

Judges 6

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[0 : 0 0] Jonah is not remembered for always saying the right thing. Indeed, he was guilty on occasion of some rather ill-advised and foolish outbursts. But there's one great truth that he expounded with refreshing clarity. From the unlikely pulpit of the belly of the fish, he declared salvation belongs to the Lord. Salvation belongs to the Lord. And I want us to consider this great truth in the light of God's saving work in and through Gideon. And I want to do so from two perspectives or in two ways. What does the account that we've read tell us about God's salvation, and how does the account serve as a case study that illustrates principles of God's saving work that apply more broadly to God's salvation, and very especially as that salvation finds its ultimate and pivotal manifestation in the person of Jesus Christ. So what do we see in the account itself that speaks of how God saves? But how does that in turn then give light to our understanding of the big picture of God's salvation? Now there are three questions that we will ask of God and His salvation. The first question is, who does God save? But then we'll ask, why does God save? And then thirdly, how does God save? And having dealt with those three questions, we'll end with another question very much to be posed to ourselves. In the light of what we've discovered, we'll borrow the question of the Philippian jailer, what must I do to be saved? In the light of what we've discovered about who God saves and why He saves and how He saves, then that more personal question, what must I do to be saved? But let's begin with the first question indicated, who does God save?

And here we're going to be thinking a little of what we find in the first few verses of chapter 6 of Judges. Now in answering that question, who does God save, we do need to begin, and we would not be doing justice to the text if we failed to begin by acknowledging that God saves His own people. That is the big truth of this whole account. God saves His own people. It is the Israelites, not any other of the peoples mentioned that are the objects of God's saving initiative. God saves Israel. Clear though that is, how do we apply that in practical terms to our own day and circumstances? Well, we can and must declare that God is still in the business of saving His own people. But what we ought not to do is try into the mind of God to try and establish definitively who His people are. What we can do with confidence is identify the kind of people

God saves and incorporates into His people as we consider the portrait painted of the Israelites in the first few verses of chapter 6.

So with that in mind, who does God save? Well, I think the first thing that we can notice, and it's very clear, very apparent at the very beginning of the account, is that God saves those who do evil. Notice how the whole account begins, again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. We've already established that they're the ones who God will take an initiative on behalf of to save, and this is the very first thing that we are told about them.

These are people who do evil. Again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord. It is, of course, the case that it's only those who do evil that need saving. Now, it's true that the Israelites, as we've read, were saved from the physical and economic oppression of the Midianites, but that very oppression was the consequence of their evil deeds. Again, the very first verse makes that crystal clear.

[4 : 41] Again, the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. And then we have recounted this sorry tale of all their suffering and misery.

Nothing has changed. God doesn't save good people. He saves bad people. In the words of Jesus, it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. What about you? Do you do evil?

Now, the problem with that word evil is that in our usage of it today, we generally reserve the word for those who are deemed to be beyond the pale as we see it or as others see it, for pedophiles or Islamic State jihadists or the really bad people. They're evil, but the rest of us, well, we're not evil.

That's too strong a word, surely, to describe us. But of course, the reality is that we all do evil.

We all sin. We all fall short of God's righteous demands upon us. In the very eloquent and clear language of the Apostle Paul as he writes to the Romans, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And in that same letter, there is no one righteous, not even one. And so, again, I ask the question, do you need saving from your sin and its consequences? Well, the good news is that God saves those who do evil. But we can notice another characteristic of the Israelites that we can then apply to our own circumstances. And we can say this, that God saves the impoverished. Notice there in verse 6, as this picture is painted of their misery and it comes to a conclusion, the language it is used to really summarize all that has gone before is found there in verse 6. Miriam so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help. In Gideon's day, the Israelites found themselves in a state of acute impoverishment. And we have to consider that and recognize that in the light of God's purpose that Canaan, the promised land, be for them a land flowing with milk and honey.

