

Gideon: Discipleship Lessons from the Bronze Age Handouts for Group Participants

If you're working with a class or small group, feel free to duplicate the following handouts in this appendix at no additional charge. If you'd like to print 8-1/2" x 11" or A4 sheets, you can download the free Participant Guide handout sheets at:

www.jesuswalk.com/gideon/gideon-lesson-handouts.pdf

Discussion Questions

You'll find about 5 to 6 questions for each lesson. Each question may include several sub-questions. These are designed to get group members engaged in discussion of the key points of the passage. If you're running short of time, feel free to skip questions or portions of questions.

Introduction

1. The Lord Is With You, Mighty Warrior (Judges 6:1-32)
2. Gideon's Incredible Shrinking Army (Judges 6:33-7:15a)
3. The Sword of the Lord (Judges 7:15-8:21)
4. Gideon's Tragic Mistake (Judges 8:22-35)

Introduction to Gideon and the Period of the Judges

Cycles of Prosperity and Oppression (Judges 2:10-16)

Political Structure

Judges

Most of the judges mentioned are warriors, men and women empowered by the Spirit to bring military deliverance to Israel, who then continue on as leaders until their death.

The Period of the Judges (1230 - 1020 BC)

1230 BC. Joshua: Entry into Canaan (tribe of Ephraim), oppressed by the Canaanites

1200 BC. Othniel (tribe of Judah), oppressed by Mesopotamia

1170 BC. Ehud (tribe of Benjamin), oppressed by Moab

1150 BC. Shamgar (tribe of Naphtali ?), oppressed by the Philistines

1125 BC. Deborah (tribe of Ephraim) and Barak (tribe of Naphtali), oppressed by the Canaanites

1100 BC. Gideon (tribe of Manasseh), oppressed by the Midianites

1080 BC. Abimelech (tribe of Manasseh)

Tola (tribe of Ephraim)

Jair (tribe of Manasseh)

1070 BC. Jephthah (tribe of Manasseh), oppressed by the Ammonites

1070 BC. Samson (tribe of Dan), oppressed by the Philistines

1050 BC. Ark captured. Samuel is judge (tribe of Ephraim), oppressed by the Philistines

1020 BC. Saul (tribe of Benjamin), anointed king by Samuel, oppressed by the Philistines

Religious Situation - Syncretism



The Purpose of the Book of Judges

Two themes run through the book of Judges:

1. That wholehearted and exclusive worship of Yahweh is the key to national deliverance, and
2. That centralized hereditary kingship is necessary for the well-being of the nation. The characteristic observation is: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 17:6).

Author and Date of Judges

Judges was compiled by an anonymous editor early in the period of the kings, perhaps 1020 to 1000 BC.

1. The Lord Is With You, Mighty Warrior (Judges 6:1-32)

The Scourge of the Midianite Hordes (6:1-5)

The Prophet Explains the Oppression (6:6-10)

The term “Amorites” is a generic term used to refer to the original inhabitants of Palestine, particularly the hill country, when the Israelites came to conquer the “Promised Land.” The “gods of the Amorites,” indeed of the entire area, were the male fertility god Baal and the female fertility goddess Asherah or Ashtoreth.

Q1. (Judges 6:7-10) According to the prophet, what is the reason for Israel’s oppressed state? What commandment did they break? In what way hadn’t they “listened”? In what way does this same sin affect Christians today?

An Angel Appears to Gideon (6:11)

The location of Ophrah is uncertain, but is mentioned in relation to the Jezreel Valley and Mount Tabor. It may be identified with Affuleh, in a very exposed position in the center of the Jezreel Valley. (Incidentally, Oprah Winfrey’s name is variant of Ophrah.)

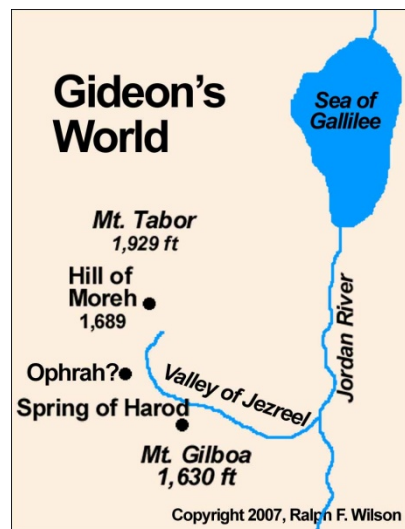
Gideon’s father, Joash, is a descendent of Abiezer, the head of one of the families of the tribe of Manasseh that settled west of the Jordan (Joshua 17:1-6). Gideon’s name means “cutter down,” “feller,” or “hewer,” and recalls his role in cutting down the Asherah pole as his first act of obedience to the Lord.

