

I. Living in a godless society

Many years ago I was invited to a wedding. It was on a week night after work so I wore my best lounge suit to work then went to the wedding. The wedding was after 6pm which means the dress code was black tie, a dinner suit. The invitation didn't say what the dress was and I had forgotten that this was a tradition. I came in my lounge suit and every other man was wearing a dinner suit. I felt completely out of place.

How does it feel to be a Christian in 21 Century? The number of people going to church used to be 74% in 1954 but had dropped to 13.8% by 20006. In 1991 most weddings were taken by clergy. Now far more are taken by civil celebrants. Religion is not playing an important place in the lives of most Australians. There has been a great decline during my lifetime. There is opposition to religion in schools and other public institutions.

Australia lost touch with God and with biblical values and morals. How does it feel?

In the book of Judges in the Old Testament we see a similar decline in devotion to God. During the time of Joshua the people had trusted God and entered the Promised Land. But after his time there had been a steady downward spiral in religion and in morals. If you read the last few chapters of Judges you will see the chaos into which the nation had descended.

Chapter 2 summarises a pattern in the life of the community.

2 ⁸ Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of a hundred and ten. ⁹ And they buried him in the land of his inheritance, at Timnath Heres in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

¹⁰ After that whole generation had been gathered to their ancestors, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel. ¹¹ Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. ¹² They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord's anger ¹³ because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths. ¹⁴ In his anger against Israel the Lord gave them into the hands of raiders who plundered them. He sold them into the hands of their enemies all around, whom they were no longer able to resist. ¹⁵ Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the Lord was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress.

¹⁶ Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hands of these raiders. ¹⁷ Yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them.

The pattern is: The people sin, they worship other gods; God lets enemies oppress them; they cry out to God for help; God raises up a "judge", a military leader who rescues them from the enemy; the people sin again.

1. Called to serve God

So we come to the story of Gideon in Judges 6.

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and for seven years he gave them into the hands of the Midianites. ² Because the power of Midian was so oppressive, the Israelites prepared shelters for themselves in mountain clefts, caves and strongholds. ³ Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. ⁴ They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor

cattle nor donkeys. ⁵ They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count them or their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. ⁶ Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the Lord for help. Desperate!!

Here we see the pattern: they sin; they are oppressed by Midian; and they cry out. What do we expect next? We expect God to raise up a judge. But at first God sends a prophet to warn them. 6:7-10

⁷ When the Israelites cried out to the Lord because of Midian, ⁸ he sent them a prophet, who said, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: I brought you up out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. ⁹ I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. And I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors; I drove them out before you and gave you their land. ¹⁰ I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; do not worship the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you live.' But you have not listened to me." (6:7-10)

Too often they have been ignoring God. They think they can act as they like then expect God to bail them out but you can't ignore God and only call when you are in trouble. He warns them that things must change. But God is ready to rescue them. He is a gracious and patient God who cares for his people.

2. Gideon's weakness

So God sends an angel who appears to Gideon. (6:12-16)

He said, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior."...

Then says, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?"

¹⁵ "Pardon me, my lord," Gideon replied, "but how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." ¹⁶ The Lord answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive."

Gideon protests that he is too weak for this job. He can't do it. Can you identify with him when faced with some task? You may feel, "I couldn't do that. Get someone else." It might be when someone asks for more helpers for the children's ministry or to read the Bible or pray in church or some other ministry. It may be as you consider talking to someone about Jesus or just going to say sorry to someone. It all seems too hard. We feel too weak.

We might think to selves, "I'm too busy; I have no time or not now." Often these are excuses. We actually feel unable to do something. What things do you dismiss as not for you? Too hard for you to do?

God probably won't call you to lead an army but it is important to see God calls each of us to some things. We are all called to serve him in some way.

Gideon is weak. He has no experience of leading. It is God who will give him strength to do this job. In fact we will see that it is God who defeats the enemy not Gideon. God will help us to do whatever he asks us to do.

God is at work in spite of our weakness.

The first job the angel gives him is to destroy an altar to Baal.

²⁵ *That same night the Lord said to him, "Take the second bull from your father's herd, the one seven years old. Tear down your father's altar to Baal and cut down the Asherah pole beside it. ²⁶ Then build a proper kind of altar to the Lord your God on the top of this height. Using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering."*

²⁷ *So Gideon took ten of his servants and did as the Lord told him. But because he was afraid of his family and the townspeople, he did it at night rather than in the daytime. (6:25-27)*

We have seen Gideon's sense of weakness now we see his fear and we can understand it. His father is the head of local cult to Baal. To destroy altar will be to oppose his father and whole community in this most significant area of life. They believed Baal gave them good harvests and made their livestock productive. To destroy the altar is a threat to all they believed in and to risk the anger of the whole community. He is afraid, but he does it, although he does it at night when no one will see.

We may be afraid to do some task but it important to step out in faith. What is the scariest thing you have done for God?

Think. Have you attempted anything difficult for him?

It is much more comfortable to sit in your seat and just listen. But sometimes we have to put our commitment to God out there, put it before our parents, our reputation or popularity, even before our own safety. There are no guarantees. Sometimes may have to suffer for our faith as Christians do in other parts of the world.

Here the community are out for Gideon's blood.

³⁰ *The people of the town demanded of Joash, "Bring out your son. He must die, because he has broken down Baal's altar and cut down the Asherah pole beside it." (6:30)*

But Gideon is protected and his father gives a diplomatic answer which calms the situation so he is not killed.

3. Seeking guidance?

In 6:33-35 we are told, *"All the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples joined forces and crossed over the Jordan and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. ³⁴ Then the Spirit of the Lord came on Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him. ³⁵ He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, calling them to arms, and also into Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, so that they too went up to meet them.*

A great combined army has come to attack them! Gideon has received God's Spirit and gathered an army in response. But then there is a pause in the action.

³⁶ *Gideon said to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised— ³⁷ look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said." ³⁸ And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.*

³⁹ *Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece, but this time make the fleece dry and let the ground be covered with dew." ⁴⁰ That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew. (6:36-40)*

Gideon is “Laying a fleece before the Lord.” This has sometimes been used as an example of the way to seek God’s guidance. Is this the way to seek guidance? Well, no!

God has told him, *“Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian’s hand. Am I not sending you?” ... “I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive.”* (6:14, 16)

And as Gideon prays he says, *“If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—³⁷ look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor.”* (36-37)

He knows what he should do. He has been given God’s Spirit. God has promised to be with him and give him victory. What is he doing laying out fleeces?

He is trying to avoid God’s will for him. He’s afraid. This isn’t seeking guidance. It is trying to get out of doing what he has been told!

Do we do this? God has told us we each have gifts to serve him with. There are things God wants each of us to do for him. Do you wait for some other sign? Or do we get on and do what we know we ought to do?

C. What are you doing?

What ministry are you involved in this year? What are you waiting for? God may give us more specific guidance at times but often it just a matter of getting on with serving him, saying, “Yes I’ll help here or there.”

There are lots of things you could be doing: helping with the children’s ministry, with SRE in the school, with Bible reading or prayer or music and so on. There is helping with morning tea or cleaning. We can show you how or provide training. You could just try something out to see if it is right for you.

It can be hard to stand up for God in our society. We can feel weak. God says to Gideon, “I will be with you.” God will be with us as we seek to serve him. He will give you the help you need. God is at work in spite of our weakness. God is still building his kingdom.