[7 : 19] This was God's purpose that Canaan would be a place for them, not of poverty, but of great comfort and yes, even wealth. And yet, what a striking and somber contrast. We find them far from enjoying the milk and the honey. We find them so impoverished. We think of our own circumstances and indeed God's purposes for us. God created us to live in rich fellowship and friendship with Himself. But in the measure that we have drifted from His near and dear presence, we too become impoverished. We're spiritually poverty stricken. And God saves from such a spiritual poverty. God saves those who do evil. God saves the impoverished.

But then one third thing that I want to notice concerning those who God saves. God saves those who do not listen. Now, that's a little more intriguing. Perhaps the first two things that I said, you could say, oh, well, I knew that. But this is a little bit more curious. God saves those who do not listen. Notice there in verse 10, as God, through the prophet, concludes His case again, against His own people. And the final thing that He says there at the end of verse 10, but you have not listened to me. Now, just to get the context of these words of God to His people, notice what happens when the people cry out for help. Then in verse 6, we're told they cried out to the Lord for help. And then in verse 7 again, we're told that they cried to the Lord because of Midian. They cry out for help. What is it that they were looking for? Can you imagine? What is it that they hoped God would do? Well, I imagine that they hoped that He would send a deliverer. That's what they needed. They were under the yoke of Midian. They were suffering terribly. They were impoverished. And so they cry out to God for help. And God, surely He'll send a deliverer. But what does God do? Well, He sends a prophet. What a letdown. What a letdown for the people. They were thinking, a prophet? We don't need a prophet. This preacher isn't going to destroy the hordes of Midian. We don't want a prophet. We want a deliverer. But God sends a prophet. And why does God send a prophet? Well, the people needed to know the root cause of their misery. They need to know why they are impoverished. And so the prophet is sent to tell them. And we have the message that this unnamed prophet brought to them. We read of how they are reminded of God's gracious hand in history and how God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

And the prophet also reminds the people of God's gracious instruction as to that which they ought to do and that which they ought not to do. And having given them this message, we have these final words delivered through the prophet, but delivered from the very mouth of God through his prophet.

And they still weren't listening. Gideon himself wasn't listening. We've already thought with the children of how Gideon responds, having already heard this message from the prophet and then having heard from God himself this this stirring address. The Lord is with you, mighty warrior. We've seen how Gideon responds.

There in verse 13, if we just limit ourselves to the final words there of Gideon, but now the Lord has abandoned us and put us into the hand of Midian.

[11 : 20] But you have not listened to me. What does God do with a people who will not listen? Now, when we think of the circumstances here of Gideon and the people of Israel in his day, you might have imagined that a minimum requirement to move God's saving hand would be that the people would listen.

Surely that's the minimum you might have thought God would require. I'm going to do everything, but at least listen. At least I can expect that of you. Surely that is not too much to ask. Listen, and then I'll deliver.

But that is not what happens. They don't listen, and they won't listen, and yet God still delivers. God saves a people who would not listen. Even in the absence of their listening, God moves to save.

But what about us? Where do we stand in this matter? Are you listening? How long have you failed to listen? A life, perhaps, hearing sermons, but never listening to God? Does that place you out with the reach of God's saving grace?

Well, no, not even that. God saves those who have not listened to Him. But recognizing that does lead us in, I think quite helpfully, to the next question that we want to pose, and that is, why does God save?

[13 : 01] Why does God save? And this question, as I've just suggested, follows on almost seamlessly from what we have just been commenting on concerning the people's failure to listen.

Really, the question that we are addressing, why does God save? The question we are addressing is one of motivation. We might even say provocation.

What motivates God to save the Israelites in Gideon's day? What provokes God to save? Is it repentance? Is that what moves the hand of God to save?

Is that what we are to conclude from the people crying out? It is recorded for us in verses 6 and 7. They cried out to the Lord for help. Well, surely this is the people finally recognizing their sin and their rebellion, and in repentance, they cry out to God for help.