Mighty Warrior (6:12-13)

“Mighty warrior” (NIV, NRSV) or “mighty man of valor” (KJV). This is the Hebrew phrase *gibbor hayil* used to describe David’s select warriors who had performed great exploits in battle.

Q2. (Judges 6:13) In what way does Gideon blame God for his troubles in verse 13? Is Gideon’s assessment accurate? Why or why not? Why do we blame God? What’s the danger and how can we stop short of this in the future?

Gideon’s Call to Be a Deliverer (6:14-16)



Q3. (Judges 6:12-16) How did God see Gideon? How did Gideon see himself? Whose self-perception is most accurate? How can our own self-perception prevent us from becoming what God has made us to be? What is God's answer to Gideon's self-image? What might be an appropriate prayer to pray in light of what God has taught you from this passage?

Gideon's Hospitality – and Sacrifice – and Altar (6:17-24)

Like his ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Gideon builds an altar to commemorate this appearance of the Lord (Genesis 12:7-8; 13:18; 26:24-25; 28:18).

Worship of Baal and Ashtoreth

Baal (meaning "lord, master, husband") was pictured as a bull, the symbol of fertility, and was identified with Hadad the storm god, and considered the son of Dagon, worshipped by the Philistines. As the god of storms he was considered to control the land's rain, and thus, fertility.

Asherah (also called Ashtoreth and Astarte) was a goddess worshipped throughout Syria and Canaan, where her worship sites were represented by an Asherah pole, a tree trunk or cone of stone. She was considered the goddess of fertility and love, and thousands of Astarte figurines made of clay have been found at most of the excavated sites of the Canaanite and Israelite periods.

Worship of Baal and Asherah involved offering sacrifices and burning incense. And, since this was primarily a fertility religion, worship also involved sex with religious prostitutes, both male and female, at the worship site (Judges 2:17; 8:27-35).

Gideon's First Assignment (6:25-27)

Q4. (Judges 6:25-27) What is the strategic significance of God's command for Gideon to tear down the Baal altar and Asherah pole? What positive thing is he to erect in their place? What risks are involved in this action? Why does Gideon do this at night? Is this night mission a sign of weakness or of faith?

Gideon's Father Defends Him (6:28-32)

Q5. (Judges 6:25-31) What kind of leader has Gideon's father Joash been up to this point? How does Gideon's action affect his father? Shouldn't Gideon have considered the impact on his father? How should this have affected Gideon's action? (See Matthew 10:34-38) In what sense is Joash a follower of Yahweh now?

Lessons for Disciples

From Ralph F. Wilson, *Gideon: Discipleship Lessons from the Bronze Age* (JesusWalk, 2012). Copyright © 2007, 2012, Ralph F. Wilson <pastor@joyfulheart.com>. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to make copies of these participant handouts, one set for each member of a local group, at no charge, provided that this copyright information remains intact on each copy.

1. We, like Israel, can drift away from full allegiance to God.
2. God sees us differently than we can see ourselves.
3. We sometimes blame God for troubles we bring upon ourselves.
4. Our strength is in God's presence and leadership.
5. We must act with courage when we determine what we should do.
6. When we recognize where we have compromised, we must correct our path, even if it requires losing face.

2. Gideon's Incredible Shrinking Army (Judges 6:33-7:15a)

Gideon Summons the Tribes to War (6:33-35)

“Trumpet” is the Hebrew noun *shofar*, related to the Arabic word for ram’s horns. It is used of the curved musical instrument made of the horn of a ram. The *shofar* (pronounced SHOW-far) is used in worship in the tabernacle, announces a new king (1 Kings 1:34; 2 Kings 9:13), and serves as a bugle for signals in battle (Judges 3:27; 2 Samuel 20:1). At the blast of the *shofar*, the walls of Jericho fall down (Joshua 6:20).

Q1. (Judges 6:33-35) What inspires Gideon to blow the battle horn and summon an army against the Midianites? What does Gideon have in common with other judges and leaders of his era? (Hint: see Deuteronomy 34:9; Judges 3:10; 11:9; 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14; 1 Samuel 11:6.)

