

Out of Caves: God's Call to Courage and Justice

Judges 6

Key Idea: Out of the caves, God called forward Gideon to use the strength he had to help those who were being oppressed. In the same way, God calls us to use the strength and abilities we have to help those who are being persecuted and oppressed. Testimonies of persecuted individuals that can be used as powerful illustrations can be found at 21Wilberforce.org

I. Introduction

Begin with a short anecdote or compelling modern persecution headline (e.g. from Nigeria or Myanmar) to open the message. Example:

“Today, around the world, there are thousands who sleep in literal caves to avoid being slaughtered for their faith. And while most of us live above ground, many of us have retreated to caves of fear, passivity, and disengagement. But Judges 6 reminds us — God doesn’t just find us in caves. He *calls us out*.”

Introduce the topic by highlighting (1) why you decided to focus on the reality of contemporary religious persecution, (2) some of the general facts related to persecution today, and (3) a general background to the book of Judges.

II. Context of Oppression – Judges 6:1-6

Read Judges 6:1-2 emphasizing that oppression forced the Hebrew people to hide in caves. Describe what that must have been like, the fear of running to the cave, the fear of separation from children and loved ones, the struggle for survival. Consider:

- The emotions these individuals might have felt as they sought shelter and found their lives utterly disrupted;
- How this reality differed or corresponded to the expectations of the Hebrew people;
- Possible rationales behind those who engaged in the attacking.

Transition to the contemporary context.

Metaphorical Context. Even today there are many who feel as if their situation is so extreme they must retreat to the caves and strongholds in their lives. Consider how this could be the case and the difficulty of living life to the full when in the face of opposition, we respond out of negotiated hiding.

Contemporary Reality. While many of us face proverbial challenges and temptations to hide in caves, the reality of significant persecution and oppression that forces individuals out of their homes and into literal caves and hiding places remains far too common. Consider:

- Christians in northern Nigeria who have been displaced from their homes by Boko Haram, experienced the burned destruction of their crops, and forced to live for months at a time in literal physical caves;
- Christians in Iraq and Syria who have been displaced from their homes by the Islamic State and forced to live as people without a home, without education, and without employment; both in displacement camps inside Iraq and Syria and as refugees in neighboring countries
- Both Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar as well as Karen and Kachin Christians from Myanmar who have experienced targeted destruction, rape, military violence and extrajudicial killing that has forced many to become refugees.

Read Judges 6:3-6 emphasizing the destruction of the crops with the subsequent ramifications on livelihood and anxiety that would produce. Consider the possible reactions to this situation ranging from the positive to the negative.

Reread Judges 6:6 emphasizing the great impoverishment, the fear and reduction of life to dwelling in a cave. Consider the feeling of abandonment that could have been felt when none in the international context seemed willing to engage on their behalf. Consider how in this case the people responded by crying out to the Lord for rescue.

III. Strength You Already Have – Judges 6:12-16

Read Judges 6:12-16. Highlight how the Lord is calling Gideon to step out of the shadows of the cave in order to advance a cause of justice in the face of opposition.

Restatement of the theme: God doesn't call the equipped. He equips the called – starting with the strength you already have.

Discuss the differentiation between the Lord's perspective of Gideon (vs. 12, "mighty warrior") and Gideon's perspective of himself (questioning the presence of God, vs. 13, questioning his personal qualifications, vs. 15).

A simple comparison: Gideon looked in the mirror and saw a coward. God looked at him and saw a commander.

Consider:

- Why was this the Lord's perspective of Gideon?
- Why did Gideon perceive himself in this way?
- How might have the world (and the enemies) have perceived Gideon at this point?
- Which are you more likely to question: the presence of God or your personal qualifications?
- What are the ramifications if Gideon begins to perceive himself through the Lord's description?
- What are the ramifications if Gideon continues to believe his own self-designations?
- Why is it easier to believe our own self-designations or see the enormity of the problem and become paralyzed to inaction?
- What are other promises used by Scripture to describe followers of the Lord living according to his mission? h

- How do we begin to understand and act upon how the Lord perceives us?
- What strength do you already have that God might be waiting for you to use?

Emphasize our commonality with the reluctant judge and the kind of questioning which leads to self-paralysis.

