

Chapter 8: The Call vs. The Culture

The call vs. the culture: a never-ending battle between being different (set apart) and being the same as everybody else.

Two different ways God provided through two very different judges:

A. He helped a leader in _____.

How could a whole generation could grow up after Joshua and “know neither the Lord nor what He did for Israel?” Because the culture is _____.

“This dream can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon... God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands!”

Judges 7:14

B. He defeated a leader in his _____.

1. No strength you have is ever enough to make up for your _____.
2. People _____ have no need of God's power.
3. If your strength is not consecrated to God, it becomes your _____.

Today's Equipping Point

_____ ***your gift***

Offer your greatest talent to God. How?

- _____ for the times you've used your gift sinfully.
- _____ before exercising it.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Matthew 5:5

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch." Simon answered, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets." When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John...

Luke 5:4-10

Well, how much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight.

Hebrews 11:32-34

Paraphrase:

"How much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Tom, Bruce, Rodney, Rick, Pete, and _____. By faith these men overthrew Satan's influence, led their families with grace, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of naysayers, quenched the fires of doubt, and escaped death through the blood of Jesus. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies of the Enemy to flight."

Discussion Questions

1. What part of our culture has been the sneakiest in your life?
2. Why do you think God was so gracious to give so many confirmations to Gideon?
3. No false modesty here:
 - a. What is your greatest gift?
 - b. Now how will you consecrate that strength to God?

Teaching Script

A few years ago psychologist Ruth W. Berenda and her associates carried out an interesting experiment with teenagers designed to show how a person handled group pressure. The plan was simple. They brought groups of ten adolescents into a room for a test. Subsequently, each group of ten was instructed to raise their hands when the teacher pointed to the longest line on three separate charts. What one person in the group did not know was that nine of the others in the room had been instructed ahead of time to vote for the second-longest line.

Regardless of the instructions they heard, once they were all together in the group, the nine were not to vote for the longest line, but rather vote for the next to the longest line. The experiment began with nine teen-agers voting for the wrong line. The stooge would typically glance around, frown in confusion, and slip his hand up with the group. The instructions were repeated and the next card was raised. Time after time, the self-conscious stooge would sit there saying a short line is longer than a long line, simply because he lacked the courage to challenge the group. This remarkable conformity occurred in about 75% of the cases, and was true of small children and high-school students alike.

Anyone ever felt peer pressure? Anyone's kid ever tell you about peer pressure? Did your parents ever tell you, "How many times have I told you...stay away from them. That's the wrong crowd. They are dangerous...uh huh...yeah...so if they told you to jump off a bridge, would you do that too?"

Now the real question: How many times have YOU as a parent said those exact words again? After you swore you'd never talk like your mom and dad, how many times have you said, "Well, if they told you to jump off a bridge..." and then just stopped in horror. Oh my goodness, I can't believe I just said that....

But guess what? The problem of orthodoxy and congruity and compliance is as bad as it ever was.

It's the constant lure to conform, to blend in, to be accepted, to not be labeled a loser, a chicken, gutless, a nerd, a dork, a schlemiel, a dweeb, a goober, a moron, or any combination of four-letter expletives. Take your pick of adjectives.

This is the message today: the call vs. the culture: a never-ending battle between being different, set apart, and the same as everybody else. We've heard this before. This was the message of chapter five three weeks ago: be different! I've rescued you for a purpose: you were saved to bear God's image to the world. You were spared to be salt and light. You are to be the instrument to reach the Gentiles as well. But what happened? They danced around an idol and God must've had this huge knot on His forehead from hitting the wall and lamenting, "What did I just say??"

And guess what? It happened again! They entered the Promised Land, won amazing victories, saw God rout their enemies, and then, it happened again! Those pagan neighbors they failed to eradicate became a toxic influence on a nation called to be different. They caved—they became indistinguishable from their neighbors.

We dealt with this two years ago when we studied Proverbs 9. Remember, there were two voices speaking: Wisdom and Folly. One says wise up, be different, live up to your calling. The other says “Stolen water is sweet...Come home with me!” And you might remember that if we give in, if we don’t choose well, we do what? We leave our buttprints in the sand. Talk to me later if you don’t know what that means.

Let’s look at this roller-coaster chapter of ups and downs and draw lessons as we walk through. First, let’s look at the middle of page 103 [*read the first four sentences of paragraph 3*].