Putting a Fleece before the Lord (6:36-39)

Fleece – the sheared pelt of wool from a sheep that has come off in a single piece.

The word “test” (NIV), “prove” (KJV), or “make trial” (NRSV) is the Hebrew verb *nāsâ*, “test, try, prove, tempt, assay, put to the proof, put to the test.” (Exodus 17:2, 7; Deuteronomy 6:16; Psalm 78:18, 41, 56; 95:8-9; 106:14; Isaiah 7:12; Matthew 4:7 = Luke 4:12; 1 Corinthians 10:9)

Q2. (Judges 6:36-39) Why does Gideon put out a fleece before the Lord – twice? Is this a sign of unbelief or of belief? Does this constitute “testing” God? How does it differ from the sinful testings of God the scripture warns against? When, if ever, should we ask God to confirm his direction with a sign? What is the danger of demanding a sign?

Too Big an Army to Give God Glory (7:2-4)

Q3. (Judges 7:1-3) Why did God feel Gideon’s army was too large? Why was shrinking the army’s size to a tiny band essential in restoring Israel’s faith and allegiance? What kinds of pressures would Gideon be feeling *not* to obey God in shrinking his army? How was Gideon able to obey God fully in this?

Q4. Why do we demand that God’s directions make sense to us before we’ll follow them? What’s the spiritual danger here? We’re afraid of being – or being perceived as – religious kooks. How can we balance blind obedience with getting confirmation through spiritual people whose discernment we trust?

Separate the Lappers for Battle (7:5-6)

From Ralph F. Wilson, *Gideon: Discipleship Lessons from the Bronze Age* (JesusWalk, 2012). Copyright © 2007, 2012, Ralph F. Wilson <pastor@joyfulheart.com>. All rights reserved. Permission is granted to make copies of these participant handouts, one set for each member of a local group, at no charge, provided that this copyright information remains intact on each copy.

Q5. (Judges 7:5-6) What significance, if any, do you see in selecting the “lappers” from the “kneelers”?

Nearly 10,000 Lappers Sent Home (7:7-8)

With 300 I Will Deliver You (7:7)

The Midianite army was vast, perhaps 135,000 or more (Judges 8:10)

The Lord Encourages Gideon (7:8b-12)

The Enemy’s Barley Bread Dream (7:13-15a)

The sword (Hebrew *hereb*) in Gideon’s day at the end of the Bronze Age was probably made out of bronze. A century or two later the Phoenicians and Philistines began to use iron and steel swords.

Q6. (Judges 7:13-14) What does the rolling barley loaf mean in the Midianite’s dream? Why does the Lord show Gideon this dream?

Lessons for Disciples

1. When the Holy Spirit comes upon us, we can do what we can’t do in our strength.
2. God is merciful and gracious, understanding of our human frailties.
3. God is ready to assist us to grow in our faith.
4. God desires to build our confidence in him, not our own strength.
5. God delights to work through those too weak to act on their own.

3. The Sword of the Lord (Judges 7:15-8:21)

300 Men, Trumpets, Jars and Torches (7:15-20)

Gideon's strategy involves several elements:

S _____ **the Midianite camp** with a line of men a few hundred feet apart. This way the enemy will feel like they are being attacked from all sides.

Attack L _____ **at night** to surprise and confuse the enemy. The beginning of the middle watch would be about 10 pm.¹

Sound T _____ (*shofars*) from 300 different directions. Trumpets were used in battle to sound the charge or retreat, much as bugles were used in the American Civil War. Usually one trumpet would be sounded to direct each company of soldiers. When the enemy hears 300 trumpets they imagine that a huge army is attacking them.

Break P _____ **J** _____. The jars serve two purposes: (1) to hide the light of the torches until the right time and (2) to create a great deal of noise upon shattering in order to confuse the enemy.²

Raise T _____. Torchlights suddenly appearing all around the Midianite camp underscore the impression of being surrounded and induce panic.

Shout a B _____ **C** _____, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon." 300 men shouting a battle cry from diverse directions adds to the fear and panic of the enemy.

A Rout of the Midianite Army (7:21-23)

Q1. (Judges 7:16-22) Why does Gideon divide his army into three companies? What is the strategy with the trumpets, the empty jars, and the torches? Why did this strategy work?

