

“Here Comes the Judge”

Judges 6-8; Hebrews 11:32-12:4 ¹

After Joshua died in 1375 B.C., the nation of Israel entered a period known as “The Time of the Judges.” During these 325 years, God raised up thirteen Judges to lead Israel until Saul became Israel’s first king in the year 1050. Some of these Judges, like Deborah, Samson, and Samuel, will be familiar to you. Others, like Othniel, Ehud, and Shamgar, are less well known.

If you’ll open your Bibles to Judges 6:1-7, I’ll show you the four-step pattern that repeated itself over and over in our nation during that period of more than three centuries. Judges 6:1 says that *“the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD.”* This four-step cycle began, time after time after time, with Israel’s choosing sin over obedience to God’s law.

The second step appears at the end of verse 1: *“and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites.”* If the first step in this cycle is Israel’s SIN, the second step is God’s JUDGMENT. In this case, the judgment went on for seven years, until, in verse 6, the Israelites *“cried out to the LORD for help.”*

Isn’t it interesting that it took seven years of suffering for Israel to get to the third step in this cycle, an attitude of REPENTANCE? Finally, after Israel repented of her sin and cried out to God, God acted to DELIVER Israel from her oppressors. That story begins in verse 7: *“When the Israelites cried out to the LORD because of Midian, he sent them a prophet.”* Thus, the four-step cycle of The Time of the Judges is SIN, JUDGMENT, REPENTANCE, and DELIVERANCE.

Actually, what you see in Judges 6 is the beginning of my own story, because I am Gideon, son of Joash, of the clan of Abiezer, the fifth of those thirteen judges, and the judge in that story. I’ve come to tell you how I became a Judge of Israel, and about what happened after that.

I made my living as a farmer, growing grapes and wheat on my father’s land near Ophrah. Ophrah was in the Valley of Jezreel, about fifteen miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee. Because of the marauding bands of camel-riding Midianites who had been stealing our animals and crops for seven years, I threshed my wheat at the bottom of a large winepress so as not to attract attention to what I was doing. The Midianites were a desert people, relatives of ours, actually, because they were descended from Father Abraham and his second wife, Keturah, but that’s another story altogether (Genesis 25:1-2).

As I climbed up out of the winepress on one fateful afternoon, I saw a stranger sitting under the Oak of Ophrah, watching me. The stranger hailed me and said, *“Mighty hero, the LORD is with you! Go with the strength you have and rescue Israel from the Midianites. I am sending you! You will destroy the Midianites as if you were fighting against one man”* (Judges 6:12, 14, 16).

“Yeah, right,” said I. *“How can I rescue Israel? My clan is the weakest in the whole tribe of Manasseh, and I am the least in my entire family! If you are truly going to help me, show me a sign to prove that it is really the LORD speaking to me”* (Judges 6:15, 17).

I hurried home, prepared a goat and some unleavened bread, and brought these as a gift of hospitality for the stranger. When I had put the food down on a large rock, the stranger touched the food with his staff. When he did, fire blazed up from the rock and consumed everything I had brought, and the stranger himself disappeared—just like that! When this

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happened, I realized that I really had been in the presence of an angel from God, and I was afraid.

Later that night, I had a vision as I lay on my bed. In that vision, the LORD told me to take my father's prized seven year-old bull—born at the same time that the Midianite oppression began—up to the hill where my father's altar to Baal and his Asherah pole stood. The LORD told me to tear down the altar and cut down the pole, using the stones to build an altar to the LORD and the wood to build a fire on which I would sacrifice the bull as a burnt offering.

The vision was so intense, so convincing, and so urgent, that I got up in the night, took ten servants to help me, and did as the LORD commanded. But when what I had done became known, all the neighbors gathered and called for my death! My father took my side and shouted back, "*Why are you defending Baal? If Baal truly is a god, let him defend himself and destroy the one who knocked down his altar!*" From then on, I was called "Jerubbaal," which means "Let Baal defend himself!" (Judges 6:31-32).