Tell a personal story of a time when you stepped out in obedience and witnessed the Lord's deliverance

Focus on verse 14 as one of the keys to unlocking this courageous step of obedience. The call is to move forward in the "strength you [already] have." Even when we feel as if we cannot make a difference, the Lord calls us to step out of the caves and work to advance justice.

For many experiencing the most extreme forms of oppression and persecution, it can seem as if they are living utterly abandoned in the face of attacking enemies and with all possibility of a future stripped from them. Consider how our unwillingness to act contributes to this reality.

The emphasis of the Scripture is not in knowing the full outcome or an entire plan but in taking the first step – to go in the strength we already have. If we are to go in that strength, some initial first steps that could be taken today include:

PRAY

- Commit to pray regularly for those facing persecution and their families.
- Generate more awareness by signing up for Alerts that highlight these realities and that are often overlooked in many media coverages (recommended source: www.21wilberforce.org with sign up at the top; or even consider having a simple sign-up form at the end of each row that could be passed down so that members can elect in and then mail that form to 21Wilberforce for manual input);

GIVE

- Give to support organizations actively working in this area (suggested amount: \$21 per month through www.21wilberforce.org can make a significant difference).

ACT

- Act as a voice multiplier by regularly posting about the reality of persecution on your social media accounts.
- Go on a mission trip to a country where persecution remains real;
- If you are a student learn more by choosing this topic for a research project;
- Enhance religious freedom in your immediate area by inviting someone of another faith to your home for dinner and shared conversation;
- Reach out to refugees in your area and build an intentional friendship;
- Encourage your elected representatives to prioritize these issues and to demonstrate that priority by tasking one of their staff to track international religious freedom issues (visit www.IRFscorecard.org to download a free scorecard that grades each Senator and Congressmen on the degree to which their votes support this area);

- Volunteer your background specialty such as: legal, research, teaching, micro-finance, small business or medical.

IV. When Injustice Demands Action – Judges 6:17-35

Emphasize that no one is questioning the reality and seriousness of the enemy either in this biblical narrative or in our world today. No one is questioning the challenges that may be facing you in your current context. In a similar way, we are living in a time when the enemies of religious freedom remain real and pressing for many people of faith. Sometimes the call is to step out in the strength you have. In this instance – even in the face of real and certain opposition – the call was to step out and engage on behalf of communities that were hiding in caves and dying in the midst of terrorism. But even still, we will often internally feel hesitation.

Summarize that Judges 6:17-26 illustrates Gideon's ongoing reluctance to engage even though he is certain that the Lord is calling him to move forward. Are there areas in our lives and in our world that we are certain the Lord has asked us to engage but for which we still feel hesitancy? Why?

Judges 6:27 in particular illustrates that Gideon remains at this point a reluctant, at-night, hesitant follower – a reality that many of us understand, especially when we are uncertain how our immediate family and community are going to respond to our actions. Consider how the family and community around Gideon may have responded as they first learned of his intended actions.

In the midst of this normal and reasonable hesitancy, something changed in Gideon.

Read Judges 6:33-35. When the eastern peoples once again invaded the land, Gideon knew he had to respond. Perhaps he was unwilling to see the terror inflicted upon entire communities forced to hide in caves. Perhaps he had just reached the breaking point. Perhaps he has just now fully yielded himself to the Lord's Spirit. Whatever the reason, the outcome is the same: Gideon moves towards a public commitment that works for justice even as the enemies draw near.

What would it take to move us and our churches to action?

Emphasize the Spirit of the Lord in calling us forward as individuals. Before the rest of the community could move forward towards freedom, it took an individual to take the first step. However, once Gideon took that first step he found that he was not alone but that others joined him at his side. In the same way and in the face of some enormous challenges, the opportunity is for us as individuals to take a first step and engage as we are able, and trust that the Lord is going to raise up others who will give out of the grace the Lord has given them in pursuit of his mission of freedom restoration. God can use hesitant obedience. You don't have to be fearless to be faithful.

V. Conclusion – A Call to Action

Gideon was a hesitant, uncertain, at night follower who allowed the Spirit of the Lord fill him and move him to active engagement in the face of great injustice. Will we do the

same? In the midst of many who are huddling in the caves and displaced from their homes and livelihoods, the Lord is calling forward some Gideon's who will go in the strength they have. Go in the strength you have. You are not alone.

Optional Additions:

- **Responsive Reading or Prayer** for the persecuted church.
- A **slide or printed quote** from a persecuted believer.
- A **song** to end that reflects the theme