

“Losing the Plot”
Judges 8:4 – 21

Who’s been enjoying our series following the story of Gideon?

If you were here last week tell the person next to you what we talked about.

Here we find Gideon in a ‘mop up’ operation after the confrontation with the Midianite army.

Through God’s intervention the battle is over; the Midianites are beaten. One hundred and twenty thousand men are now a paltry 15,000.

Now we see Gideon in hot pursuit in particular of two of the Midianite leaders, Zebah and Zalmunna.

What’s notable are the great lengths Gideon goes to, to capture them. Despite exhaustion, despite hunger, despite being outnumbered, Gideon keeps pushing on. Along the way he is rebuffed by the people of Succoth and Peniel but it doesn’t dampen his fervour. In fact it only serves to enflame him.

Gideon – at this point – is a driven man.

There was drivenness in his life.

Do you know what the markers are if you want to identify drivenness?

It’s marked by

- compulsiveness
- restlessness
- impatience
- rashness
- an obsessiveness, singlemindedness

Does that describe Gideon at this point? I think it does.

Driven people often do what other mere mortals can only dream about. They don’t need external motivations; their drive comes from within.

But is that a good thing?

Is it a quality to admire?

So my first question this morning,

“What was Gideon driven by?”

Have a real quick chat about that and then we’ll have some feedback.

Here’s what I think: Gideon was driven by... revenge.

His heart is consumed by a desire to get even, to exact payback, to even the score.

And it’s at this point Gideon loses the plot.

And the first people to experience this dark side of Gideon are the elders of Succoth and the people of Peniel.

Now at this point in my preparation for today I did a bit of reading.

Some of the commentators were intent on defending Gideon’s honour.

There were comments like it was rough justice, they were traitors so the punishment fit the crime, and it was in keeping with the times.

But consider the position Succoth and Peniel find themselves in.

Geographically they live near the borders of their invaders and doubt whether Gideon can secure a triumph.

They even state, “Do you have the hands of Zebah and Zelammuna in your possession [in other words are they dead or have you captured them] that we give bread to your troops?”

If they aid Gideon and Gideon’s loses, they fear the swift retribution Midianites will exact on them.

What’s more telling is this: when Gideon is fearful and repeatedly doubted God, God is kind, patient and gracious.

When the people of Succoth and Peniel are fearful and doubt Gideon, Gideon responds with brutal vengeance.

Not only that, these were his fellow Israelites, his countrymen.

In fact Law given to Israel states in Leviticus 19 verse 18:

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.”

But we’re told that Gideon punished the seventy-seven elders with desert thorns and briars; which is a polite way of saying that Gideon used the thorns and briars to flay the elders until they became a bloody mess, leaving their flesh and muscles exposed.

Then he demolishes Peniel’s only form of defence, the town tower.

But then Gideon goes one step further than he promised – he then commits an act of gendercide, killing all the men of the town.

Finally he executes Zebah and Zalmunna, *not* as act of justice or invading Israel or even for God’s glory – but because they killed his brothers.

All this time Gideon stored his hurt and anger until the accumulated weight of it became too much for him to hold back.

In other words, Gideon’s ruthless, remarkable pursuit and brave attack had really been driven by a desire for personal vengeance.

And Gideon no longer acts like a hero; he acts like a tyrant. Driven by revenge he is harsh, vindictive, merciless and cruel...

You know, we still live in a world where people are driven by revenge.

Revenge is the ugly, often violent offspring of unforgiveness.

Mark Twain writes of the conversation between Huckleberry Finn and his friend Buck about the nature of revenge:

Huck: "What's a feud?"

Buck: "Why, where was you raised? Don't you know what a feud is?"

Huck: "Never heard of it before -- tell me about it."

"Well," says Buck, "a feud is this way: A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man's brother kills *him*; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the *cousins*

chip in -- and by and by everybody's killed off, and there ain't no more feud.

But it's kind of slow, and takes a long time."

Films are built around it, consisting of three main acts.

Act 1: The protagonist is wronged.

Act 2: He or she makes plans and overcome obstacles and setbacks along the way.

Act 3: He or she exacts violent and bloody retribution – and we cheer! I know we cheer because I do, if not on the outside, at least on the inside.

This narrative or story about how things are has accepted as our reality.

We live with the illusion that revenge will satisfy us but it never does.

But you know, Gideon is not alone in his drivenness and chaos and hurt he brings into others lives.

And it's not necessarily revenge.

There are all sorts of drivers that cause hurt and damage either both ourselves or others.

We may be driven by our personalities.

Have you heard of the clinging vine, the star, the turtle and the Nero?

