

# Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson

***“When the LORD raised them up judges, then the LORD was with the judge, and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge.”  
—Judges 2:18***

**For a period of several** centuries after the death of Joshua there were no definite governmental arrangements in Israel. The record is that during this time everyone did what seemed “right in his own eyes.” (Num. 33:52-56; Judg. 21:25) For the most part the trend was toward

unrighteousness and worshiping false gods. As punishment for their evil ways, God permitted the Israelites to be oppressed by their enemies, whom they had not completely driven out of the land of Canaan as he had commanded. (Judg. 2:13-15) “Nevertheless the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them.” (vs. 16) In this article, we will examine the lives of three faithful judges—Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson.

Gideon was the fifth judge of Israel. When first mentioned he is visited by an angel while threshing

“wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites,” who had oppressed Israel for seven years. The angel said to Gideon, “The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valour.” (Judg. 6:11,12) Gideon’s reply to the angel was not too enthusiastic. It was difficult for him to see how, under the circumstances, it could be said that the Lord was with him, or, in fact, with any of the Israelites. He asked the angel, “If the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt? but now the LORD hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.”—vs. 13

This reply does not necessarily indicate that Gideon doubted the assertion of the angel, but it perhaps was simply his way of getting further information. Gideon reasoned that if God performed miracles in the past to deliver his people, he should be able to do so again, and he wanted to be assured that this would be the case. The Lord replied to Gideon through the angel: “Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?” This assurance did not convince Gideon, for he replied, “Wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.”—vss. 14,15

Here Gideon displays the characteristic humility which has been possessed by all whom the Lord has used in his service. His family was poor, and evidently circumstances were such that Gideon had been made to feel that he was of little importance in the family, hence his surprise and hesitancy

when the Lord indicated him to be his choice for a deliverer of his people. God reassured this humble man, saying to him, “Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.” (Judg. 6:16) When assured by the Lord, “Surely I will be with thee,” even the humblest and the weakest of men become valiant and courageous if they have faith in him, but Gideon’s faith needed bolstering. He did not doubt the Lord, but he wanted to be sure that it was the God of Israel who was communicating with him; so he again replied, “If now I have found grace in thy sight, then show me a sign that thou talkest with me.”—vs. 17

Then Gideon asked the angel of the Lord not to depart “until I come unto thee, and bring forth my present, and set it before thee.” The messenger promised to remain. “Gideon went in, and made ready a kid [a young goat], and unleavened cakes of an ephah of flour: the flesh he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot, and brought it out unto him under the oak, and presented it.” (vss. 18,19) Then the messenger of God said to Gideon, “Take the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and lay them upon this rock, and pour out the broth. And he did so. Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. Then the angel of the LORD departed out of his sight.”—vss. 20,21

The angel of the Lord had appeared to Gideon in human form. The miraculous manifestation of divine power and the sudden disappearance of the heavenly messenger made Gideon realize with whom

he had been speaking. Then he said, “Alas, O Lord GOD! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face. And the LORD said unto him, Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die.”—vss. 22,23

## **Baal Worship Destroyed**

Now that Gideon had been assured that the Lord’s blessing was with him, he was ready to proceed with the task of liberating the Israelites from the Midianites. A necessary preparation for this was the destruction of Baal worship in the land. This was a severe test upon Gideon, for his own father had established an altar for this heathen worship.

The angel of the Lord said to him, “Take thy father’s young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old, and throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down the grove [sacred trees used in idol worship] that is by it: And build an altar unto the LORD thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place, and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shalt cut down.”—Judg. 6:25,26

Gideon carried out these instructions. He utilized the help of ten of his servants “and did as the LORD had said unto him.” He carried out the instructions at night because he feared the reaction of his father’s household and thought it would be best to have the act completed before they discovered it. Gideon did not underestimate the violent reaction of the Baal worshipers. When the “men of the city” learned what had been done and that Gideon was responsible, they demanded that he should die.—vss. 27-30

They made this demand of Gideon's father, Joash. However, Joash, though he had established the altar of Baal and the grove which his son had destroyed, replied to those who demanded Gideon's life, "Will ye plead for Baal? will ye save him? he that will plead for him, let him be put to death whilst it is yet morning: if he be a god, let him plead for himself, because one hath cast down his altar."—Judg. 6:31

Joash had evidently been impressed with the fact that Baal had been unable to prevent the destruction of his own altar. Wisely his sympathies were moving toward Gideon, and his confidence in the God of Israel was mounting. "On that day," Joash called his son "Jerubbaal [Hebrew: let Baal contend], saying, Let Baal plead against him, because he hath thrown down his altar."—vs. 32

## **An Army Assembled**

An immediate crisis developed. The record is that "then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the children of the east were gathered together, and went over, and pitched in the valley of Jezreel. But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon." He blew a trumpet, and the men of his father's household were gathered to him. He also sent messengers "throughout all Manasseh; who also was gathered after him: and he sent messengers unto Asher, and unto Zebulun, and unto Naphtali; and they came up to meet them." (vss. 33-35) Things were moving rapidly, and Gideon soon found himself surrounded with an army ready to follow his leadership in an attack upon Israel's enemies. For one who had been considered least in his father's house, this must have been a rather overwhelming turn of events

for Gideon; and it is no wonder that he felt the need of further reassurance from the Lord.

