

Background to a Saviour

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, let me introduce myself. My full name, I haven't exposed this up until this point, I think.

My full name is Andrew Sutherland Reid. It is a good Scottish name. The Andrew part comes from my parents' choice. The Sutherland part comes from my grandmother's maiden name.

And the Reid is because I come from a long line of Reeds. Now, the name Reid is probably best understood as deriving from the word red. And that's very Scottish as well.

You see, I heard the other day that there is a greater proportion of redheads in Scotland than any other place on earth. And you wouldn't know it, but before I went grey, my beard bore the mark of my name.

That is, it was flecked with red. That red turned grey first. Yes, you see, so read by name and somewhat read by colour as well. Friends, I start today's sermon in this rather fun and perhaps bizarre way.

[1 : 03] Because names are important in the passage that we have in front of us today. So keep your eyes out for the names. For just as they were important, are important in Scotland, so they were in Israel.

Okay, so let's get underway. Before we get to the passage, it will be helpful for us to remember where we were. First, do you remember the historical context that the book of Judges occurs in?

In Genesis 12, God calls Abraham. And he promises him three great promises. You'll remember these. Land, children, and that he would be blessed and be a means of blessing for the whole world.

Anyway, in Genesis and in the first part of Exodus, we see Abraham's descendants becoming a great nation. God rescues them from Egypt through a series of spectacular events.

He then solidifies those with a covenant. He outlines the demands of the covenant in the books of Exodus and of Deuteronomy. They are to, he says, live before him as his holy people.

[2 : 07] Live according to his word. And if they live according to his word, it will bring blessing. But if they don't live according to his word, there will be curse. Anyway, with those stipulations, they enter the promised land.

The land given to them. And they do that in the book of Joshua. Now, although they only partly conquer the land, the inhabitants of the land are not therefore completely destroyed.

You see, they were not wholly successful in their conquering of the land. And in Judges 1 and 2 tells us that the Canaanites remained in the land and shared the land with Israel.

Israel didn't yet have a king. But God occasionally appointed these figures, which were called Judges. And the book of Judges is, of course, about these particular people. And so far, we have met a number of them.

You might remember them. Othniel. Remember Ehud, the left-handed man. Remember Shamgar, the man with an ox goad. And you might remember the coalition of Deborah, the prophetess, Barak, the commander, and Jael, the woman with the tent peg.

[3 : 10] So there's the vague background. There's one more thing you need to remember, however. When we read the early chapters of Judges, we notice there was a pattern of activity that emerged.

It was a sort of amended cycle with a distinct down point and a distinct up point. If you've got your outlines, you can see my little amended cycle there. Point number one.

The down point. Israel does evil and becomes even more corrupt. Item two. The Lord's anger is aroused so that he gives them into the hand of a foreign aggressor.

Item three. Israel cries out to the Lord. Item four is the up point. The Lord relents and he gives them a deliverer or a judge. Item five.

The Lord then gives the foreign aggressor into the hands of the judge. And item six. The land has rest for a number of years. So that's the background to Judges six.

[4 : 08] We need to now just look back a verse or two from Judges six to the immediate preceding events of this chapter. And if you look back, you'll see the previous chapter is all about praise.

It praises Israel's leaders and the people who finally stepped up to the mark. But much more importantly, it praises the Lord. The Lord, you see, gives victory to his people.

The Lord raises up deliverers, rescuers and gives peace to the land for 40 years. So that's where we are. Judges six, one to 32 is basically an extended introduction to Gideon, whose name means hacker.

Now, we'll eventually find out why he's called the hacker. But for a moment, let me tell you that Gideon and his family will dominate the story of Judges from now, from verse one through to chapter nine, verse 57.

In other words, four chapters are devoted to Gideon and his family. It is a very significant slab of the book of Judges. So it's fitting that there's this extended introduction to the man who will dominate these chapters and whose family will follow in his footsteps.

[5 : 22] Now, the 32 verses we're looking at can be divided into four sections. I'm going to look at them section by section. Let's look at the first one, verses one to six. Please turn with me to it in your Bibles.

Now, immediately you come to this little section, you'll notice a change from the previous stories of the Judges. In the previous stories, item one in the cycle wasn't sort of spelled out or specified.

We're just told that Israel did evil in the eyes of the Lord. Now, to some extent that happens here as well. We're told that in verse one of chapter six. But now look down at verse 10.

So just flip down in your Bibles to verse 10 and we're told of the evil that they did. Though the Lord their God is God, they worship the gods of the nations in whose land they live.