Now how was this possible? ONE generation passed, and both God and what He had done were foreign concepts. You’ve heard about how important it is to build into and equip your kids because, as many have said, “the church is one generation away from extinction.” This is not an exaggeration—this is not an overly dramatic preacher trying to make a point. This is history! It happened! And right after the conquest of the Promised Land!

Let’s read on [*read the next two sentences, ending with “able to resist”*].

This is why God had Joshua cleanse the land so thoroughly as he marched through. This is why the flood wiped out everything—so God could give His people the best chance possible of hearing Him well and building enough character to resist the lure of the culture. And it’s why church is so important today, and why gatherings like this are **crucial**. If you and I don’t come and gear up, re-arm for the fight, make sure we have each other’s “six” and fuel up for the journey, we are sitting ducks in the culture war over our souls.

But we see in Chapter 8 that this was the lot of the Hebrews: a vertigo-inducing lifestyle that played on their weaknesses. First it was the Moabites and King Eglon, then Jabin the king of the Canaanites. When two courageous women, Deborah and Jael had the guts to take care of business and purge the evil, there were 40 years of peace.

But then some of the worst bullies of the Old Testament, the Midianites, showed up. Look at the bottom half of page 107 [*read the paragraph that starts “The Israelites...”*].

And who did God raise up to save them? A lowly wheat-thresher named Gideon. Today we’re going to look at two different ways God provided through two very different judges—and here’s the first:

A. He helped a leader in doubt.

The first place where we find Gideon is hiding—threshing wheat to keep it from the Midianites.

He then calls him a “mighty warrior.” This would have been one of those Kodak moments to capture the look on Gideon’s face when God said that. It would have been like the look on David Robinson’s face if God appeared to him at the Naval Academy in physics class and said, “The Lord is with you, O Great Builder of Schools.” It would have been like the look on my face if God appeared to me in a dusty warehouse at MCI counting microwave transmitters and said, “The Lord is with you, O Preacher of the Word.” Have you ever heard Bill Cosby’s monologue on Noah?

“Noah?”

“WHAT? Who is that?”

“It’s the Lord, Noah.”

“Right....who is this really?”

“It’s the Lord, Noah. I want you to build me...an ark.”

“Right.”

This was a leader in doubt, who could only see the grain on the floor. God saw a man with a trumpet, a jar, and a torch.

The third thing to notice about Gideon is that he was clueless why this was happening. On page 108, he says, “Pardon me Lord.....given us into the hand of Midian.” Gideon had no concept of how Israel’s apostasy had distanced them from God! And the amazing thing is, God did not take this opportunity to slap him upside the head and say, “What do you mean *if the Lord is with us*? Don’t you get cable down on that threshing floor? What do you mean WHY?”

But God was endlessly patient—He didn’t reprimand or chastise, He just said “Go save Israel.” Once again we see, like a couple of weeks ago, God equips the called. He could have searched for an equipped four-star with a chest full of medals and a sterling track record in a hot zone. Instead, He chose an obedient farmer. God chooses based on different criteria, then He equips at just the right time.

This cluelessness on the part of Gideon is important to see because the culture is sneaky. You can be infected and not even know it. Satan is so masterful at masking a slow descent into sin, you’ll find yourself looking around one day and saying, “How did I get here?”

Video Feature

To illustrate how a generation can grow up not knowing the Lord, show a clip from “Broadcast News:”

The scene takes place after the correspondents’ ball. Albert Brooks is talking to Holly Hunter (she’s all dressed up), trying to convince her that William Hurt is “the devil.” He describes the devil as not coming in a frightening, scary kind of way, but in an unobtrusive way, where he “slowly, inch by inch, lowers our standards, just a little at a time.”

THAT explains how a whole generation could grow up after Joshua and “know neither the Lord nor what He did for Israel.” THAT explains how Gideon could stand there with a straight face and say, “Pardon me Lord, but where have you been?” The culture is stealthy, deceitful, shifty, underhanded, and clandestine.

God was even so gracious that He helped this doubt-filled leader by patiently enduring four tests—four hoops that Gideon wanted him to jump through before he said, “OK, I’m all in.” First the angel incinerated the meat on the rock, then the dew was on the fleece

only, then it was on the ground only, and then he overheard the dream of an enemy that foretold his victory.

And once again, far from throwing His hands up in disgust, or pitching a hissy fit on Gideon's weak faith, He just smiled and said, "OK, now that I've got you convinced, send 99% of your men home." And because of these signs God gave him, Gideon

believed. In an amazing display of His grace, God brought Gideon along *slowly*, demonstrating his power, patiently answering Gideon's questions.