- A clinging vine loves relationships.
- The Star loves to be the centre of attention.
- The Turtle loves security and safety.
- The Nero (or Tyrant) loves to set the agenda.

Most of us are essentially one of these.

What happens when we are driven by our egos? Well we lose the plot.

- The clinging vine will be driven to depend others, smothering them with their needs and demands and unwilling to stand on their own two feet.

- The Star will be driven to attain the admiration and adulation of others and will be crushed and / or angered if others take his or her spotlight.
- The Turtle is compelled to live a safe life and retreats from taking risks and living a faith-filled life.
- The Nero must have power and control and will try to dominate others in order to have it.

As I shared a number of weeks back – for those who weren't here – much of my early life was driven by fear, all sorts of fears. These fears took on a life of their own.

I've spoken about Sally's story before.

Sally was born beautiful – there's no other word for it.

And she realised very early on that she could wield power through her physical attractiveness.

But something flipped in her life in late teens and early twenties.

Sally found herself moving from one partner to another, being rejected and repeating the cycle all over again.

She would say that without a man in her life she felt invisible.

Sally also found that she couldn't bear to be alone and found herself in relationships with men who were abusive.

She said these words: "men were my alcohol. Only if I was on a man's arm could I feel good about myself and face the world."

Sally was driven, compelled and restless by the pursuit of romantic relationships.

Then there's Keith

Keith was a talented musician who met Jesus in his early twenties.

And from that point on he became a firebrand for the Lord.

His music began touring churches and music festivals and Christian Universities and his message was a simple one – be 100% sold out for Jesus.

And God moved in Keith's life and moved powerfully in his ministry.

But there was another side to Keith's life.

Keith's zeal often led to crushing disappointment with his own perceived failings. He'd promise God that he was going to pray for an hour or read five chapters of the Bible before breakfast and then, when he'd slept in late, he would be devastated at having let God down.

Like many zealous Christians, Keith based his relationship with God on his own performance. If he didn't "feel" right with God then he believed he wasn't right. This view sometimes blinded him to the love of God. He once confided to a friend, "Sometimes I'm not sure if God loves me" ¹ Keith was driven by need to prove his worth to God.

The question then, is where does this drivenness come from, even in Christian people?

Well I think there is a clue in this passage this morning.

"So when you look at this passage, what is the significant defining feature?"

Have a chat and see where you get to.

The defining feature as this point in Gideon's story is... *the absence of God, of Yahweh, of the Lord.*

Gideon pays lip service to Yahweh, the Lord, in verse 7 but from then onwards it's all Gideon.

He does not pray, worship or seek God's leading or help.

Gideon loses the plot because God is not in the picture.

So here's what I want to strongly suggest this morning:

where there is drivenness in our lives – compulsiveness, restlessness, impatience, rashness, almost an obsessiveness – where there is drivenness in our lives there is often an absence of God.

And it's not that God is absent altogether.

But there can be areas, these places, these spaces in us where Jesus has never really had access to.

And because we have not opened up that area to God the Holy Spirit, that area can begin to take on a life of its own and drives us.

I mean, who knew up until this part of the story that Gideon had a deep well of vengeance inside of him.

So to finish, what do we do?

¹ "Keith Green's Grace Awakening" - <https://escapetoreality.org/2010/07/28/keith-greens-grace-awakening/>

Gideon's story doesn't have a happy ending – there's no remorse, no regret, no repentance, no returning to the Lord.

But both Sally and Keith's do.
(Keith, by the way, is Keith Green).

We may need the help of a skilled counsellor.
It may be paid professional; it could be a wise praying friend.

It was Keith's good wise friends who introduced him to deeper meaning of grace. At the end of his short life there was a new peace that enveloped him – he didn't have to prove himself anymore; Jesus had done it all.

For Sally it was seeing what Jesus had done for her and how much he loved her so that if she ever meet a guy who was interested in her she would silently say to herself, "You may turn out to be a great guy, but you can never be my life. Only Christ is *my life*."

And for us, what I am going to say next will sound simple to many of us.

You know, what's the Kiwi attitude to the difficult stuff in our lives?
"Harden up."

But Jesus doesn't call us to "harden up" but to... open up.

And that begins in the quiet, still space we make in our lives.
There we welcome and invite the Spirit of God into those places and spaces we've never opened up to him before, where there's been an absence.

And with that there is a prayer we can bring – many of you will know it – Psalm 139 verses 23 and 24:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Test me and know my anxious thoughts.
See if there is any offensive way within me,
and lead me in the way everlasting."

And we wait, and we wait... because this kind of time can't be rushed.

So let's do that this morning.