They worship gods other than the Lord to whom they owe sole allegiance. As a result, God gives them into the power of a foreign aggressor.

[6 : 22] And this is item two in the cycle. But then come some more differences. Look at verses two to six. The pain and the difficulty caused by the Lord giving them into the hands of the Midianites is spelt out for us.

You see, Midianite rule is not like the rule of the Lord. The rule of the Lord is filled with rest and peace. But not the rule of the Midianites. No, it is harsh and oppressive.

It's like, well, it's like what God promised in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 when he outlined the curses for covenant disobedience. And to get the, we get the details spelled out to us just so we hear the point.

Look at verses two to six. Here are the Israelites, you see, trying to live in the land, trying to eke out an existence. But the rule of the Midianites is so oppressive that they find themselves living in clefts and caves and strongholds.

They plant their crops. And the Midianites, the Amalekites and unnamed Easterners invade their country, camp on their land, ruin the crops throughout the land.

[7 : 31] They come, we're told, like swarms of locusts bringing livestock, camels, tents, everything else. I mean, picture the scene. It's your land. The land God gave you.

You venture out with your family to plant your crops, graze your flocks and your herds. And then the hordes arrive. They trample on your crops. They dash around and you dash around to save what you can of your flocks and your herds.

And you retreat back into your caves and you live as cavemen. And it goes on year after year after year. And finally, you've had enough. And you remember that your ancestors cried out to God in Egypt.

And you wonder, well, maybe that's worth a shot. And so you do it. You cry out to the Lord for help. And friends, before we see what happens, it's worth reflecting on what we just see here.

You see, here is sin in its essence. You see, we were made like the Israelites for God. And we were made to find rest in God.

[8 : 35] And yet we seek to avoid the way he's made us, don't we? We sin. And sin creates an awful burden. It creates pain and affliction. In the 1662 Anglican Book of Common Prayer, this is captured.

It captures the nature of sin and its impact magnificently. Let me read it to you. It says this. And listen to this.

Well, might Israel pray a prayer like this.

For sin has brought an intolerable burden upon them and they crave rescue. And so they cry out to God. And look at what happens in the next section.

Look at verses 7 to 10. They give us a sort of third difference between this situation and the previous situations with the judges. In the past, you see, when Israel has cried out to the Lord, he does what?

[10 : 00] He immediately raises up a judge who will save them. And that was the point up in our item four. So when Israel cries out, this is what we expect as well.

We expect to deliver it. But not this time. Look at verses 7 and 8. When the Israelites cried out to the Lord because of Midian, he sent a prophet. Now, one commentator remarks that this is like a stranded motorist ringing a garage for assistance only to find that the garage sends a philosopher instead of a mechanic.

You see, Israel needs a deliverer and God sends them a prophet. Israel asks for an active power and he sends them a proclaimer of the word of God. It's not really what they were requesting.

And it's not really what we were expecting. However, when you think about it, we've seen something like this before. Do you remember the story of Deborah, Barak and Jael in Judges 4 and 5?

At exactly the same point in the cycle as this, we heard that the Lord raised up a prophet, Deborah. And then Deborah goes off and she speaks to Barak, the prospective deliverer.

[11 : 16] But look at what the prophet does this time. The prophet doesn't run off and speak to a prospective deliverer. He doesn't urge that deliverer to deliver. Rather, he speaks to Israel as a whole.

And he soundly rebukes them for breaking covenant. Verses 8 to 10 contains the indictment. Look at it. The prophet says, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel says. I brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

I rescued you from the hand of the Egyptians. I delivered you from the hand of all your oppressors. I drove them out before you and I gave you their land.

And 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.

The prophet is telling Israel that a cry that they utter for help does not necessarily mean deliverance. A cry of distress does not automatically guarantee that God will act graciously.

[12 : 18] You see, God is their God and he is for them. He's entered into covenant with them. Israel is his people. But they have covenant obligations to him as well.

And they have breached them. He is not in any way obliged, therefore, to answer their cry for help. And so we wonder, will God act?

Will he raise up a deliverer? Will there be that upward intervention that we're so used to seeing and we've been led to expect? And with that question left hanging, let's just reflect on these few verses.

Friends, I wonder if you have ever found yourself where Israel finds herself. That is, have you found yourself in trouble ever in your faith? You cry out to God and you bring the matter to him in prayer and he doesn't answer or perhaps even worse, he answers by telling you the truth of his word, which you really didn't want to hear necessarily.

