

JUDGES 6-9 THE MIGHTY FEATS OF THE GIDEON, THE FIFTH JUDGE

After Deborah's judgeship, that brought peace to the land for 40 years, Israel began backsliding again. The Bible says, "Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord delivered them into the hand of the Midian for seven years...Because of the Midianites the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves and the strongholds which are in the mountains" (Judges 6:1-2).

"For the fourth time in Judges," explains *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, "the Israelites fell into sin. This time they found themselves at the mercy of the invading Midianites. These desert dwellers, descended from Abraham and Keturah (Gen 25:2), lived...south of Palestine. They were allied with the Moabites in an attempt to impede the Israelites under Moses, but Moses later routed them. For seven years the camel-riding Midianites swept across the Jordan into the Valley of Jezreel at harvest time. With their speedy, wide-ranging camels, they roamed all the way to Gaza, helping themselves to crops and animals. The Midianites were joined by the Amalekites--who had earlier assisted King Eglon of Moab--and by other eastern peoples. Israel was helpless to resist the invaders and literally took to the hills to save their lives."

The Midianites used a new military technology—large camels that permitted them to make rapid waterless journeys of several days, covering great distances and mounting two men for battle. Israel cried out to God, and deliverance came through a young man of Manasseh—Gideon.

To hide the wheat and himself from the Midianites, Gideon threshed in a winepress, a pit carved out of rocky ground. Normally threshing floors were located in exposed areas so that the wind could easily blow away the chaff, but here, Gideon was doing it secretly and silently. There, the Angel (or messenger) of the Lord appeared to him (6:11).

Yet, as many men of God, Gideon did not think himself worthy of this calling. He said, "O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh and I am the least in my father's house" (6:15). Clearly, he was not a man of wealth or influence, but God often works through the humble and seemingly insignificant person. This is also true of many of God's leaders in New Testament times, who were ordinary men, such as fishermen and publicans (Mt. 10:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:26).

As we have seen in the accounts of Abraham (Gen. 16:10-13; 18:1, 13-14), Jacob (Gen. 32:30), Moses (Ex. 3:2-6) and Joshua, the Angel of the Lord was worshipped in some instances and was later identified as the pre-existent Christ (1 Cor. 10:4, 9). *Smith's Bible Dictionary* says it was "the special form in which God manifested himself to man, and hence, Christ's visible form before the incarnation."

Gideon was initially skeptical of the identity of the Angel of the Lord, and in his typical fashion, asked for proof by a sign. When the Angel of the Lord made fire fall upon the sacrifice, he was convinced but he feared for his life having seen the Angel of the Lord "face to face." "Then the Lord said, "Peace be with you; do not fear; you shall not die"" (6:23). Notice, here it does not say "the Angel" spoke, but rather the Lord himself, implying the Angel and he are one and the same.

The first test Gideon must pass is to destroy his father's idol of Baal and a wooden pillar (the Ashtoreth) next to it. Why was this idol worship always so attractive and prevalent in Israel?

Eugene Merrill explains, "Canaanite religion was to pervade all levels of Israelite life and thought from the period of the judges on at least to the time of the Babylonian exile. Thanks mainly to the Canaanite texts from Ugarit (Ras Shamra) as well as the Old Testament, it is possible to reconstruct at least the main lines of Canaanite thought and practice.

"Essentially, the religion of Canaan was based on the assumption that the *forces of nature* are expressions of divine presence and activity and that *the only way* one could survive and prosper was to *identify* the gods responsible for each phenomenon and by proper *ritual* encourage them to bring to bear their respective powers...The ritual involves *human enactments*, particularly by cultic personnel such as priests, *of the activity of the god* described in the myths...El is the head of the pantheon of gods...His wife is Asherah, the mother goddess, by whose fecundity the whole earth is vitalized. It is she who is referred to when the Bible speaks of 'the Asherim' or 'groves.' The symbol of her presence and power was originally *the evergreen tree* [shades of Christmas!]. Eventually even a wooden pole could represent Asherah and serve as a shrine where ritual was performed. The most important deity, however, was Baal, the 'master' of the land...Baal was the Amorite

storm god who manifested himself in rain, thunder, and lightning. Baal played this role in Canaan, and since Canaanite agriculture was totally dependent on rain, his importance is obvious...The ritual involved a dramatization of the myth just described. It centered in sexual activity since the rainfall attributed to Baal was thought to represent his sperm dropping to earth to fertilize and impregnate the earth with life just as he impregnated Asherah...Canaanite religion, then, was *grossly sensual and even perverse* because it required the services of both *male and female cultic prostitutes* as the principal actors in the drama” (*Kingdom of Priests*, 1987, pgs. 159-160).

So when Gideon smashed the statue of Baal and cut down the idol representing Asherah, according to his father and the townspeople, he was risking shutting down the vital rain and causing a deadly drought. The town folk were ready to kill him, but then his father asked a logical question: if Baal was so powerful, why didn’t he prevent the action? No one had a good answer and Gideon was spared. “Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, ‘Let Baal plead against him, because he has torn down his altar’ (6:32). Gideon’s name means “hewer down” and now he is also called Jerubbaal or “contender against Baal.”

So Gideon passed the first test--and just in time. “Then all the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. But the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites [his clan of Manasseh] gathered behind him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, who also gathered behind him...also Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali” (6:33-35).

But not yet confident with the task of ridding the great multitude of Midianites and others, Gideon asks God for an unmistakable proof of His backing by causing only the fleece’s wool to be wet in the morning and not the ground. After fulfilling this miracle, he still asks God for one more sign, this time making the opposite effect, with the dew all around the ground but not the wool, and it is done.

