply. This is something that traditional Christianity rails at because it too often equates obedience with something it calls legalism. Obey a law of God, that's legalism and that's bad. In Gideon's God's people day people did NOT stop believing in YHWH; rather they stopped being obedient and they became unfaithful by adding other gods to their lives. Listen to a passage you have all heard before, but perhaps you haven't heard it more in its context with the verses on either side of it quoted:

CJB 2 Chronicles 7:13 If I shut up the sky, so that there is no rain; or if I order locusts to devour the land; or if I send an epidemic of sickness among my people; 14 then, if my people, who bear my name, will humble themselves, pray, seek my face and turn from their evil ways, I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin and heal their land. 15 Now my eyes will be open and my ears will pay attention to the prayer made in this place.

I guess I'm a little perplexed how if this Old Testament promise was supposedly abolished and nailed to the Cross that it is so widely preached upon and hoped for by modern Believers who prefer to refer to themselves as "New Testament Christians". But of course since I know, and I think most of you who are listening know, the OT has not been abolished thus we can indeed rely upon and rest in this enduring message of hope in 2nd Chronicles. But also notice the final verse of this 3-verse passage; it says that only after returning to the Lord in obedience (turning away from evil) will the Father's eyes be open and His ears ready to pay attention to our prayers.

This is the principle being spoken of here in Judges 6. Great miracles in days gone by happened when God's people called upon Him AND due to their turning from their evil ways He listened. And I maintain that the general weakness in the Church today is precisely as it was for Israel in the era of the Judges. We insist that we're worshipping God properly and following Him sincerely, but when our actions and traditions are held under the light of the Holy

Scripture too much of what we follow are actually weak doctrines of men.

Verse 14 returns us to the topic of identifying the Angel of the Lord because it says in the Hebrew, “**YHWH** turned to him and said.....” Aha. The Angel of the Lord is here unequivocally identified as YHWH. Here’s where the too rigidly applied doctrine of the Trinity runs into trouble; those who adhere to the strictest sense of the Trinitarian view say that any and every physical apparition of God **MUST** be the Son. But nowhere is the Son ever called YHWH. YHWH is either the Father or the unified Godhead (however you want to look at it). Nowhere is the Father identified as anything but YHWH; He is given no other formal name (although some titles and epithets like El Shaddai and Abba are used from time to time).

I’ve taught repeatedly that the Angel of the Lord (malach YHWH) is some other kind of manifestation of God than the Holy Spirit, the Son, or the Father in direct revelation. The Father is always referred to in the Word as invisible and as purely spirit. The Angel of the Lord lands outside of the Trinitarian view when taken to it’s most rigid. It is mysterious, yet here the **malach YHWH** is definitely NOT an angel, nor is it the Spirit, nor is it the Son. Don’t ask me to solve this mystery, I can’t. But that doesn’t mean that I must accept a manmade doctrine that doesn’t fit the Scriptural facts simply because it makes things nice and tidy. O. Frankly, as the years pass, I’m growing more comfortable about not having all the answers to the deepest mysteries of God.

In verse 14 God commissions Gideon as a **Shophet** (a judge): He says that Gideon will rescue Israel from the hands of Midian. He further tells Gideon that NOW (because of God’s presence) Gideon has the strength to do what must be done. But Gideon is skeptical and in verse 15 responds that he has no means to save Israel. And even if he did, he comes from one of the poorest families in his tribe, Manessah, and on top of that he is the youngest male in the household! So Gideon says he has no means, he has no money, and he has no status to be the deliverer of Israel. He’s not saying he won’t answer the call, Gideon just can’t imagine how such an assignment is humanly possible. Answer: it’s not. So God replies to Gideon’s quite logical assessment that he will succeed because, “I (God) will be with you”. It will be God’s doing and God’s strength that envelope Gideon, not Gideon’s personal and human abilities that assure success. In fact, says the Lord, it will be for you as though the entire Midianite army was as but one man.

