

Series: God in the Midst of the Chaos

“Gideon: God with Us”

Introduction: When you hear the word “hacker,” what comes to mind? Hacker is actually an ambiguous term. On the one hand, it can describe someone who does something skillfully and well, like those who have in depth knowledge of computer hardware and software. On the other hand, it can describe someone who does something carelessly and poorly, like someone who has given you a bad haircut, or trimmed a hedge but left large gouges in the shrub as well as branches sticking up all over the place!

I bring this to mind because the name Gideon means hacker and the ambiguity in the word is useful because in our journey with Gideon over the next few weeks we’ll see that he does some things well and some things not so well. He hacks down an altar to the Canaanite god Baal, at which his father and people had begun to worship (6:25-32). That’s a good thing. But later we’ll see that he also uses his military success to leads the people he has delivered back into idolatry (7:22-27). And that’s a bad thing!

As we journey along with Gideon in the midst of his chaos, he will help us to ask a variety of helpful questions, of ourselves and of God, as we seek to navigate our own troubled waters. Deborah, Barak and Jael have left the scene. There has been forty years of peace. Let’s now meet Gideon {READ}...

I. Midianite Oppression

A. We’ve seen on several occasions how God has given his people over to foreign oppressors as a means of discipline, as a means of waking them up to the dangers of losing sight of him and being lured by the local gods and goddesses as they settled in the Promised Land, the land known as Canaan. Part of God’s call on them as they settled in this land was to break down the pagan altars (2:2), not because God liked to play favorites with one people group over another, but because God stood opposed to anything or anyone who stood against his good and abundant creational purposes for all of mankind. So we see God standing against not only the Canaanites and their unjust ways, but also against the Israelites when they refused to get their own house in order.

B. As we’ve come to expect, the oppression exercised against the Israelites by the Midianites wasn’t pretty. As we heard, it involved camel-riding raiding parties who swept into the land like swarms of locusts, destroying both crops and livestock such that the Israelite economy took a major hit. The people were left impoverished and forced to hide in caves and mountain clefts. As a for instance, when we meet Gideon, he was threshing wheat not out in the open, but while sequestered behind the walls of a winepress.

II. A Sermon from a Prophet

A. Now, in this instance, when the people cried out, God didn’t immediately raise up a savior, as he had done in the past cycles. Instead, he gave them a sermon! And so we would do well to pause and consider it’s message. It came from the lips of a prophet. The prophet reminds the people of two things: the exodus from Egypt, which lay behind them, and the gift of land, which lay ahead of them. Both of these gifts had come from the hand of God. But instead of responding with love and thanksgiving and allegiance to the LORD, the people were drawn to other gods. This, actually, is at the heart of the problem of the human condition. It’s a picture of how Paul describes our condition in Romans (1:21):

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him. But their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

B. What's behind this condition? Essentially, human beings don't really want God to be God. We may want what we think God can do for us, but we don't really want God. As Dallas Willard, drawing on the work of Augustine, puts it, "God being God offends human pride. If God is running the universe, and has first claim on our lives, guess who *isn't* running the universe and doesn't get to have things as they please" [*Renovation of the Heart*, 52]. We may think having things the way we want them is the very best way to go, but without a healthy fear and respect of God, we'll eventually find ourselves in a state of chaos. Paul goes on to describe what can become of the human race when it follows the path of its own desires:

They become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy [Ro. 1:29-31].

This describes the chaos of the human condition, when, as Judges ends, people have no king and simply do as they see fit, when they become their own king.

C. Now, the nature of this sermon, at this point in the narrative, suggests Tim Keller, reveals that God is trying to teach his people that their sorrow, their "crying out" (and we have seen several cycles of it) has only been skin-deep; it is not heartfelt. In crying out for deliverance, they have expressed regret, but not remorse and certainly not repentance. It is only through repentance that lasting change can come about. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul makes the distinction this way:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death (2 Cor. 7:10).

That is because regret, or worldly sorrow, only laments the consequences of sin. It is self-centered, focused on the painful circumstances we don't like that have resulted from our sinful actions. It's about how we hurt, how our life is now ruined. We may want God to help us, but we don't really want God to lead us. Godly sorrow, on the other hand, is sorrow over the sin itself. It is God-centered. It is concerned over the breaking of our relationship with God that sin causes, how God has been hurt and how our sin grieves him. It recognizes what we deserve, but what we didn't get, because our penalty was paid by Jesus. Such amazing grace is what begins to move us beyond our sinful actions, fueling a desire to please the one who has loved us so.

D. It's a good reality check. When we fall into sin, are we sorrier about its consequences, what we've "lost," or the way we've hurt God? If we are continuing to cycle into the same sin again and again, then perhaps we are only responding with regret, and not repentance. Are we unwilling to recognize, or maybe simply unaware of the idol or root that lies beneath our sin, what needs to be left or changed in our lives?

III. The Angel of the LORD and the Call of Gideon

A. This sermonic interlude, if you will, highlights not only the deserved discipline that God's people needed but also the undeserved and therefore remarkable nature of God's continuing intervention on their behalf. As Paul later in Romans simply reminds us: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Ro. 5:8). Such intervention in this case comes as God doubles his divine workforce by sending a figure identified as the angel of the LORD. This figure is one of the intriguing mysteries of the OT. Here we hear him both speak as the angel, and then a few verses later be identified as the LORD himself who promises to be with Gideon (vv. 12, 14, 16, 18). Here, I think, we have a deep hint of our triune God. Here we may very well have the presence of God the Son.

B. Most importantly, this figure marks God intervening by his grace, coming to his people, before any kind of repentance has taken place, as far as we can tell. The angel sits down and makes himself comfortable under a tree and seems to watch Gideon work for a while. He then approaches Gideon and simply says: "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior." And, maybe somewhat cheeky and sarcastic, Gideon asks the question all of us have at various points in time: "Pardon me, my lord, but if the LORD is with us, why has all this happened to us?" We need a miracle, an Egypt-like rescue, Gideon goes on to say, instead of a God who has abandon us.

C. Now, notice the assumption, both here as well as probably in our own questioning, if we're honest. The assumption is that if our circumstances are not favorable, then not only must God not be with us, but it also must be God's fault. We're not inclined to believe that we could bring trouble on ourselves. The irony here is that in fact, God's people were in the hands of the Midianites not because God had abandoned them but because they had abandoned God; God had put them there! God had not abandoned them but was seeking to show them the poverty of their idolatry and their need for repentance. He was seeking to work in and through their troubling circumstances for their good.

D. Notice, also, how the Lord had determined to answer Gideon's wish for an Egypt-like deliverance: "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" "You, Gideon," God seems to be saying, "are going to be the Moses for this generation of my people." To which Gideon responds, in a very Moses-like way, "but I'm really nothing Lord. I'm not mighty and I don't come from very mighty stock. I've got two strikes against me. Look at me, I'm even in hiding right now!" Just like Gideon can't believe God could be at work through troubling circumstances, he can't believe that God can work no matter what one's social circumstances. "I will make you mighty, for I see what you, in my strength, can become," God responds. Understandably, Gideon wants some assurance from the LORD and asks him to wait while he runs off to get an offering. Graciously, patiently, the Lord says, "I will wait."

While we wait until next week to see what happens, we can begin to ruminate between now and then:

- Do you know the patience of the Lord, who waits for you to come to him?
- Do you know who God sees that you, in his strength, can become?
- Are you aware of where you need repentance in order to get back on the path God has laid out?
- Can you pray that even if God doesn't seem to be changing your circumstances, he would use you for his purposes in them?

Let us do what Israel struggled to do: glorify the Lord and declare our desire to worship him alone.