In fact, the transformation in Gideon was so complete, that as he sat outside the enemy's tent, he heard them respond in fear to the name of a hapless farmer: "This dream can be nothing other than the sword of Gideon...God has given the Midianites and the whole camp into his hands!"

The first takeaway for us is that even in a state of doubt and fear, God nurtures us, brings us along at a pace we can handle, but still firmly challenges us to step WAY out of our comfort zone to claim victory. If *you're* a leader in doubt today, about your capabilities or your future, you can rest assured God works through doubting farmers, doubting accountants, doubting sales reps, doubting stockbrokers, doubting real estate agents, and even doubting preachers.

Here was a great victory, but again, it was short-lived. At the top of page 112 it says...

They were in trouble again, and this time God used a different leader and a different method. This time, in point #2 on your outline,

B. He defeated a leader in his *strength*.

You say he did what? God defeated Israel's enemies by using a leader that needed to be defeated himself. A leader whose strength became a source of pride, cockiness and arrogance. A man whose narcissism knew no bounds.

Samson was a Nazirite, consecrated from birth who had never had alcohol or a haircut and kept to a strict diet. He grew up a fearsome man:

- He tore a lion apart with his bare hands
- After his riddle he struck down 30 men
- After his father-in-law gave his wife to another man, he lit the tails of foxes who ran through the fields and burned all the grain
- When those enemies killed his wife and her father, he slaughtered them
- He took the jawbone of a donkey and killed 1,000 more men

He was an intimidating man, but...but...let's just say he wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. His first wife nagged him long enough to get the secret of the riddle. Then his second wife, Delilah, a Philistine spy, tried three times unsuccessfully to get him to tell the secret of his great strength. You'd have thought by now Samson would have caught on. You'd have thought he'd run a background check on Delilah and gotten the scoop. You would think just her repeated badgering of him for the secret might have tipped him off just a little. Smell the coffee Samson!

Unfortunately, however, Samson was thinking, shall we say, with the wrong part of his anatomy, so he spilled the beans and the Bible says the Lord left him.

He was blinded, and made a spectacle for the Philistines, who taunted him and used him for sport. But despite his failures over and over, the Spirit of God came upon him in power. His last day was his best day and he took his torturers with him.

The point to see in the story of Samson is this: God defeated a leader in his strength to deliver His people.

Now you might say, why would God do that? Why wouldn't God use a gift that He Himself had given Samson to rescue Israel? It's because of this:

- **No strength you have is ever enough to make up for your weaknesses.**
- **People sure of themselves have no need of God's power.**
- **If your strength is not consecrated to God, it becomes your weakness.**

God gives us gifts to honor Him and serve the Kingdom and the world. If your gift is management, you bless your company by exercising that gift well. If your gift is compassion, you bring glory to God by loving your marketplace and your family. But what happens when we forget the Giver of the gift? What happens when I'm so good at something, I stop honoring the One who gave it to me?

The answer is, I become Samson. This leads us to today's Equipping Point:

Surrender your gift.

Only when our gifts are submitted to the Giver can they be fully utilized for His glory, not ours. This is incredibly difficult, because our strengths are what come to us most naturally; it can never occur to us to surrender the very thing we do most easily. But if you're like me, and like Samson, you've used your greatest gifts, whether it's management, empathy, discernment, or teaching, to elevate yourself.

How do we keep from doing this? How do we offer our strengths, our greatest talents to God?

1. We need to repent for the times we've used our gifts sinfully, or selfishly.
2. We need to pray before exercising it.

If you're particularly talented at counseling, make sure you pray before each session. If you're gifted at the mechanisms of management and building infrastructure, make sure you pray before every meeting, whether at work or on a volunteer committee at church, to ensure your strength doesn't become a stumbling block to yourself or to others.

Now let's look at two Biblical examples of the same principle. The first is in the Sermon on the Mount:

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Matthew 5:5

This is one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible. Jesus is NOT saying ‘blessed are the milquetoasts...blessed are those with a poor self-image...blessed are the spineless, the wishy-washy, the wusses...’

On the contrary, the word meek has a sense of “strength under control.” A wild animal who is governed and channels its strength for its master—a stallion that isn’t beaten down, but whose great strength, energy and spirit is harnessed for a larger purpose. This was Samson’s problem—he had great strength, but it went to his head and it wasn’t submitted to God.

