

A Mighty Man of Valor

“Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, . . . And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him, and said unto him, The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valour.”
—Judges 6:11,12

FOLLOWING THE DEATH

of Joshua, who succeeded Moses as leader of the Israelites, there were more than four hundred years during which the people were without a central government. It was a time when, as the record states, “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” (Judg. 17:6) Sometimes, and on the part of certain individuals, that which seemed right was in harmony with the Lord, but more often it was not.

This long era in Israel’s national history is known as the period of the Judges. It is so-called because when the iniquities of the people became gross the Lord permitted their enemies to enslave them. When they cried to him for help, he raised up a deliverer for the occasion to give them a short respite from oppression. The Scriptures inform us that “the people served the LORD all the days of

Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great works of the LORD, that he did for Israel.” (chap. 2:7) Then there arose another generation who knew not Joshua, and these “did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim.”—vs.11

Idolatry was Israel’s greatest sin during this period as at other times, and the people were being oppressed by the Midianites. The situation was thus when God raised up Gideon. He was the fifth recorded judge whom the Lord used to deliver his people. Gideon served forty years as judge of Israel.

The people had cried unto the Lord for help. Through a prophet, he assured them that he would deliver them from the oppressive hand of the Midianites. Through this prophet, the Lord said, “I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage; And I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all that oppressed you, and drave them out from before you, and gave you their land; And I said unto you, I am the LORD your God; fear not the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but ye have not obeyed my voice.”—chap. 6:8-10

God had promised to bless and protect Israel when the people obeyed him, and had also made it plain that he would punish them when they were disobedient. They had given themselves over to idolatry, and, as punishment, the Lord had permitted the Midianites to oppress them. When they cried to him for help, he was compassionate and promised to send deliverance. The fulfillment of that promise came quickly.

We read in Judges 6:11,12, "There came an angel of the LORD, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abiezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him, and said unto him, The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valour." Just why Gideon is referred to at this point as a "mighty man of valour" is not clear. Some scholars suggest that he had already bravely displayed his willingness to help deliver the Israelites from the Midianites. More likely, the expression is used prophetically, in view of what the Lord knew concerning Gideon's heart attitude, and that this humble man would be courageous in the doing of his will.

GIDEON IS PERPLEXED

Gideon was somewhat perplexed by being referred to as a "mighty man of valour." At the time, he was threshing wheat in a winepress, hoping that he would not be discovered by the Midianites. He replied to the angel, "Oh my Lord, 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

Up to this point, the angel had said nothing to Gideon about delivering Israel from the Midianites. Being addressed as he was, Gideon probably sensed that he was about to be called upon for some such task as this. His first reaction was to express his feelings concerning the manner in which he supposed the Lord had deserted his people. The

angel had said to him, “The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valour.” Gideon asked: If this be so, why isn’t the Lord doing something about helping his people?

In a very human-like manner, Gideon suggested that it might be well to talk about the miracles of the past, and how God had delivered his people from Egypt. Now, he wondered how that would help him and his people. Were the Midianites more powerful than the Egyptians—so much so that God could not do anything about it? Probably most of the Lord’s people have moments like this when trials are pressing down on them and they wonder why the Lord doesn’t come immediately to their rescue. We need such experiences to test our faith and reliance on the Lord.

THE LORD’S ASSURANCE

The Lord’s reply to Gideon’s concern was reassuring. He said to him, “Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?” (vs. 14) Here was the Lord’s direct commission to Gideon. The fact that he said to him, “Go in this thy might,” does not imply that Gideon could deliver the Israelites in his own strength, or by his own wisdom. It simply indicates that the Lord knew Gideon had capabilities which he could use; not the least of these was the recognition of his own weaknesses. Gideon was a modest man, and was aware of his own insignificance.

Gideon replied to the Lord, “Oh my Lord, where-with shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s

house.” (Judg. 6:15) Here we are reminded of Moses. When the Lord called upon him to deliver the Israelites from Egypt, his reaction was, “Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh?” (Exod. 3:11) Isaiah, when given a vision of the Lord and his greatness, responded, “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.”—Isa. 6:5

None of the Lord’s people today are being called to do outstanding and dramatic things in his service, but we are all called to an exceeding “high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 3:14) One of the first reactions to this call is to think that we are not worthy. For this reason, many hesitate for a while to make sure that this “heavenly calling” really belongs to them. When we accept it and dedicate ourselves to the doing of our Heavenly Father’s will, we should look upon every little service he may give us as being an exalted opportunity to be associated with him in the outworking of his great and glorious purpose of delivering the whole sinful world of mankind from their bondage to sin and death.

NOT EASILY CONVINCED

The Lord’s commission to Gideon was given to him by the angel. When this “mighty man of valour” expressed his feelings of inadequacy, the Lord replied to him through the angel, “Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.” (Judg. 6:16) Nothing can stand in the way of those with whom the Lord is present, to whom he gives his Spirit of guidance and strength. This is just as true today as it was in Gideon’s time.