And when God sees this repentance, He says, ah, now I can save these people. But, of course, the people do no such thing. The words of God that we've noted just a moment ago are, in equal measure, sobering and eloquent.

[14 : 18] But you have not listened to me. And He could have gone on to say, and you are still not listening to me. It's not repentance that provokes God to save.

Repentance is part of the very salvation that God generously gives us. God, by His Spirit, works repentance in us.

So what does motivate or provoke God to save? Well, let's look again at the end of verse 10, but then see what follows in verse 11. The end of verse 10, familiar words, The juxtaposition of God's final words through the prophet, Just think about it for a moment.

What might we expect to follow the words, but you have not listened? What might we think would reasonably have followed these words, but you have not listened? Well, we might think that the reasonable follow-up to these words would have been, God said, well, you have not listened, therefore I am going to punish you.

Therefore I am going to drive you out of the land. Therefore I am going to deliver you into the hands of your enemies. But that's not what we find. That's not what happens. What do we read, rather?

[16 : 02] The angel of the Lord came and sat down under the oak at Ophrah. Now, in order to understand this, the first thing that we need to do, and very fleetingly, because this is not our primary purpose this morning, is to identify this character, the angel of the Lord.

Now, much could be said, but for our present purposes, suffice it to say that the manner in which the designations angel of the Lord and Lord are used interchangeably in this account on many occasions allows us to conclude the identity of the angel of the Lord with the Lord in a way that is certainly mysterious, but nonetheless, though mysterious, a reasonable conclusion.

The angel of the Lord is the Lord in human form. He is both the messenger of the Lord, hence angel, and the Lord himself. Now, having made that point, what we want to notice is this manner in which the Lord, having delivered this message, having declared this great truth, you have not listened to me, then we find him making this entrance and sitting under the oak at Ophrah.

And why has he come to sit under the oak at Ophrah? What purpose does he have in view? Well, the purpose that he has in view is one only. It is to save his people.

He has come to save the very people to whom he has just said through the prophet, but you have not listened to me. Now, why would God do that?

[17 : 41] Why would God in one breath say, you have not listened to me, and then he comes and he sits under the oak at Ophrah with one purpose and one alone to save his people? Why? Why? Grace.

Grace. There is no other answer. Grace and grace alone explains the presence of this heavenly visitor under the oak at Ophrah. It is grace that motivates and provokes the Lord to act on behalf of his people.

Why does God save? Because of his grace, the unmerited favor he lavishes upon his own, those he has fixed his eyes upon to save.

And this was true of the Israelites in the days of Gideon, has ever been true and remains true today. What is it that the apostle Paul reminds us of concerning the grace-driven divine initiative to save?

As he writes to the believers in Rome, but God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, while we weren't listening at all, Christ died for us.

[19 : 00] Why does God save? But then, thirdly, how does God save? And in answering this question, we want to identify three features or characteristics of God's saving initiative on behalf of the Israelites, and note how these features or characteristics are mirrored in God's salvation through history, and especially in the person of his Son.

And the first thing that I want you to notice is this, is that God saves through a mighty warrior. God saves through a mighty warrior. In verse 11, we've noticed the Lord's initiative in coming to save.

But what does he do? His purpose is to save. Well, what does he do? Well, what does he immediately do? He commissions another. He commissions Gideon. Now, Gideon, it's very apparent, seems so unlike a mighty warrior as he cowers in the winepress, threshing wheat to avoid being seen by the marauding Midianites.

Indeed, the language used by the Lord, describing him or addressing him as a mighty warrior, seems so incongruous that some have suggested that it's tinged with irony.

But I don't think that's the case. I think when God addresses him in this way, that is indeed God's perspective. He considers this man before him. Unlikely though it may seem, and though it may not appear to be so, he views him and addresses him and identifies him as a mighty warrior.