Then in verse 17 begins the famous and often told story of Gideon’s request for a sign from God. Gideon was still not entirely convinced of whom he was dealing with; was this traveler merely a godly man, or was he a heavenly messenger of God, or was it actually God? I can completely identify with Gideon’s dilemma. If God appeared right in front of me, I’m not sure I could accept it. I have no idea what God in visible form would look like. Oh, most would say, “that’s easy, He would look like Yeshua”. Fine. But what did Yeshua look like? I’d first wonder if my imagination was playing tricks on me. Was the devil or my own evil inclination deceiving me? Was it a dream or a hallucination? It would be so unexpected, and I’d feel so unworthy that I would **NEED** some kind of proof that my limited mind and flesh-bound humanness could feel confident with and not just stand there bewildered. Yet in another way Gideon knew what was happening was otherworldly and so responded in a rather knee-jerk way that people of that era would have: he wanted to bring an offering to this god or god

apparition. Everyone knew that gods expected gifts and burnt offerings. Naturally, he also responded by offering what was standard fare in Hebrew culture and what was at least loosely connected with the Law of Moses. Essentially Gideon sort of combined the customary Middle Eastern hospitality of offering a guest some food, along with showing a submissive respect to this god or agent of god. Thus the meal Gideon prepared for this single individual was enormous; an entire kid goat PLUS Matza made from a full ephah of flour, meaning it would have been around 40 pounds of bread that he brought.

It's interesting that the Hebrew word used for this "gift" of food was **Minchah**; strictly speaking (according to the Torah) a **Minchah** is the grain offering that accompanies an '**Olah** (or burnt) offering. However over time the use of the term **Minchah** also came to mean a rather generic, all-occasion voluntary gift (not necessarily for a sacrifice) usually of food. In fact Judaism to this day uses the term in that way.

Again, Gideon was acting largely within the every day customary Middle Eastern understanding at least as much as he was operating within the laws of Moses. It was understood that if you wanted something from a god you first had to give him a gift; and Gideon wanted a sign and so he offered the gift as the prerequisite in hopes of receiving that sign. It's always been amazing to me how the Lord will, in His mercy and grace, work within the beliefs and customs of humans (in all of our various cultures) and usually not rebuke us for our ignorance and what in the end is downright silliness.

That Gideon thought he was offering a meal to be LITERALLY eaten as opposed to a sacrifice is demonstrated when Gideon "presents" the food to the mysterious traveler. The **malach YHWH** accepts the food and instructs him to take the meat and the Matza and lay them on a rock, then pour the meat broth that Gideon had also provided over the top of it all. It was about now that Gideon was starting to realize more fully that he was dealing with a non-human because at that moment the Angel of the Lord reached out with his staff, touched the offering and fire shot up out of the rock and burned it all up into smoke and ashes. If THAT didn't freak-out Gideon enough, the Angel of the Lord just suddenly evaporated before his eyes!

Now Gideon had witnessed a lot of sacrifices to all kinds of the Canaanite gods, and also to the God of Israel, in his lifetime but NOTHING like this had ever happened before. It finally struck Gideon like a thunderbolt that indeed this was God, and He had appeared to him and talked with him and given him encouragement as well as instructions; and it scared Gideon out of his wits. He figured he would not survive this encounter. Why would Gideon believe he would die?

CJB Exodus 33:18 But Moshe said, "I beg you to show me your glory!" 19 He replied, "I will cause all my goodness to pass before you, and in your presence I will pronounce the name of ADONAI. Moreover, I show favor to whomever I will, and I display mercy to whomever I will. 20 But my face," he continued, "you cannot see, because a human being cannot look at me and remain alive.

Listen: this goes all the more to the core of my assertion that the Angel of YHWH is not a direct revelation of any of the 3 persons defined as the Trinity, but as yet another of several

legitimate manifestations of God that is given an entirely separate name and set of attributes: the **malach YHWH**. It was the Father (because the specific NAME of the Father, YHWH, is quoted), yet it certainly was NOT the person of the Father or else as the Father told even Moses, “a human being cannot look at me (YHWH) and remain alive”.

This understanding must have been a very strong tradition within the Hebrew community of Canaan. Just like in Christianity we have certain bible stories that are the most common among even our children (Jesus’ birth in a manger, His death on the cross, Samson and the Philistines to name a few) so it was with the Israelites. Gideon knew he was a dead man walking; but God assured him all was OK. First, as I just said, Gideon didn’t actually view the person of the Father but rather some manifestation of Him. Rather, says YHWH, shalom is yours as a blessing from Me. And remember, that while we usually translate shalom as “peace”, it means so much more. It means well being, it means abundance, and it means harmony with God and His favor. This was positive assurance from God.

So Gideon built an altar on that spot and called it “YHWH shalom”. And it says that “to this day” that altar remains. What the phrase “to this day” means is that the writer of Judges personally knew of the place in his day. As I explained in the introduction to the book of Judges, it was a Hebrew writer or editor who pieced together the book of judges from various documents and traditions. After all, the events of Judges spanned perhaps as much as 350 years or so. Understand that this altar was not intended to be a new place of sacrifices to YHWH; rather it was a memorial that commemorated this awesome revelation of God. But that very night, Gideon had yet another encounter with God.

We’ll take that up next week.