The second example in the Bible comes from the Gospels.

When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” Simon answered, “Master, we’ve worked hard all night and haven’t caught anything. But because you say so, I will let down the nets.” When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink. When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!” For he and all his companions were astonished at the catch of fish they had taken, and so were James and John...

Luke 5:4-10

It’s important to know that by this time, Jesus had already performed miracles and established His identity. He had turned the water to wine, healed a child there at Cana, healed a demoniac, Peter’s mother-in-law and several others. But it was only when Jesus defeated Peter in his strength—fishing—that he called him Lord. You could perhaps imagine sarcasm in Peter’s voice when he said, “We’ve worked hard all night; but because you say so...” It’s almost as if Peter were saying, “Look, I’m the fisherman, you’re the prophet. You stick to preaching, and let me handle the fishing.”

But when Jesus defeated him in his strength, in his profession, in his giftedness, Peter called him Lord.

I’m wondering if there isn’t someone besides me here today who has been defeated in their strength. Perhaps you have a gift of leadership and haven’t been allowed to exercise that gift where you work. Perhaps you’re a consultant and you can see things from the outside that people on the inside can’t see but....they just won’t listen to you. Maybe you have a real passion to speak into a situation, or to help fix a problem that you KNOW you could solve, but no one will give you permission to deal with that problem. Has anyone ever had these feelings?

If so, congratulations. Because you have joined the ranks of Samson, Peter, Jacob, and a host of other characters whom God defeated in their strength. Why? So we will call him Lord and Master. So we can see that no matter how good we are at something, it will never make up for all the rest. So we don’t get cocky and think WE are somehow God’s gift to humanity or to this church. Because until you take your strength and first offer it to the Lord, it’s YOUR gift, not His.

God graciously helps leaders like Gideon who are full of fear and doubt, and He helps other leaders with amazing abilities by graciously breaking them, and defeating their strength, so that their potency is submitted to God's purposes. Just as a wild stallion

needs to be broken to be of service to its owner, so we need that same "meekness"—power that is restrained, but ready to be released by God's will, in God's timing.

God is never bashful about His intentions for His people. He never tolerates sin and, at the same time, never breaks His covenant with His people. Israel may not have fully understood God's discipline, but over and over He had to bring them to their knees in order to bring them to Himself.

Here is a great quote that sums up the roller-coaster history of Israel in the time of the Judges:

A couple of years ago a friend introduced me to the phrase 'the saw-toothed history of Israel.' Israel was up one day and down the next. One day they were marching in triumph through the Red Sea, singing songs of victory, the next they were grumbling in the desert because they missed having Egyptian steak and potatoes for supper. One day they were marching around Jericho blowing trumpets and raising hearty hymns, and the next they were plunged into an orgy at some Canaanite fertility shrine. One day they're heeding God's voice, the next they're being bullied by the Midianites or the Philistines. One day they are with Jesus in the upper room, listening in rapt attention and receiving his love, the next they are stomping around and cursing in the courtyard, denying they ever knew him.

*But all the time, as we read that saw-toothed history, we realize something solid and steady: they are **always** God's people. God is steadfastly with them, in mercy and judgment, insistently gracious...My security comes from who God is, not from how I feel. Discipleship is a decision to live by what I know about God, not by what I feel about him or myself.*

—Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*

In the same way, we, you and I, despite our failures—despite our propensity to be Homer Simpson with that daily "D'oh!"—we are always God's men.

Look at Hebrews 11:

Well, how much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight.

Hebrews 11:32-34

We are stunned to find bargaining Barak, gutless Gideon, self-indulging Samson and the politically-incorrect Jephthah listed in the "Hall of Faith" in Hebrews 11. Their lives illustrate the great theological truth that the work of the LORD depends not on our

consistency or dependability, but on God's empowerment. How comforting it is to know that God triumphs despite us!

Look back at these verses we just read from Hebrews—will you allow me a personal paraphrase? From the “Revised New Living Century International Convolutd” version:

“How much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Tom, Bruce, Rodney, Rick, Pete, and _____ (write in). By faith these people overthrew Satan's influence, led their families with grace, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of naysayers, quenched the fires of doubt, and escaped death through the blood of Jesus. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies of the Enemy to flight.”

There you go. You are officially enrolled in the Hall of Faith; not because of what you did, but because of what God did. You always were, and always will be, His.