

GIDEON

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The sixth in a series of articles on the Book of Judges

After Deborah, Barak, and Yael delivered Israel from the Canaanites, "the land had rest forty years" (Jdg. 5:31). Then the cycle of Apathy, Apostasy, Anomianism, and Anarchy began again. Once more the children of Israel did evil in the sight of Yahweh. This time He delivered them into the hand of the Midianites. For seven consecutive years the Midianites invaded the land of Israel and plundered all the produce and livestock, leaving the Israelites starved and impoverished. The Bible says the Midianites came "as grasshoppers for multitude" and "left no sustenance for Israel." The Israelites were forced to flee to the mountains, where they hid in fear in dens and caves.

The Church of today has likewise been invaded by enemies that are as grasshoppers for multitude and leave no sustenance for Israel. Corruption, compromise, sin and worthiness have spread like a plague throughout the Body of Messiah, robbing God's people of spiritual sustenance and nourishment. God's people are in need of the milk and meat of the Word, but what they get from the pulpits is spiritual junk food. The sugar-coated teachings they hear provide some immediate, short-term gratification, but it is not spiritually healthy. And like junk food, it can be addictive. When the soul is fed nothing but spiritual junk food, it weakens the faith and courage of God's people. In their weakened state, they retreat from the enemy like the Israelites who fled to the mountains to hide out. Like the Israelites of old, they are concerned with being survivors instead of victors.

There was one man in the days of the Midianite invasion who was not satisfied with seeing the Israelites as mere survivors. This man's name was Gideon. One day he was threshing

some wheat to hide from the Midianites. The angel of Yahweh appeared and said to him, "Yahweh is with thee, thou mighty man of valour!"

Not knowing it was the angel of Yahweh, Gideon responded by saying, "Oh my lord, if Yahweh 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 Yahweh bring us up from Egypt?' But now Yahweh hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites."

Gideon knew that the present situation was not meant to be the norm for God's people. He knew that the norm should be victory, prosperity, and blessings, not defeat, poverty, and curses.

"Go in this thy might," Yahweh said to him, "and thou shalt save Israel from the Midianites: have not I sent thee?"

Yahweh will not send us to be deliverers until we understand that God wants His people to do more than merely survive. God wants His people to be victorious over sin. He wants us to be fruitful trees whose branches are heavy with the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance (Gal. 5:22f). The words "Go in this thy might" were spoken to a man who knew that defeat was not supposed to be the norm.

It is also significant that Gideon was threshing wheat when he received his call. He was doing what little he could do to help alleviate the problem and relieve some of the suffering of God's people. The Israelites who were doing nothing probably thought: "*The enemy is too strong; it's no use even trying to grow any crops at all.*" Gideon knew that even a small harvest is better than no harvest at all. The words "Go in this thy might" are spoken only to people who, like Gideon, are using whatever small measure of strength the Lord

has already given them. If we focus on our inabilities and weaknesses and human limitations and sit around waiting for God to magically transform us into spiritual supermen before we do anything, we will never hear the words "Go in this thy might."

Before Gideon could lead God's people to victory, there was some preparatory work that had to be done in Gideon's own backyard. Gideon was told by Yahweh to take his father's bullock and throw down the altar of Baal that belonged to his father, then cut down the grove and use the wood to burn the bullock on an altar to Yahweh.

Like Gideon, we need to clean up our own backyard before we can lead others to victory. It was a difficult thing for Gideon to do, because the altar of Baal belonged to his own father. Sometimes our obedience to the will of God offends our own families. Sometimes we have to get rid of idolatrous items or occultic objects that were gifts from well-meaning family members who were unaware of the spiritual implications of these things. In order to please his heavenly Father, Gideon had to risk offending his earthly father, and we sometimes have to do the same.

Gideon is probably best known for putting out the fleece and asking God for confirmation of his calling. The first time Gideon asked that the fleece be wet and the ground around it dry; the second time he asked that the ground be wet and the fleece dry. God graciously accommodated Gideon's request, and this gave him more confidence and courage. The story of Gideon's fleece often raises questions about the legitimacy of "putting out a fleece" (figuratively speaking) and asking God to perform some unusual sign to let us know His will for us. Is this a legitimate way for us to discern God's will?

There are several things that need to be considered. First of all, this was

not the normal way of discerning or confirming God's will. We should not look at a one-time incident which was an obvious exception to the norm, and use that rare event as an example to follow.