No faithful servant of God to whom the assurance has been given, “Surely I will be with thee,” has ever been disappointed. The Lord does not always deliver us from trouble, but he does give us strength to endure our trials so that we are able to fight the good fight of faith against the world, the flesh, and the devil, and fight it victoriously. Even our formidable enemy—Satan the devil—will in God’s due time be completely routed and bruised under our feet.—Rom. 16:20

Gideon wanted a sign giving further assurance that he was really the one selected by the Lord to deliver Israel. He wanted to know that, if necessary, the Lord would use his miracle-working power on his behalf. He said to the angel, “Shew me a sign that thou [the Lord] talkest with me.” (Judg. 6:17) Gideon by now seemed convinced that the Lord could help him, but needed assurance that the voice speaking to him was the voice of the Lord. This was a commendable attitude on Gideon’s part.

It is important for us today to make sure that the voice we hear is that of the Lord. Today, the Lord speaks to his people through his written Word. It is fundamentally essential that we be sure that the views to which we give heed, the views which guide and strengthen us as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus, are based on a “thus saith the Lord.” The Lord’s voice to us is the gospel of Christ, the power of God unto salvation. Paul said that even if an angel from heaven should preach any other gospel to us, we should not give heed to it.—Gal. 1:8,9

Upon request by Gideon, the angel lingered while he “made ready a kid, 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 [the angel] under the oak, and presented it.” (Judg. 6:19) Then the angel said to Gideon, “Take the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and lay them upon this rock, and pour out the broth.” Gideon did this, and “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 [Gideon’s] sight.”—vss. 20,21

Gideon was convinced that it really was an angel of the Lord that had been communicating with him. At first he was afraid, but the Lord assured him that he would not die. Then he built an altar there unto the Lord. The Lord did not delay in giving Gideon instructions concerning how he was to proceed in delivering the Israelites from the hands of the Midianites. The root of Israel’s difficulties was idolatry. This sin had penetrated right into the home of Gideon’s father. He had erected an altar to Baal and had built a grove nearby. Gideon’s first commission was to destroy this altar and grove.—vss. 25, 26

We have in this an implied lesson which all the Lord’s people may well take to heart. In entering into the Lord’s service at the time of consecration, we may be inclined to look for something important to do farther afield. In doing so, we may be overlooking opportunities which may exist right in our own home, or within the circle of our own friends or relatives. Those of our own household

may not have an ear for the Truth, and they may even oppose the Truth. Regardless of this, we should, by our lives, bear witness to them.

WISE PROCEDURE

Gideon knew that his father was an idolater, and he knew that this was also true of the people in his own town. He decided to destroy his father's altar to Baal and his grove by night because he "feared his father's household." (vs. 27) We do not need to conclude from this that he was fearful of what harm might come to him. He was fearful, rather, of not succeeding in the undertaking if he attempted it in daylight, and was determined to destroy the altar and grove.

The next morning, after the mission was accomplished and Gideon had offered sacrifice to Israel's God, the men of the city were most displeased. When it was reported that Gideon had done this thing, they demanded that Joash, his father, deliver his son to them that they might kill him. Then there was a surprising development. Joash, who himself was an idolater, said to his son's accusers, "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."—vs. 31

However it might have been with others of his family, Gideon's father stood by him in valiant fashion when the storm of criticism broke. He must have surprised the crowd by his defense. They had no answer to his reasoning that if Baal was really a god he should be able to defend himself. The fact

that he had not been able to do so stood as a testimony that the Israelites had been worshipping a false god.

A FURTHER TEST

We are told that the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon. He blew a trumpet and sent messengers throughout various regions. He began to assemble an army to defeat the Midianites, who by now had gathered in great numbers in a nearby valley. Perhaps the realization that he was embarking on such a tremendous project, and the fact that some of his potential army were already putting in an appearance, caused Gideon to ask for another test to be sure that the Lord would actually stand by him in his battle against Israel's enemies.

“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. And it was so: for he rose up early on the morrow, and thrust the fleece together, and wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water.”—Judg. 6:36-38

To some, this would seem to have been a very convincing demonstration, and it was probably so with Gideon. However, the mission on which he was about to embark was a hazardous one, and great responsibility was involved. He wanted to be doubly convinced that it was actually the Lord's mission, and that he would have divine guidance and help in accomplishing it. After all, it could have

been more or less a natural thing for dew to settle on fleece rather than the ground. He again said to the Lord, “Let not thine anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once: let me prove, I pray thee, but this once with the fleece; let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew.”—vs. 39

Gideon then received the definitive answer for which he was seeking. In the morning, he discovered that “it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground.” (vs. 40) Gideon was now satisfied. He “rose up early, and pitched beside the well of Harod: so that the host of the Midianites were on the north side of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley.”—chap. 7:1

ARMY TOO LARGE

The Lord then announced to Gideon that the army he had gathered was too large. The Lord wanted Gideon to realize that it would not be by his strength, or by the strength of the mighty army which he would raise, that the Midianites would be defeated. He instructed Gideon to announce to his soldiers that any who were at all fearful should return home. Twenty-two thousand took advantage of this opportunity, which left ten thousand to fight the hordes of the Midianites.