“Gideon said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said, Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said.” (vss. 36,37) The Lord was patient with Gideon and honored his request. The next morning, when he examined the fleece, it was thoroughly soaked, containing, as the record states, “a bowl full of water,” while the ground around it was dry. This should have been very convincing, but still Gideon was not fully satisfied. To make doubly sure, he reversed the conditions, asking the Lord on the second test to let the fleece remain dry and the dew fall on the surrounding ground.

Gideon realized that he was asking a great deal, and he said to God, “Let not thine anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once.” Again the Lord honored Gideon’s request, “for it was dry upon fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground.” (vss. 39,40) Gideon, it should be remembered, lived at a time in Israel’s history when the nation had drifted into idolatry, and for years they had been oppressed by their enemies. He had little or nothing in the way of personal experience or observation upon which his faith in the Lord could rest. Like Moses after his forty years in Midian, Gideon needed assurance in various ways that he had been called to deliver his people.

It was this very lack of self-assurance that enabled the Lord to use Gideon so marvelously. However,

there was another lesson the Lord wanted him to learn, which was that he should not depend upon the strength of numbers. God told him that the army which he had mustered was entirely too large. "The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me."—Judg. 7:2

The original size of the volunteer army that placed themselves at the disposal of Gideon was thirty-two thousand. Under the Lord's instructions he told his men that any among them who were afraid should return to their homes. "And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand." (vs. 3) Then the Lord said unto Gideon, "The people are yet too many; bring them down unto the water, and I will try them for thee there: and it shall be, that of whom I say unto thee, This shall go with thee, the same shall go with thee; and of whomsoever I shall say unto thee, This shall not go with thee, the same shall not go."—vs. 4

The test was a simple one. "Every one that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise every one that boweth down upon his knees to drink." Only three hundred out of the ten thousand lapped the water, "putting their hand to their mouth," and thus were able to alertly watch as they drank. These three hundred were to constitute the entire army which Gideon was to lead against the Midianites.—vss. 5-7

## **Further Strengthened**

A tremendous army of Israel's enemies had camped in the valley of Jezreel. No doubt Gideon

needed some further assurance that such an array of armed strength could be routed by a mere three hundred men. “The same night” the Lord instructed Gideon to take with him Phurah, his servant, down into the camp of the Midianites, “and thou shalt hear what they say.” The Lord told him that what he heard would give him courage for the attack which was to be made later.—vss. 9-11

This visit to the ranks of the Midianites was made by night, and was unobserved by their watchmen. “When Gideon was come, behold, there was a man that told a dream unto his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along. And his fellow answered and said, This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host.” (vss. 13,14) Overhearing the account of this dream and its interpretation gave Gideon the assurance he needed that the little band of three hundred whom God selected to be his army could actually rout the Midianites. Returning to his soldiers, he said, “Arise; for the LORD hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian.”—vs. 15

Gideon’s three hundred soldiers had been given no weapons, but now he gave each one a trumpet, an earthen pitcher, and a lamp, or torch, to be placed within the pitcher. It is doubtful that any other army in the history of mankind has been thus equipped. Although the record does not say so, there can be little doubt that Gideon’s method of fighting and plan of attack were directed by the Lord. Furnishing

them with their weapons, Gideon separated his troops into three groups, deploying them on the sides of the hills surrounding the host of Midian encamped in the valley below. Gideon took his place with one of the little companies.—Judg. 7:16

He instructed all to do as he did. When he blew his trumpet, they were to blow theirs. Simultaneously they were to break the pitchers, which were being used to conceal their torches. Then they were to shout, “The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.” (vss. 17,18) The Midianite who earlier interpreted the dream of his fellow had said, “This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon.” Probably many of the Midianites had heard about this dream and its interpretation; so when they heard the shout of the three hundred, they would surely think the dream was coming true.

Apparently there was more involved in Gideon’s strategy than appears on the surface. Small though his army was, he had them deployed in such a manner as to virtually surround the camp of the Midianites. Ordinarily only the captains of an army would be sounding trumpets and carrying torches, and for the Midianites to hear three hundred trumpets sounding and see three hundred flickering torches surrounding them on all sides would certainly give the impression that they were being attacked by a tremendous army. Today we might term such a strategy as “psychological warfare.”