Now that was quite an adventure, but that was nothing at all compared to what was about to happen! Soon after the fracas over the altar, "*the armies of Midian, Amalek, and the people of the east formed an alliance against Israel and crossed the Jordan, camping in the valley of Jezreel*" (6:33). Their camp was near the Hill of Moreh, about four miles from our farm.

When I learned of this, the Spirit of the LORD came over me, and I knew that I was being called to lead an army against the Midianites. I blew a ram's horn as a call to arms, and sent messengers throughout the territories of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, summoning their warriors to battle.

As the warriors began to arrive and set up camp, I said to the Lord, "*If you are truly going to use me to rescue Israel as you promised, prove it to me in this way. I will put some wool on the threshing floor tonight. If the fleece is wet with dew in the morning but the ground is dry, then I will know that you are going to help me rescue Israel as you promised.*" And it happened just that way. The next morning, the fleece was wet with dew—so wet that I wrung a whole bowlful of water out of it—but everything else was dry.

That was pretty great, but since I really wasn't all that keen on getting myself killed in battle against overwhelming force, I asked the Lord, "*Please don't be angry with me, but let me make one more request. This time, let the fleece remain dry while the ground around it is wet with dew.*" And it was so (Judges 6:36-40).

Being encouraged by these signs, I mustered the army and marched as far as the spring of Harod, with the Hill of Moreh between us and the enemy. As we set up camp, the LORD said to me, "*You have too many warriors with you. If I let all of you fight the Midianites, the Israelites will boast to me that they saved themselves by their own strength. Therefore, tell the people, 'Whoever is timid or afraid may leave and go home'*" (7:2-3). Now that didn't seem like a good idea to me at all, but I did what the Lord commanded, and 22,000 (!) of my soldiers packed up and went home, leaving me with only 10,000 to go into battle.

Then the LORD said to me, "*There are still too many! Bring the men down to the spring and ask them to drink. Put the men who cup water in their hands and lap it up that way in one group, and put the men who drink directly from the stream in the other group.*" Only 300 of the men drank from their hands, while all the others got down on their knees and drank with their mouths in the stream. And the LORD said, "*With these three hundred men I will give you victory over the Midianites. Send all the others home.*" Now that seemed like a really bad idea, but I did what God told me to do.

I moved my three hundred men up the Hill of Moreh for the night, but I didn't sleep well, as you might imagine. During the night, the LORD said to me, *"Get up! Go down into the Midianite camp with your servant Purah. What you hear will encourage you and make you eager to attack."*

I awakened Purah and we made our way down the hill to the nearest Midianite outpost. We crept up just as one guard was telling another about a dream he had just had: *"I had this dream, and in my dream a loaf of barley bread came tumbling down into the Midianite camp. It hit a tent, turned it over, and knocked it flat!"*

The other man said, *"Your dream can mean only one thing—God has given Gideon son of Joash, the Israelite, victory over all the armies united with Midian!"* (7:13-14).

Well, that did encourage me, for a fact! Purah and I made our way back up the hill and we awakened the other men. "Get up!" I said, "for the LORD has given you victory over the Midianites!"

I gave each man a ram's horn and a clay water jar with a torch in it, and divided them into three groups of a hundred each. "We're going to spread out and encircle the Midianite camp, with about a hundred yards between each man. When I blow my ram's horn, I want each of you to blow your horns as loudly as you can. Smash your jars with a great noise so that your torches become suddenly visible, and shout with one voice, 'For the LORD and for Gideon!'"

We reached the outer edge of the camp just after midnight, right after the changing of the guard. When the three hundred of us blew our horns, smashed our jars, lifted our torches, and shouted, it appeared to the surprised Midianites that they had been surrounded by an enormous host of warriors. They were so frightened and so confused that they began fighting among themselves, and then they began to mount their camels and head for the desert!

I quickly sent messengers to recall as many of the warriors who had been sent home as they could, and I sent those warriors to cut the Midianites off at the shallows of the Jordan River at Beth-barah. There was a fierce battle at the shallows, in which the two Midianite generals, Oreb and Zeeb, were killed.