[20 : 47] I think there are perhaps two overlapping aspects to this, the opinion of God concerning Gideon. At one level, I think we can say that in God's sight, Gideon is already a mighty warrior, even if Gideon himself thinks otherwise.

I think there may also be another sense in which God sees Gideon not only as he is, but the man that he will in God's hands become, a mighty warrior.

These two things don't need to be thought of as mutually exclusive, but perhaps merge together. God saves through a mighty warrior, and God continues to save through mighty warriors.

In the big picture of God's salvation, God saves through his own perfect mighty warrior. Jesus is God's mighty warrior who came to defeat sin and death and the grave.

Jesus is the one who on the cross, in the words of Paul as he writes to the believers in Colossae, disarmed the powers and authorities, making a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

[22 : 03] And we're going to give a little bit more thought to that text this evening. Like Gideon, Jesus did not appear like a mighty warrior, but he was God's all-conquering mighty warrior.

And the war that he waged and won, he won for us. God saves through a mighty warrior. But there's something else that we need to say as we build on.

Almost the three things we're going to say, they're almost going to be like building blocks as we'll build upon the previous one. God saves through a mighty warrior. But the second thing I want you to notice is that God saves through a weak, mighty warrior.

Now that seems like a contradiction in terms, but let's just think a little bit about this. God saves through a weak, mighty warrior. Now Gideon clearly did not consider himself to be strong.

Indeed, he declares very eloquently that he is not strong, that he is weak. He does so there in verse 15. He does so in other ways, but there very explicitly. How can I save Israel?

[23 : 06] My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family. Now what's going on? Is it just that Gideon, crushed by years of oppression, and blighted by painfully low self-esteem, imagines that he is weak?

No, he is weak. What he says there in verse 15 is true. Gideon was, contradictory though it may sound, a weak, mighty warrior.

By any measure, he was spectacularly ill-equipped to lead the Israelites in victory against their oppressors. And yet Gideon is God's man.

He is God's appointed instrument to secure salvation for his people. And this is God's way. As we fix our attention more broadly to the big picture, we see parallels, not exact, but genuine parallels with God's ultimate and perfect deliverer, Jesus Christ.

Jesus took upon himself weakness. He became weak for us in a very real sense. The man Jesus was weak.

[24 : 22] What does Paul say of his very death through which he vanquished powers and authorities? As he writes to the Corinthians in his second letter, in chapter 13 and verse 4, we read, He, Jesus, was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power.

God saves through a weak, mighty warrior. God saves through a mighty warrior. He saves through a weak, mighty warrior. But then as we add to this one more element, God saves through a weak, mighty warrior accompanied and empowered by God.

The very one who calls, the very one who commissions, is the one who accompanies and empowers. One of the very first words that God addresses to Gideon, the Lord is with you, mighty warrior.

Even before being identified as a mighty warrior, the Lord is with you. And this message is repeated in the face of Gideon's honest recognition of his own weakness.

There in verse 15, how does the Lord answer Gideon when he says, but I'm so weak? The Lord answered, I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together.

[25 : 45] And really, that's all Gideon needs to know. I will be with you. That's all he needs to know.

In due course, God, no doubt, will give him details about the how and the when and the why and the wherefore, but what he only really needs to know is this. I will be with you.

It's all you really need to know as you would seek to follow and serve your God. I will be with you. Remember Jesus' final words to his disciples and to us before he ascended to the Father's right hand.

I am with you always to the very end of the age. Let me highlight one other reference to God's accompanying and empowering of Gideon as we find it in verse 34 of chapter 6.

The story has moved on, and we're not going through all the details of the story, but this verse I want you to just notice in the context of what we're saying, that God saves through a weak, mighty warrior, but one accompanied and empowered by God.

[27 : 02] Then in verse 34 we read, Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon. What the Hebrew text literally says is very powerful and suggestive, and it could be translated literally in this way.