As the three hundred all blew their trumpets, broke their pitchers, held their torches, and shouted “the sword of the LORD, and of Gideon,” fear and panic spread through the ranks of the enemy. “The LORD set every man’s sword against his fellow,

even throughout all the host.” (vss. 19-22) As the Midianites attacked each other they fled. The Israelites pursued, finally capturing and slaying their princes and kings. (Judg. 7:23-25; 8:1-21) Israel’s victory was complete.

Gideon is one of the humblest and at the same time ablest statesmen of the Bible. When the angel of the Lord first spoke to him, he explained that he was the least of his father’s house, and he maintained this spirit of humility. He heard the Midianites use the expression, “The sword of Gideon,” but when he instructed his little army to use this as a battle cry, he added God’s name, and put it first: “The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.”

When his victories were complete, “the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son’s son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian.” Here again, however, Gideon’s humility and proper perspective are manifested. He replied to this request, saying, “I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you.” (Judg. 8:22,23) Thus again did this faithful judge in Israel keep the Lord before his people, emphasizing that only by obedience to him could they expect to remain free and prosperous.

The results of Gideon’s example and faithful judgeship lasted only as long as he lived. “As soon as Gideon was dead, ... the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baalberith their god. And the children of Israel remembered not the LORD their God, who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side: Neither shewed they kindness

to the house of Jerubbaal, namely, Gideon, according to all the goodness which he had shewed unto Israel.”—Judg. 8:33-35

## **Jephthah and His Daughter**

After the death of Gideon and the wickedness of his son Abimelech, a series of judges were raised up by the Lord to direct the affairs of Israel, but little or no information is given concerning them until we come to Jephthah, a son of Gilead. Jephthah is introduced as being a mighty man of valor, but he was ostracized by his brothers because he was the son of a “strange woman,” and he “fled from his brethren, and dwelt in the land of Tob.”—Judg. 11:1-3

Jephthah’s ability as a leader and militarist was apparently recognized even by those who thought themselves socially superior. When Israel became sore oppressed by the Ammonites, the elders sought out Jephthah and asked for his help, promising him the leadership of the nation after he defeated the Ammonites. Jephthah reluctantly accepted and was victorious, just as other military generals previously had been when the Lord’s blessing was upon them.—vss. 4-32

However, Jephthah’s name is prominent in the sacred record not because of his military expertise, but because of a vow which he made to the Lord in anticipation of the victory which would be given to him by divine help. The vow was that whatever first came out of his house when he returned from the battle would be offered to the Lord in sacrifice.—vss. 30,31

When Jephthah did return from the battle, his young daughter, an only child, was the first to come

out from the house to meet him. The account says, "It came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the LORD, and I cannot go back."—vss. 34,35

Among the noble of Israel, the making of a vow before the Lord was a very serious thing. Solomon wrote that it is better not to vow, than to vow and not to pay. (Eccles. 5:4,5) Jephthah held this viewpoint; and while his vow proved to be much more costly than he had expected, having entered into such a solemn obligation, he saw no way of changing it. His daughter did not rebel. She understood the situation and asked only for two months in which, as the record states, "I may go up and down upon the mountains, and bewail my virginity, I and my fellows." Jephthah granted this request. After the two months "she returned unto her father, who did with her according to his vow which he had vowed: and she knew no man."—Judg. 11:36-39

It is generally supposed that Jephthah actually offered his daughter in sacrifice, as a bullock or goat would be offered. Indeed, a casual reading of the *King James Version* favors this viewpoint. However, the rendering of verse 40 from *Young's Literal Translation* seems to give a different thought. It explains that the daughters of Israel went yearly "to talk to the daughter of Jephthah, the Gileadite, four days in a year."

This, verse 39 explains, became "a custom in Israel." Jephthah's daughter must have remained alive, else the women of Israel could not have talked with her each year. Examining the record more

carefully, it becomes apparent that what really happened was that the girl remained a virgin throughout her entire life, which, from the viewpoint of the Israelites, was a tremendous sacrifice for the father to ask of her.