Calling upon Ephraim for Assistance (7:24-25)

Dispute with the Ephraimites (8:1-3)

Q2. (Judges 7:24-8:3) What does Gideon ask the Ephraimites to do? Why are they so angry? What do you learn from Gideon's approach to the Ephraimites' arrogance?

Allies Refuse Aid (8:4-9)

Capturing Zebah and Zalmunna, Kings of Midian (8:10-12)



Q3. (Judges 8:10-12) Why must Gideon vanquish the Midianite force of 15,000 men in Karkor? What danger do we face when we deal with problems only half-way?

Punishing the Uncooperative Allies (8:13-17)

Q4. (Judges 8:4-17) Why do the cities of Succoth and Peniel refuse aid to Gideon's army? Why does Gideon punish these cities later? What is their sin? Is Gideon just? Can you think of a circumstance when a Christian might be guilty of the sin of Succoth and Peniel?

Slaying Zebah and Zalmunna (8:18-21)

Q5. (Judges 8:18-21) Why does Gideon slay Zebah and Zalmunna? Is he unjust or fulfilling his just obligation? (Numbers 35:16) Why does Romans 12:19 prohibit Christians from taking vengeance?

Lessons for Disciples

1. Great courage and faith to carry out God's battle plan with a skeleton force of only 300 men.
2. Follow-through and persistence to pursue the enemy until he is completely defeated.
3. Single-minded focus to concentrate on the most important task and not be distracted.
4. Wisdom and restraint to choose his battles carefully and not challenge the Ephraimites' arrogant complaints.
5. A concern for justice for his brothers' unjust execution by the Midianites.
6. Terrible anger that results in a harsh punishment which may have exceeded the provocation.

Answers: 1. surround, 2. late, 3. trumpets, 4. pottery jars, 5. torches, 6. battle cry.

4. Gideon's Tragic Mistake (Judges 8:22-35)

The Lord Will Rule over You (8:22-23)

Gideon the Savior (8:22-23)

Gideon Refuses the Kingship (8:22-23)

Suzerain-Vassal Treaty

The Tabernacle Throneroom

Q1. (Judges 8:22-23) Why does Gideon refuse to be king over Israel? In what sense would becoming king be treason? Why didn't the Israelites see bestowing kingship as treason?

Gideon's Share of the Spoils (8:24-26)

Q2. (Judges 8:24-27) What does Gideon ask for his reward? Was Gideon wrong to take a reward? Where did the sin begin?

Gideon's Ephod (8:27)

Spiritual Unfaithfulness (8:27)

Isaiah 54:5; 62:3-5; Jeremiah 3:14; Ezekiel 16:8; Hosea 2:19-20; 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 19:7-9; 21:2, 9-1.

Exodus 34:15-16; Leviticus 17:7; 20:5; Deuteronomy 31:16; Judges 2:17; etc; Jeremiah 3:9; Hosea 3:1; James 4:4.

Q3. (Judges 8:24-27) Why is spiritual unfaithfulness looked at as prostitution or adultery? What is the concept of God's relationship to his people which underlies this analogy? What kinds of temptations to spiritual adultery do you face today?

Spiritual Snares that Divert our Focus

Matthew 6:24; 1 Timothy 6:10

Q4. (Judges 8:24-27) What is a snare? In what way does Gideon's ephod ensnare his family and the people of Israel? How can something be a sin if we don't see it as a sin? What was the essence of the sin the Israelites committed? What is the essence of Gideon's sin?

40 Years of Peace (8:28-31)

Q5. (Judges 8:28-31) How does Gideon influence Israel during his life? What is the positive continuing effect of his leadership as judge?

Return to Baal Worship (8:33-35)

But there is a recurring cycle in the book of Judges:

1. Misery and oppression.
2. Calling out to God.
3. God answers with a leader or judge who delivers Israel.
4. When the judge dies, the people return to their idolatry, and
5. To misery and oppression.

Lessons from Gideon's Later Years

1. We must deflect to God the praises that people give us when they receive a spiritual blessing.
2. We must never let others put us in the place reserved for God himself.
3. We must be careful that what we establish as traditions and practices in our families and churches do not carry within them the seeds of our descendants' destruction. Clearly, our legacy to others includes not only our strengths but our weaknesses as well. We must be careful to live with integrity before them.