Although we were exhausted from battle and lack of sleep, I took my three hundred men and pursued the Midianites past Succoth and Peniel, and all the way to Karkor, where the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, had stopped with a remnant of 15,000 warriors. We circled around and once again took them by surprise, achieving another great victory, with God's help.

After all was said and done, the Israelites invited me to become their first king, and my sons and grandsons after me, but I replied, "No! I will not rule over you, nor will my son. The LORD will rule over you! . . . But you can each give me one of the gold earrings you collected from your fallen enemies" (8:23-24).

The warriors gladly did this, and I collected forty-three pounds of gold earrings, not counting the crescents and pendants, the royal clothing of the kings, or the chains around the necks of their camels. Not a bad return for a few days' work!

I took some of the gold and made a sacred ephod, or priestly vestment, which I took home to Ophrah. I intended for the ephod to remind us all of God's great power and glory, but as it turned out, we eventually began to sin against the LORD by worshiping the object that represented God rather than God Himself. That happens in your time, too, I notice.

Midian never recovered from their losses in those battles, and Israel lived in peace for the remaining forty years of my life. As was our custom in those days, I took many wives during those forty years, and they bore me seventy sons, plus one more, Abimelech, born to my concubine in Shechem.

Although I had begun well, I'm afraid the legacy of my life wasn't a very good one in the end. Having begun my Judgeship by destroying idolatry, I ended up leading my people back into idolatry through the ephod that I made. When I chose to divide my commitments among many women rather than being committed to just one soul mate, as God intended, I created a terrible situation that eventually resulted in the murder of every one of my sons. Choices have consequences, I tell you. Be careful what you choose!

But that's not really what I came to tell you today. What I want you to remember about my story is that God can take ordinary people and accomplish truly extra-ordinary things. Again and again across the centuries, God has used farmers and housewives, slaves and peasants, cobblers and fishermen, to accomplish the work that God had for their time.

As you read in Hebrews 11 this morning, "*By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and saw their weakness turned to strength.*" Yet even to this very moment, we who have gone before you have not received everything God has promised, because we cannot receive the prize at the end of the race until everyone has finished the race (Hebrews 11:39-40).

Therefore, since you, right here, today, are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses, I among them, I beg you to "*strip off every weight that slows you down, especially the sin that hinders your progress. Run the race before you with endurance, keeping your eyes on Jesus, who is now seated at the place of highest honor beside God's throne in heaven*" (Hebrews 12:1-2). My friends, there is urgent need *today* for ordinary people who will rise up from their work as I did from my threshing long ago, people who will rise up and follow the purposes God has for your own time.

The need in your time is not for warriors who will wield the sword, but for warriors who will "*give a clear witness for Jesus*" (Revelation 19:10). Long ago, Paul had a vision in which a man pled with him, "*Come over here and help us!*" (Acts 16:9). That's the need today as well. Young person, look at the needs of the world around you and consider God's call in your life! Young adults and young couples, look at the needs of the world around you and consider God's call in your lives! Retired folks, look at the needs of the world around you and consider God's call!

Listen to this plea from the mission field: "Due to illness, resignations, transfers, and the sheer difficulty of the work, we are engaging 18 million fewer lost souls now than we were three years ago. . . . Please join us in asking God to send laborers among millions of unreached peoples. Ask the Father to send workers who will walk through the difficulties, face challenges, and stay the course. Beg God for missionaries to join us who will allow the poverty of body and soul to break their hearts as they represent Jesus. Pray for enduring faith in the midst of persecution. Pray for the inspiration and perspiration needed in order to learn language and culture."

Sisters and brothers, God needs you—yes, YOU—to **pray**, to **give**, and to **go** into the world with the Good News. Our Father in heaven has made you American Christians unbelievably wealthy so that you, more than just about anyone else in the world, are able to make a difference in these troubled times! **Will you answer His call?**