And you find that you're living with the consequences of sin and yet you still are running to God for help. Friends, let me say that just as a parent, a good parent will want to help a child, who wants to help a child, will sometimes need to speak a firm word with them.

[13 : 36] Sometimes a parent will find that a truth is needed. And sometimes a parent will know that that truth is going to be painful and confronting. That does not mean that it should not be said, does it?

In fact, if we don't do it as parents, we wouldn't be good parents. I remember those conversations with my own sons. They were not pleasant.

So it is with God, you see. Sometimes his word will come with truth that we need to hear if we are going to grow. And the truth may be painful and it shouldn't be run from.

Rather, it should be embraced. So it is that God, the God of all truth, tells his children hear the truth. It is a truth they need to hear.

And at times God will have to tell us the truth. That may be painful, but it will be a truth we need to hear. But then, let's go back to the story. In all grace and behind the scenes, this God of grace begins to give his people what they do not deserve.

[14 : 45] Let's see him at work. Verses 11 to 24, let's see what happens. First, we're introduced to an angel. Now, I need to tell you this is not just any angel, but the angel of the Lord. That is the messenger of the Lord, who's often so closely identified with the Lord himself that, you know, they're often hard to tell apart.

And just as Deborah led Israel sitting under a palm tree, so the angel of the Lord sits under an oak tree in Orpah. This oak tree belongs to a certain Joash, the Abarzite.

He has a son, Gideon. Under pressure from Midian incursion, he's threshing wheat in a winepress to keep it from the Midianites. Anyway, the angel of the Lord appears to Gideon.

And his first announcement is somewhat shocking in verse 12. Have a look at it. The Lord is with you, mighty warrior. Now, there's a bit of a shock in that, isn't there? The shock value comes from the fact that hiding in a winepress, threshing wheat, is a strange place for a mighty warrior to be found.

And hiding from the enemy. But anyway, that's not what concerns Gideon. In fact, I think he looks like a mighty warrior of the mouth. Look at his response in verse 13.

[15 : 58] He interacts with the words of the angel of God, that the angel of God is bringing to his people. And he starts with a sign of respect for a person of higher rank. Pardon me, or if you like, by your leave.

And then he confronts. But, he says, if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all the wonders that our ancestors told about when they said, told us about when they said, did not the Lord bring us out of Egypt?

But now, says Gideon, the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hands of Midian. Now, look at verse 14. Just as often happens with the angel of the Lord, we're told that it's the Lord himself.

And so, the Lord turns to him and says, go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you? In effect, you see, Gideon is being told that he is the answer to his own question.

How is the Lord going to be present among his people? Israel is going to send his representative, Gideon. And he will use Gideon to save Israel out of the Midianites' hand. Now, the language, when you read it, is very similar to the language used with Moses at the burning bush.

[17 : 14] Did you notice this? And the reaction of Gideon is really similar to the reaction of Moses in Exodus 3. Look at verse 15 and those verses that follow. Look at here the strong echoes of the conversation between the Lord and Moses in Exodus 3.

Gideon replies to the Lord, pardon me, my Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my family. And the Lord responds as he did to Moses, promising presence and a firm result.

He says, I will be with you. Same words as the Lord gave to Moses. And you will strike down all the Midianites, leaving none alive. You see, God's presence is really what matters.

And God has promised it here. With Moses and Exodus, God also promised Moses a sign. Well, Gideon doesn't wait for that. He asks for a sign himself.

If now I have found favor in your eyes, give me a sign that it's really you talking to me. And what he does is he prepares a sacrifice. Now, you might remember staffs in the hand of Moses in the book of Exodus.

[18 : 20] And everywhere he went when he held his staff up, something happened. Now, it's the angel of the Lord who has the staff in this particular section. And he touches the sacrifice with the tip of the staff.

And fire flares up. The sacrifice is consumed. And the sign has been performed. And the angel of the Lord disappears. And then Gideon builds an altar in verse 24.

Now, again, I just want to sort of step back and reflect on this just a little. You see, Scripture says that pride comes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Scripture also tells us the opposite of this, that weakness is something. If pride is something God hates, weakness is something God loves.

And he can use. For when people are weak, God can be strong. Gideon may think that his weakness is a liability. But God thinks of it as an asset.

[19 : 20] That's why the poor shall inherit the kingdom of God. That's why children are a model of what it means to enter the kingdom of God in the teaching of Jesus. That's why mere lads with confidence in a mighty God can slay giants.