This thought is evident from the record. When Jephthah explained his position to his daughter, and she asked for two months' grace, she did not request these two months in order to prepare for death, as some commentators explain, but in order to bewail her virginity. (Judg. 11:37) When she returned, and her father "did with her according to his vow which he had vowed," it is explained that "she knew no man." Jephthah was one who was led of the "Spirit of the LORD." (vs. 29) As such, he would not have made a vow to offer his daughter as a sacrifice, for this was forbidden by the Mosaic law.—Deut. 12:29-31

After his victory over the Ammonites, Jephthah found it necessary to put down a rebellion of the Ephraimites within Israel. Their rebellion was largely due to the fact that they claimed Jephthah had not requested their help in the conquest of the Ammonites. Their claim was not true, and Jephthah successfully put down their rebellion. Nothing else is recorded concerning the life of Jephthah—only that his period of judgeship lasted for six years, and he died.—Judg. 12:1-7

## **Samson the Mighty**

After Jephthah's death a number of other judges served the nation of Israel, but they are merely mentioned in the record. The next judge who is given prominence is Samson, the son of Manoah.

He was raised up to be a judge because, as had been the case on previous occasions, “the children of Israel did evil again in the sight of the LORD.” As punishment, “the LORD delivered them into the hand of the Philistines forty years.”—Judg. 13:1

Samson’s mother had been barren, and an angel appeared and announced to her that she would have a son. Manoah, her husband, was not present when this occurred, and he prayed that he might also see this visitor, who had not as yet been recognized as an angel. This request was granted, and during the interview with the angel, Manoah offered a kid in sacrifice upon a rock, and as it burned the angel ascended from them in the flame. Then they knew they had been visited by an angel, which impressed upon them the great importance to Israel of the son who would be born to them. He would be, as the angel had explained, one who would “begin to deliver Israel out of the hand of the Philistines.”—vss. 2-24

In keeping with the Lord’s instructions, from infancy Samson’s head was not shaved, for his parents were instructed that he was to be a lifelong Nazarite. Under the terms of the Jewish Law, as recorded in Numbers 6:1-21, a Nazarite was one who was separated from the people and devoted exclusively to the service of the Lord, either for a limited period of time, or for life. One of the outward characteristics of a Nazarite was his uncut hair.

Samson is noted for his great strength. At the same time, however, according to the standards of the New Testament, his personal life is not to be commended. Nevertheless, at heart he evidently was loyal to God, so that in the Book of Hebrews he is named as one of the ancient heroes of faith, as

was also Gideon and Jephthah, previously considered.—Heb. 11:32

Though Samson was married, sometime later he met and “loved a woman ... whose name was Delilah.” (Judg. 16:4) After being pressed by her, he revealed to Delilah that the secret of his strength was in his hair. (vss. 15-17) We are not to suppose from this that there was some mysterious way in which strength flowed from his hair to his body. The thought seems to be that as long as he retained his hair, the emblem of devotion to God, he was given power by the Lord to accomplish the mighty feats of strength recorded concerning him.

Learning the secret concerning Samson’s hair, Delilah took the opportunity, while he slept, to have a man cut it off. Probably this would not have been permitted by the Lord had Samson not been breaking his vows of dedication to God in his flirtations with Delilah. With his hair gone, the Lord withdrew his support, and the Philistines captured Samson, put out his eyes, and cast him into prison.—vss. 19-21

Since Samson, with the strength which the Lord supplied, had vexed the Philistines so long, they gloried over the fact that they now had him under control. They made doubly sure that he would not escape from them by binding him with fetters of brass. To celebrate this victory over the mighty Samson, the lords of the Philistines gathered together to offer sacrifices to their god, Dagon.—vss. 23,24

This gathering was in their heathen temple, and it was a great assembly. “The house was full of men and women; and all the lords of the Philistines were there; and there were upon the roof about three thousand men and women, that beheld while

Samson made sport.” (vss. 25-27) What a humiliation for the mighty Samson!

The situation soon changed. Samson’s faith came to the rescue. His hair had begun to grow again, and he asked the Lord to assist him once more, that he might avenge himself against the Philistines. The account of what followed is well known. Bracing himself between two of the pillars which supported the roof of the building, he pushed them asunder, “and the house fell upon the lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.”—vss. 22,28-30

Here again we must assume that it was strength specially given by the Lord that brought down the temple of the Philistines. All the exploits of strength on the part of Samson were just as much miracles as was the destruction of the walls of Jericho or the parting of the Red Sea. Just why the Lord chose to manifest his strength through a man, we may not know, except that it helps to illustrate that our God is in no way limited in the methods he can use to accomplish his purposes.

## **Future Judges**

Christ and his faithful followers of the present age will be the judges in that future time of judgment. (Acts 17:31; I Cor. 6:2) Just as Israel came under bondage to its enemies because of disobedience to divine law, so all the world is now in bondage to sin and death—Jews and Gentiles alike. However, in God’s due time he will raise up these judges who have been prepared in advance for this great responsibility, and through them all the willing and obedient of mankind will be delivered from death. It is a glorious prospect! ■