The Spirit of the Lord clothed himself with Gideon. God, by his Spirit, was the one winning the victory as he clothed himself with Gideon, and it could be no other way.

In the absence of God's presence and power, Gideon was powerless to save. Indeed, the whole account of this victory that was won by the hand of Gideon intentionally emphasizes that it is God's strength rather than Gideon's or Israel's that is to explain the victory.

This, of course, is what lies behind the decimating of the army from 32,000 to 300. God himself explains very clearly why this is being done.

In chapter 7 and verse 2, the Lord said to Gideon, You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands in order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her.

[28 : 22] And then it goes on. Reduce the army in the way that we know it happened. So the whole account serves to highlight and to stress and to recognize that, yes, though God saves through this mighty warrior, it is God who is granting the victory.

It is God who is accompanying and empowering. What of the big picture of salvation and of God's perfect deliverer?

Well, we're reminded of how Jesus' public ministry is inaugurated, the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And yet, and here we are confronted with a somber and critical disconnect with Gideon and with every other partial deliverer.

At the very point where Jesus took upon himself the somber load of our sin, far from being accompanied by God, he is abandoned by God.

And so cries out, Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why have you abandoned me? Forsaken by the Father, yet faithful to the Father.

[29 : 39] And that victorious faithfulness was vindicated by the very one who abandoned him to his accursed death. As the Father on the third day raised him victorious over death.

God saves. He saves through a mighty warrior, through a weak, mighty warrior, through a weak, mighty warrior accompanied and empowered by himself.

But I want to close with a final question for each and every one of us. What must I do to be saved?

Now, in the light of all that we've been considering, you might ask the question quite reasonably, well, can I do anything? Did Jonah not hit the nail on the head?

Salvation belongs to the Lord. It's all of God. And yet God does graciously grant us a part to play. And Gideon can guide us in what we must do, in what you must do.

[30 : 41] Remember what Gideon did following his encounter with the Lord. He has this encounter with the Lord. There is this conversation. He's commissioned. And what does Gideon do?

We read of what he does in verses 25 and 26 concerning the altars. But to summarize what he does, he tore down the altar to Baal that shamefully stood in the very courtyard of his father's house.

And he did so as a symbol of his rejection of all false gods. That's one thing that he does. What he's told to do? Tear down the altar to Baal.

But that's not all he does. He also, at God's instruction, erects an altar to the Lord. And that altar that he raises up, he does so as a symbol of his loyalty and commitment to God, to Yahweh, to the Lord.

These two actions are, in a measure, paralleled in what we are called to do that we might experience God's salvation. We are to repent and we are to believe.

[31 : 51] In repenting, we acknowledge our sin and our shameful subservience to all manner of false gods or idols, and we would tear them down.

We repent of our sin. And in believing, we put our trust in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, the one to whom we pledge our undivided loyalty and love.

So what's the deal? Our God is a saving God. He is a God who saves sinners, who saves the impoverished, who saves those who have refused to listen.

Our God does and has saved through his mighty warrior. Salvation has been secured. God's enemies have been vanquished. Forgiveness and eternal life are now offered freely to all who will but repent and believe.

Have you? Will you? Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you are indeed a saving God. We come to the God who is our redeemer and deliverer.

[33 : 07] We thank you that salvation belongs to you. We thank you that you are the God who in eternity determined to save a people for yourself. You are a God who in history brought to fruition your great plan of salvation.

You are the God who continues today to apply the saving work of your son, Jesus, to the lives of sinners such as we are. We pray that you would help us to know you as such a God, that we would be enabled to respond to your grace and your love as we ought.

Help us to tear down those things that we offer such loyalty to, false gods and manners of thinking and behaving that are displeasing to you, the sins that occupy and fascinate us, that we would repent of them and that we would put our trust in your son, Jesus, as our Savior, that our undivided loyalty and love would be directed to him, the one who is indeed your mighty warrior who came to save, who came to offer his own life in our place, that he might be our Savior.

And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.