The second point that needs to be considered is that the fleece was not put out to *determine* or *discover* God's will. It was put out only to *confirm* the calling which Gideon had already received. If we put out fleeces at all, we should do it only to confirm that which we already believe to be (or at least suspect to be) God's will.

A third important point is that the instructions given to Gideon did not come from the written Scriptures, they came from an angel. If we receive a message from an angel, we need to "believe not every spirit, but try the spirits, whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1). Paul said that "Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). Paul also alluded to the possibility of a false gospel being preached by "an angel from heaven" (Gal. 1:8). So we should not criticize Gideon's uncertainty too much. Perhaps he was wise to ask for further confirmation of the message he had heard from the angel.

If we receive instructions from an angel or from the Spirit by Divine revelation, we should ask God to confirm it. However, the instructions we receive straight from the written Word do not need to be confirmed. We do not need to put out a fleece to find out if we should marry an unbeliever, or find a new spouse because we are bored with our present spouse. The plain instructions in the written Word do not need to be confirmed by putting out a fleece.

Gideon is also famous for having his army whittled down from 32,000 to 300. This was by God's command, so that the Israelites would know that it was Yahweh who delivered them, and not their own power. Sometimes God whittles away our numbers or our finances or our natural resources and abilities so that we cannot get proud and take any glory to ourselves. When this whittling away happens, we might have to face problems that are

so insurmountable that they can only be solved by Divine intervention. However, we still have to do our part before God fully intervenes. Gideon and his army still had to go out against the enemy.

At times like this, God will sometimes give us further confirmation to let us know that we are still walking in His plan, even though the situation looks hopeless, humanly speaking. The Lord did this for Gideon. He told Gideon that he would defeat the Midianites with the 300 men. "But if thou fear to go down," God said, "go thou with Phurah thy servant down to the host, and thou shall hear what they say, and afterward shall thy hands be strengthened to go down unto the host" (Jdg. 7:1 Of).

Gideon and his servant secretly infiltrated the enemy's camp and overheard a man telling his friend about a dream he'd had about a barley loaf rolling into camp and overturning a tent. The dreamer's friend immediately understood the prophetic significance of the dream. This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel" he said, "for into his hand hath God delivered Midian and all the host." When Gideon heard this, it gave him more assurance. This was even better than the fleece, because this confirmation was completely God's doing, and not something Gideon had initiated.

Gideon assembled his army of 300 and passed out the weapons: a shofar, an empty clay pitcher, and a burning torch for each man. Where were the swords and shields and spears? The weapons of our warfare are not carnal" (2 Cor. 10:4). If we want to get victory God's way, we have to understand that God often uses the foolish, weak, base things of the world to deliver His people and bring glory to Himself (1 Cor. 1:26ff).

That night Gideon's army divided into three groups and surrounded the enemy camp. They kept their burning torches concealed inside the jars of clay. At a given signal, they all broke their earthen vessels to reveal the fire, blew on the shofars, and shouted in unison, The sword of Yahweh and of

Gideon!"

Upon seeing their camp encircled by 300 burning torches and hearing 300 shofars blowing, the Midianites were thrown into a state of hysteria and confusion. Thinking they were surrounded by a vast army, some fled and some unwittingly turned their swords against their own countrymen in the darkness of night. The Israelites pursued the fleeing Midianites and defeated them.

God used empty jars of clay with fire inside them to defeat the enemy. He still uses empty jars of clay with fire inside them to defeat the enemy. We are the jars of clay. The fire is the burning zeal of the Holy Spirit that the Lord ignites in our hearts. "For God, who commanded light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Yeshua the Messiah. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels [NIV, 'jars of clay']..." (2 Cor. 4:6f).

Fire won't burn in a jar filled with rubbish, though. If we want the fire to bum in our hearts, we have to empty ourselves of the rubbish in our lives. We have to get rid of pride, selfishness, carnality, worldliness, and any other rubbish that quenches the fire of the Holy Spirit. We empty ourselves of the rubbish by pouring it out of our mouths in prayer and confession and genuine repentance. Just as Gideon's jars of clay had to be broken, so we have to be of a broken and contrite spirit and humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God. If the jars are not broken, the light of the fire will not shine forth. If we want the fire to shine its brightest, we have to get all the rubbish out of our lives. The more rubbish that remains in the jar, the smaller the flame will be. The more rubbish we remove, the brighter the flame will be.

With broken vessels and burning fire, Gideon's band of 300 delivered Israel. What we need today is small bands of on-fire disciples who have poured themselves out in prayer and have been broken before the Lord. With God's help, may we be among such people. Q