So Gideon gathered 32,000 men--still a minority against the Midianites, who had four times more men, yet God considered there were still too many. “And the Lord said to Gideon, ‘The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”

So God orders Gideon to whittle down the number from 32,000 to 10,000 by having any who are afraid to return home, as Deut. 20:8 permits. But God considers there are still too many, and says He will choose those few men who will fight.

“So he brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gibeon, ‘Everyone who laps from the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set apart by himself, likewise everyone who gets down on his knees to drink.’ And the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was three hundred men, but all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water. Then the Lord said to Gideon, ‘By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the other people go, every man to his place’ (7:5-7). “The test of lapping water in the hand like a dog instead of drinking the natural way,” says *Unger’s Bible Handbook*, “separated the vigilant and watchful from the more careless” (p. 173).

With less than 1 percent of his original army, Gideon’s faith again began to waver. For the third time God gave him a sign by letting him enter the Midianite camp and overhear a dream from them about being defeated (7:13-14). At last Gideon is totally convinced and God gives him the winning strategy: they were to attack just before dawn, each with a horn (a shofar), an earthen jar and a lighted lamp. The empty jars were used to hide the light of the torches until the proper moment arrived.

“The Israelites’ main weapon was noise,” says the *Expositor’s Commentary*, “and between the trumpet blasts and the smashing of jars, they achieved the intended effect of demoralizing the Midianites. Once the jars were broken, three hundred torches lit up the night, apparently at the head of vast columns of troops. To add to the nightmare, a ringing battle cry pierced the night air. These startling developments quickly produced panic, a normal occurrence when God led his people into battle. The Midianites were convinced that a powerful army was about to massacre them. The people ran about, shouting and trying to escape as fast as possible (7:21). In all the confusion they began fighting among themselves, thinking that enemy forces were already in their camp. To avoid the slaughter, they fled toward the Jordan and the safety of the desert beyond.

“To help in the pursuit, Gideon summoned reinforcements, perhaps including many of his original 32,000. Their courage restored, they gladly

rushed after the foe. Gideon also called on the powerful tribe of Ephraim to cut off the Midianites at the fords of the Jordan. Many of the enemy forces had not yet crossed when the men of Ephraim attacked them and captured Oreb and Zeeb, probably leading generals of the army. The two were put to death at sites named to commemorate the occasion.

"The tribe of Ephraim had a proud heritage and felt insulted by Gideon's failure to call on them earlier (8:1). They had cooperated honorably with Ehud and Barak and wondered why they were left out this time. Perhaps they were eager for some of the rich Midianite plunder that went to the victor.

"Gideon might have questioned the Ephraimites' motives by asking them why they had not taken action on their own during the long seven-year oppression; but, unlike Jephthah, he adopted a course of appeasement. He praised them for their great victory over Oreb and Zeeb, assuring them that in comparison his accomplishments were small. Gideon's praise calmed their anger and avoided the civil war that later flared up between Ephraim and Manasseh. His wise action admirably illustrates Proverbs 15:1: "A gentle answer turns away wrath."

Gideon is faced with an attitude exactly the opposite of Ephraim's as two cities completely rejected his request for help. The tiny army was now some forty miles from the hill of Moreh when they came to Succoth, just north of the Jabbok River. Worn out from the long chase, Gideon asked these residents of Gad for some provisions. The men of Succoth reasoned that the fleeing Midianites would soon regroup and easily defeat the makeshift army thrown together by Gideon. Any assistance given to Gideon would implicate Succoth and bring certain retaliation from the feared nomads. They want to see the cutting off the hands of dead victims as a convenient body count. The sarcastic, unpatriotic response of the leaders brought a sharp reply from Gideon. Perhaps the tribes of Transjordan could be excused for failing to aid Deborah and Barak, but neutrality was impossible when the conflict was on their soil. Gideon promised that when he returned in victory, he would severely punish the city.

Moving six miles east, Gideon received the same response from the people of Peniel (8:8). In the place where Jacob had wrestled with God and had his name changed to Israel, these Israelites doubted God could give victory over the Midianites. Gideon vowed that

he would soon demolish the fortified tower that had made Peniel an important city.

True to his word, Gideon pressed farther into Transjordan, following the caravan trail taken by the Midianites. No doubt the Midianites believed they were safely out of range of the pursuing armies, but again Gideon surprised them and routed them.

When Gideon captured the two Midianite kings, he returned to Succoth and Peniel and carried out his threats, whipping the elders of Succoth with thorns and breaking down the defensive tower in Peniel.

The victory achieved by Gideon was so great the Israelites wanted to make him king. But Gideon refused, insisting *God* was their king. Yet Gideon did take a reward which was also his due according to the standard of the day. But he behaved foolishly, taking his reward of gold and making a lavish ephod—a ceremonial religious garment—of it. It became an object of worship by the Israelites and even proved a snare to Gideon and his family (8:27). Sadly, when Gideon died, the people went back into total idolatry, even building a temple to Baal (9:4). Gideon's story presents the first signs of a yearning for kingship in Israel. Most of the real governmental power in Israel at the time was in the hands of the elders of the various tribes, and the tribes tended to look to their own interests, even when the national fortune or honor was at stake.

The repeated cycle of servitude and deliverance began to expose the weakness of the tribal confederacy as it then existed and to awaken a desire for a more powerful central government. Sadly, the repeated cycle of servitude and deliverance did not impress on the Israelites the need for fidelity to God and the covenant. *That* was the lesson they should have learned. But men seldom blame their own evil hearts, preferring rather to blame "the system."

Gideon, despite not being perfect, is mentioned as one of the men of faith in Hebrews 11:32, and will be in the coming kingdom of God.