The Lord informed Gideon that the number was still too great. Another test was then imposed. Gideon brought the ten thousand soldiers down to the water. “The Lord said unto Gideon, Every one that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise everyone that boweth down upon his knees to

drink. And the number of them that lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, were three hundred men: but all the rest of the people bowed down upon their knees to drink water.”—vss. 3-6

Thus Gideon’s army was reduced to three hundred. This drastic reduction in the number of troops to go against the Midianites is a reminder to us that the Lord does not depend upon great numbers to accomplish his purposes. Many throughout the present age, as well as during past ages, have failed to learn this lesson. Even among certain professed Christians today, the display of great numbers is supposed to indicate the Lord’s favor and be, therefore, an evidence of success.

Those truly devoted to the Lord realize that it is not numbers that prove the presence and favor of the Lord, but a true spirit of devotion to him and trust in him. Those who truly trust in God are happy to be guided by his Word. If one such should find himself even standing alone, he would not be concerned so long as he had a deep conviction in his heart that he was doing the Lord’s will.

This does not mean that small numbers and minorities are always right, or that the Lord is specially blessing them. The first consideration for every true Christian is to make sure that he is right. Being right is being in harmony with the Lord’s written Word. When one has made sure of this and he finds his friends supporting him, or in harmony with him, he can rejoice. If he finds that they are opposed to him, he can thank God for the assurance of his guidance and help. Let us all realize that neither numbers, nor lack of numbers, in a group with which we may be as-

sociated, or are considering being associated with, is any evidence of the Lord's choice, one way or another.

A STRANGE DREAM

In Gideon's case, it was in following the instructions of the Lord that he found his army reduced to the inauspicious number of three hundred, compared to the tremendous hordes of the Midianites. While he knew that this was the Lord's will, he was favored by an experience that gave him even more confidence. He was instructed to slip down quietly by night into the camp of the Midianites. He arrived as one of the Midianites was relating a dream in which he saw a loaf of barley bread come tumbling into the hosts of Midian. It rolled into a tent and smote its occupants and killed them. This dream was interpreted by one of the Midianites in this way: "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."—vs. 14

Gideon realized that the news of this dream would rapidly circulate among the Midianites and that its effect would be to more or less unnerve them. For him, it was further evidence that the Lord was leading him and would support him as he and his three hundred attacked that mighty host of Israel's oppressors.

STRANGE WEAPONS

The Lord had reduced the size of Gideon's army to three hundred. Additionally, they were apparently unarmed except for trumpets, water pitchers, and torches—a strange combination. Each

man had been given a trumpet, a pitcher, and a torch. He was to light his torch and then conceal it in his pitcher. At the giving of a certain signal, the trumpet was to be blown and the pitcher broken. This, of course, would reveal the light of the torch.

Gideon divided his three hundred into three groups and deployed them in a manner to approach the camp of the Midianites from three sides. Gideon's instructions were that when he, and those with him, blew on their trumpets and shouted, "The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon" (Judg. 7:18), all the others were to do likewise, and also to break their pitchers, suddenly revealing the light of the torches. This gave the appearance that they were surrounded by a mighty army. In this way, the Midianites were frightened and confused. We are told that "the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host: and the host fled."—vs. 22

The main point of the story is that this was the method by which the Lord, through Gideon, defeated and routed the Midianites. Many other interesting lessons have also been drawn from the use of the trumpet, the pitcher, and the torch. In other places in the Bible, trumpets are used to symbolize messages. Torches give light, and we are commissioned to bear the light of the Gospel for the blessing of others. The Bible refers to our human bodies as earthen vessels. It is a nice thought that by the breaking of our vessels the light shines out. These are all reasonable thoughts and ones by which we can gain additional lessons.

AN UNHAPPY END

Following the rout of the Midianites from the valley, Gideon pursued them. His little army was joined by others in the “mopping up” aspect of the battle. In the end, he commanded quite an auspicious army. They wanted to make Gideon their king, but he said, “I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you.” (chap. 8:23) Here, again, this mighty man of valor displayed his humility and his loyalty to the Lord.

At this point, however, Gideon did make a request of “the men of Israel.” (vs. 22) I request, he said, “that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey. (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)” (vs. 24) Gideon’s men gladly honored this request, with the result that Gideon was handed a tremendous quantity of gold—“a thousand and seven hundred shekels.” (vs. 26) With this gold, Gideon made an “ephod, . . . and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house.” (vs. 27) There is no reason to suppose that Gideon intended to create an idol, or himself took part in this idolatry, although it was the golden ephod that enticed his people to begin their next falling away into this great sin. Let us think of this mighty man of valor as wanting to commemorate the wonderful manner in which the Lord had blessed him as he sought to be faithful in his service.

Gideon was a pleasing servant of the Lord and is mentioned as one of the Old Testament “heroes of faith” in Hebrews 11:32. May we look at his

example of faithfulness to the Lord and emulate the Godlike qualities he possessed. “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses [such as Gideon], let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.”—Heb. 12:1

“There came an angel of the LORD, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abiezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him, and said unto him, The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valour.”—Judg. 6:11,12 ■