Such as David does. Or this is why a man hanging in ignominy on a cross can become a powerful weapon. The most powerful weapon against sin and Satan that the world has ever seen.

Friends, don't despise weakness. God loves it. For when we are weak, then he can be strong. And so, come to God in your weakness.

Glory in weakness. And ask God to be strong. Ask God to take you and your frailty and use it for his great purposes. Take my word for it.

No, no. Take God's word for it. He loves taking the weak of the world to shame the strong. And he loves taking the weak of the world to show up the strong.

[20 : 22] And he loves people turning to him in their weakness so that he can be strong. Let's turn to our last section, 25 to 32.

Look at verse 25. The same night the Lord speaks again and he says, 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.

Then build a proper kind of altar to the Lord your God on the top of this height. And using the wood of the Asherah pole that you cut down, offer the second bull as a burnt offering. Now, friends, please understand this.

Gideon's family has been sucked in by their Canaanite neighbors. The very thing that God had warned against. Gideon's own father was guilty of the sin the prophet condemned earlier on.

You see, his own dad was engaged in the worship of the Canaanite god Baal. He made altars to Baal and he had Asherah poles beside it, which Deuteronomy had forbidden. And now the Lord was instructing Gideon to destroy both of them.

[21 : 26] Now, Gideon is not yet the bold warrior that the angel of the Lord had hailed. How do you know that? Because he sneaks off at night to do it. Hacker by name, hacker by nature, Gideon hacks down the idolatrous objects.

However, he's quickly isolated as the culprit, verse 29. Death is threatened, verse 30. And his dad comes to the rescue of this great warrior in verse 31.

And Joash replies to the hostile crowd and says, are you going to plead Baal's cause? Are you trying to save him? Whoever fights for him shall be put to death by morning.

If Baal really is a god, he can defend himself when someone breaks down his altar. It's a great line, isn't it? Theologically indisputable. So Gideon survives.

He's given a new name or a nickname. Ominously, you see, where the name Gideon has positive associations, the new name has the name of Baal incorporated into it.

[22 : 31] Now he will be Jerub Baal. Let Baal contend with him. And as we'll see in the coming weeks, his two names betray what will be a two-sided character to this man.

Sometimes for Yahweh. Sometimes for sometimes not. Friends, this is the start of the story of Gideon. Now let me tell you, it's an interesting and somewhat depressing story.

You see, we began so positively, didn't we, in the book of Judges? But gradually, each judge, with each judge, things have become more coloured by sin and with ambiguity.

And the downward spiral can be seen in the differences between this cycle and the ones that came before it. As we journey on with Gideon or Jerub Baal, that downward spiral will escalate and we will find ourselves being sucked into a deep vortex of sin, corruption, idolatry and depravity.

And human sin will dominate. We will find Adam's rebellion alive and well in his descendants in Israel. And just as God found that in the days of Noah, he looked upon humanity and was grieved because their hearts were only on evil all the time.

[23 : 49] So we too will grieve, as we read Judges, as Israel is known as a place where even its heroes do what is good in their own eyes and not in the eyes of God.

Friends, at the end of this book, we will find ourselves wondering if there's any hope for Israel. And because Israel was meant to be different, we'll therefore find ourselves asking, is there any hope for humanity?

Let me let you into a little secret though. It's a secret that is tucked deep into this narrative. It is a secret that offers some hope.

Did you notice it? The secret is grace. You see, Israel in this narrative is what? Idolatrous and sinful. And yet God chooses a saviour from among the weak.

And he uses him. Now, he will turn out to be a flawed character. But God's raising up of him is an act of grace. And that act of grace is a small and bright light in a dark world.

[25 : 02] For that act of grace indicates something at the heart of God that we can look to. And that small bright light will later on in history flicker into a flame in the person of Jesus.

For, and so, as Paul says in Romans 5, at the right time, when we were powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person. Though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his love for us in this.

Or if I might add another word to Paul. God demonstrates his grace in this. That while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Friends, let me tell you. In world religions, there is no other God like ours. There is no other place to go in this dark world.

[26 : 11] There is no other hope. Only in him and in his son is there hope. That hope is a hope realised and accomplished in Jesus Christ.

So thanks be to God for this marvellous gift of grace. Let us pray. Amen. Father, we thank you that there is no other God like you.

There is no other place to go in this dark world. There is no other hope than the hope stretched out to us in Jesus. Thanks be to you, Father, for your marvellous gift of grace in your son.

We pray this in his name. Amen.