

AN ARMY THAT WAS TOO LARGE

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DID you ever hear of the Commander in Chief of an army who told one of his generals to send thousands and thousands of his soldiers home because his army was too large? That sounds very strange, doesn't it? But that is what occurred one time when the Israelites raised a large army to fight their enemies.

God was the Commander in Chief of Israel's army, and his general at this time was a man named Gideon. Gideon raised an army of thirty-two thousand men, and before God would let him go into battle all of these men were sent home except three hundred. But Gideon won the battle because God was with him.

This was many long years after the death of Joshua, that wonderful leader of the Israelites who took the place of Moses and led the Hebrew people across the river Jordan. Joshua was a brave and

faithful servant of God and of God's people. Under his leadership the children of Israel, by much hard fighting, finally conquered most of their enemies in the land of Canaan. There were still some enemies in the land, but not in sufficient number to cause the Israelites a great deal of trouble. After a while Joshua died, and the Bible tells us that for forty years afterwards the Israelites had rest from their enemies.

God's people could have had rest much longer than that. Indeed, they could have had rest and peace all the time if they had been faithful to God, but they were not. They began to forget God who had done so many wonderful things for them. Forgetting him, they served other gods. Among them was one called Baal. Because of their unfaithfulness, Israel's true God allowed them to be oppressed by enemy nations, who subdued them with their armies and took much of their food away from them. But when God saw that his people had been punished enough for their wrongdoing he selected General Gideon to deliver them from the oppression of their enemies.

Gideon's father was one of the leaders in the worship of Baal, a false god. He had built an altar right on his own land where sacrifice was offered to Baal. Wasn't that wicked? Altars on which sacrifices were offered were usually built under the protection of groves of trees. God called Gideon into his service, and the very first thing he asked him to do was to cut down the grove of trees on his father's land, and destroy the altar of Baal. Gideon had to be very brave to do this, but he trusted God. So one night he got ten of his servants to help him, and in the morning the neighbors discovered that the grove had been cut down and the altar destroyed.

These neighbors had been worshipping Baal and they were very angry when they discovered what Gideon had done. So they asked Gideon's father to kill his son and those who had helped him. But Gideon's father was a very wise man. He told the neighbors that if Baal was a real god, with much power, he could take care of himself. Wasn't that a wise thing to say?

Baal wasn't a real god, only a make-believe god, so he didn't do anything about it, because he couldn't. When all the Israelites learned about this, they were very anxious to serve the true God who had delivered them from Egyptian bondage and brought them through the Red Sea and over the river Jordan.

But now the people of Israel were threatened with worse trouble from their enemies. A very large army of Midianites was encamped nearby ready to destroy and conquer them. This army was well armed, too. They didn't have tanks and airplanes in those days, but they had horses and camels, and various implements of warfare. Now that Gideon had shown his courage in destroying the grove and altar of Baal, God asked him to lead an army against this mighty host of the Midianites.

Gideon was brave, all right, but he wanted to be sure that God really wanted him to do this, and that God would help him. So he did something very unusual. One night he put a piece of sheep's wool out on the ground and told God that if the dew fell upon this wool and didn't fall upon the ground around the wool, then he would know that he was to fight against the Midianites. The next morning he went out to get the wool and found it soaking wet. So much dew had fallen upon it that he could wring the water out of it, just as you would squeeze water out of a sponge. Wasn't that remarkable? And besides, the ground all around the wool was absolutely dry!

You might think this would have convinced General Gideon that God really wanted him to fight the Midianites, but it didn't. He asked God to be patient with him, and explained that he would like to make another test. It was a very hard task that Gideon was asked to perform, so perhaps we shouldn't blame him for making sure before he started that God was with him.

He put a piece of sheep's wool on the ground another night, and told God that if the dew fell upon the ground and didn't fall upon the wool, he would know without question what he was to do. And it happened just that way. When Gideon went out the next morning, the ground all around the wool was wet with dew, but the wool was

perfectly dry! Well, Gideon was now certain that God really wanted him to raise an army to fight the Midianites.

He sent out a call for men, and thirty-two thousand Israelites responded. When God saw this large army, although it was much smaller than the army of the Midianites, he told Gideon that it was far too large. God explained that if this large army went out to fight against the Midianites and defeated them, they would take the glory to themselves. You see, the Israelites had just returned to the worship of God, and God wanted to demonstrate that he could help them out of their troubles if they put their trust in him. If the Midianites were defeated by a very small army, the Israelites would know that it was God who did it.

General Gideon obeyed the orders of his Commander in Chief and told all in the army who had any fears, and those who would like to go home, to do so. And what do you think? Twenty-two thousand withdrew from Gideon's army. But God told the general that there were still too many. Can you imagine that?

God instructed Gideon to have the remaining ten thousand go down to the water to drink, and to notice how they drank. All those who put their lips right down to the water were to be sent home, but those who scooped the water up in their hands and drank it out of their hands were to remain in the army. Only three hundred drank this way, so General Gideon's army was thus reduced to three hundred. If these three hundred defeated the Midianites, then all Israel would certainly know that it was by the wisdom and power of God!

Now I suppose you are wondering what kind of arms were supplied to these three hundred brave soldiers. They were very unusual arms. The men were given a torch, a clay pitcher to hold over the torch, and a ram's horn which was to be used as a trumpet. That night, after dark, following the orders of General Gideon, they separated themselves into several small groups and spread out over the sides of the hills surrounding the valley where the Midianites were encamped. Gideon told them all to do just as he did.

They all knew where Gideon was standing on the side of a hill, and they watched. Suddenly Gideon broke the clay pitcher that was hiding the lighted torch. Then he blew his trumpet and cried, “The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon.” Those in his company did the same, and then all those in the other companies who were scattered over the sides of the hills also broke their pitchers and blew their rams’ horns.

The Midianites were aroused out of their sleep, and seeing torches flickering all over the sides of the hills, and hearing the blowing of trumpets and the shouting from so many different directions, they imagined that they were surrounded by a mighty army, much larger than their own. They were filled with fear, became excited, and instead of fighting that small army of three hundred Israelites, they started to fight each other! Many of them were killed in this way, and the remainder fled in terror.

Gideon, knowing now that the Midianites were on the run, pursued them until they were driven completely away and were no longer a menace to Israel’s peace and happiness. Wasn’t that a wonderful victory for such a small army? And it was all because God told Gideon how to do it, and because Gideon was faithful in doing what God asked him to do.

QUESTIONS

- Who was Gideon?
- Why did he raise an army, and why was it too large?
- What kind of weapons were used by Gideon’s army, and how many people did they kill?