

JUDGES—WEEK 5

THE CALL



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

*The Cover Picture is Samson and the Lion by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553)
On display in the Schlossmuseum, Weimar, Germany*

Sisera's defeat sets the stage for 40 years of rest, which sets the stage for apostasy and then oppression. First, the LORD sends a nameless prophet to tell the Israelites what they did wrong. Then He sends His Angel to call Gideon.

Gideon starts out saying all the wrong things but eventually comes around.

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Joshua, Week 5 — The Call
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1 Judges 5:28–31

*“The mother of Sisera looked through the window,
And cried out through the lattice,
‘Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why tarries the clatter of his chariots?’
Her wisest ladies answered her,
Yes, she answered herself,
‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoil:
To every man a girl or two;
For Sisera, plunder of dyed garments,
Plunder of garments embroidered and dyed,
Two pieces of dyed embroidery for the neck of the looter?’*

*“Thus let all Your enemies perish, O Lord!
But let those who love Him be like the sun
When it comes out in full strength.”*

So the land had rest for forty years.

Suddenly, the whole thing makes sense. Sisera’s evil is laid bare.

*‘Are they not finding and dividing the spoil:
To every man a girl or two;*

The Hebrew word translated as girl (רַחֲמַיִם, ra-ha-mah) refers to sex slavery.

And this is merely the excuse given by the *wisest ladies* for why Sisera is late returning from battle. In other words, “Don’t worry, Mom; he’s late because it takes time to rape the women.”

But note that this isn’t a historical account. It’s Deborah and Barak’s mocking portrayal of Sisera’s loved ones awaiting his arrival home from battle. Thus, Sisera’s reputation for mistreatment of women was widely known, presumably even by Jael.

That would explain her desire to off him.

For the wages of sin is death. — Romans 6:23a

Another wage of sin is the fear of death. Great sin has extra consequences. People who should be widely despised usually are widely despised.

Sisera was living a life in which he needed to look for enemies under every rock. He made many mistakes that day, but his final one was letting down his guard.

He should never have been at peace with himself.

2 Judges 5:31b–5:6 (ESV)

And the land had rest for forty years.

The people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Midian seven years. And the hand of Midian overpowered Israel, and because of Midian the people of Israel made for themselves the dens that are in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For whenever the Israelites planted crops, the Midianites and the Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. They would encamp against them and devour the produce of the land, as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel and no sheep or ox or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents; they would come like locusts in number—both they and their camels could not be counted—so that they laid waste the land as they came in. And Israel was brought very low because of Midian. And the people of Israel cried out for help to the LORD.

This time, it takes about two generations of “rest” for Israel to forget the LORD and get back to their usual evil ways. Then it takes about seven years of abuse by the Midianites for Israel to wake up and cry out for help to the LORD. Well, at least they haven’t forgotten His name.

The Midianite oppression is so severe that it sets a standard. Isaiah mentions it a couple of times.

*For the yoke of his burden,
and the staff for his shoulder,
the rod of his oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian. — Isaiah 9:4 (ESV)*

This oppression is worse than subjugation to a totalitarian government. It’s just relentless, random thievery.

It’s the randomness that makes it so horrible. Even in the slavery under Pharaoh, the Israelites had some idea of what tomorrow would bring. It was horrible, but livable. You could work within the system because there was a system. Even when their quota of bricks was doubled, there was a quota.

The Midianites don’t have a quota (or it’s infinite).

This greatest oppression will set the stage for the greatest judge—Gideon. There’s a lesson in that.

These swings from bad to good to bad are like a pendulum. The farther a pendulum swings one way, the more it’s prepped to swing far the other way. So it is with Israel’s behavior (and ours).

At the heart of this is our sinful reaction to good things. Good things can’t stay good, because our sin pollutes it. For example, success leads to complacency and over-confidence. This sets the stage for failure, which sets the stage for repentance. But that’s a good thing; repentance is the ideal state.

Our lowest points are really the highlights.

3 Judges 6:7–10

And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried out to the LORD because of the Midianites, that the LORD sent a prophet to the children of Israel, who said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘I brought you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage; and I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. Also I said to you, “I am the LORD your God; do not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell.” But you have not obeyed My voice.’ ”

This is one of those passages that speaks volumes by what it does not say.

First off, it does not say the name of this prophet. This seems odd to us because we’re steeped in a culture of personality. This prophet is important, therefore we’re supposed to admire him or her.

But no. Speaking for God is sufficient and the name of the mouthpiece matters not. Our culture is poisonously off base on this. Christians are not immune either (not by a long shot).

For example, do you ever speak of looking forward to meeting some particular person in heaven—say Martin Luther or J.I. Packer? But what about this prophet? Would meeting the unknown saints of history be thrilling too?

Maybe not. Maybe that’s not the point at all.

Also, this passage does not say, “Do not fear the Amorites.” It says, “*Do not fear the gods of the Amorites.*” Then it says, “*But you have not obeyed My voice.*” That’s why God sicced the Midianites on them. How could they possibly *fear* the gods of the Amorites?

Beats me, but it’s clear that’s what happened.

These two things are not unrelated. God is what matters. Not us. Not the Amorites. Not Martin Luther.

People play big roles in this great drama called life, but we shouldn’t see them as the stars. We need to learn to see events in spiritual context. This is advanced stuff, and it doesn’t come quickly. I’m definitely not there. Shaking off the culture I was raised in is no easy task.

Shaking off our culture means rejecting “upward mobility”. The opposite is portrayed in a book by Henri Nouwen titled *The Selfless Way of Christ: Downward Mobility and the Spiritual Life*. The concept of “downward mobility” hits the nail on the head beautifully.

The book was originally published in serial form in the evangelical journal *Sojourners* in the early 1980s. Henri wrote it in response to the prosperity of that age and the rise of the “yuppies”. He saw the rot in our culture even then.

Ironically, Nouwen’s readers formed the Henri Nouwen Society (<https://henrinouwen.org/>).

I hope they understand that it’s not about him either.

4 Judges 6:11–18

Now the Angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth tree which was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon threshed wheat in the winepress, in order to hide it from the Midianites. And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him, and said to him, “The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!”

Gideon said to Him, “O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, ‘Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?’ But now the LORD has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.”

Then the LORD turned to him and said, “Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?”

So he said to Him, “O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.”

And the LORD said to him, “Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man.”

Then he said to Him, “If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who talk with me. Do not depart from here, I pray, until I come to You and bring out my offering and set it before You.”

And He said, “I will wait until you come back.”

The Angel of the LORD showing up here is huge; it’s only the sixth time that this has happened so far and it’ll only happen another dozen times in the whole Bible. Any angel is a big deal, but the Angel of the LORD is a direct representative of God. The Hebrew word for angel (מַלְאָךְ, mal-akh) literally means messenger. Often, a king will send a mal-akh with a message to a commander or to an adversary. The Angel of the LORD is the LORD’s authoritative messenger and his speech is the LORD’s. That’s why verse 14 can say, “*the LORD turned to him,*” when we might expect it to say, “*the Angel turned.*”

Gideon’s encounter with the Angel of the LORD tracks closely with Moses’s encounter with the Angel of the LORD in the burning bush.

Just like Moses, Gideon thinks he’s not up to the task he’s assigned. So, the LORD uses an amusing trick to set Gideon up to learn. He says, “*Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?*”

Gideon misinterprets “*this might of yours*” to mean the might of an army he can raise. He misses the significance of the tag line, “*Have I not sent you?*” Thus, Gideon argues that he can’t do it.

So, the LORD repeats, “*Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man.*”

This has to leave Gideon a bit chagrined. So he jumps into worship mode and prepares an offering.

5 Judges 6:19–24

So Gideon went in and prepared a young goat, and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot; and he brought them out to Him under the terebinth tree and presented them. The Angel of God said to him, “Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth.” And he did so.

Then the Angel of the LORD put out the end of the staff that was in His hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire rose out of the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. And the Angel of the LORD departed out of his sight.

Now Gideon perceived that He was the Angel of the LORD. So Gideon said, “Alas, O Lord GOD! For I have seen the Angel of the LORD face to face.”

Then the LORD said to him, “Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die.” So Gideon built an altar there to the LORD, and called it The-LORD-Is-Peace. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

Gideon didn't realize who he was dealing with. He knew he was wrong to doubt that he could defeat the Midianites and he knew to offer up a sacrifice.

But the way the sacrifice is consumed shocks him. This is no regular angel. This is THE Angel of the LORD. He's not safe.

It's not just that being in the presence of the LORD isn't safe. Gideon's backtalk over whether he could take the Midianites suddenly looks really bad.

“Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die.”

Well, that's a relief.

This is perfect attitude adjustment. Gideon has been taught, encouraged, and had his pants scared off him. He's now in the right place spiritually—ready to follow the LORD wherever He may lead.

That's the right place for everyone. We should all seek to have that terrified, humble confidence that Gideon has found. But how?

What did it for Gideon was being in the presence of the LORD. That's the main prescription. To grow in the LORD, don't seek His favor; seek His presence.

There are two main ways to seek His presence: ask for it, and open your eyes. Our prayer lives should include seeking Him. We spend too much time asking for help with our own agenda and not enough time asking for more of His. This gets back to the line, *“I never knew you,”* in Matthew 7:23.

Seeing God or, as Brother Lawrence put it, practicing the presence of God, is just as important. He's here.

Most importantly, these two work together. Ask God to reveal Himself and then keep your eyes peeled.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. How should we treat people who are justly despised?

2. Have you ever noticed the glory of a low point?

3. What is the most poisonous thing in our culture?

4. What is an angel?

5. Have you ever asked for vision?

Items for prayer: