

THE DAYS OF GIDEON; JUDGES 6-8

After Israel's deliverance by the Lord using the leadership of Deborah, once again the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. Resorting to the worship of a physical god that they could see and feel, they once again built altars to Baal. Once they had forsaken God, He chose to leave them to their own devices which led to poverty and pillaging at the hands of the Midianites. For roughly seven years the children of Israel lived in fear as seasonal raiders would come through by the herd and wipe out their land like a swarm of locusts. They would devour their lambs and goats, wheat, wine and whatever else they could get their hands on leaving the people of Israel in a state of perpetual fear and their land in tatters. Once the sons of Israel had finally had enough, they chose to call on the name of the Lord to release them from this bondage and fear, to allow them to come out of the caves that they had fled to so that they may dwell in their land freely once again. (How humiliating this must have been for Israel, to be driven from their own land and forced to dwell in caves and dens).

So, upon their cries to the Lord, an unnamed prophet is sent to convict their spirits and prepare them for the judge Gideon. As the prophet approaches the Israelites, he takes time to remind them of exactly who they are and who their deliverer is. The series of reminders given is a short history lesson beginning with the deliverance from the Egyptians, deliverance from slavery and bondage, deliverance from a series of oppressors thereafter and the gift of land and freedom. They are reminded that they are a chosen race and shall not fear the gods of the Amorites because that is not who their oppressor is. They have not been held down by the Midianites, Egyptians or any other foreign regime, they have been held down by their own disobedience and dismissal of who the one true God is. "You have not obeyed me, therefore you suffer" (in a paraphrased form).

Now enter Gideon, the gentleman who will deliver them from the hands of the bad guys and show them once again who God is. As the young man thrushes wheat in the hidden valley of the wine press, (as opposed to working on a hill where the wind may blow the chaff away, as he must remain hidden from the plunderers), an angel of the Lord visits him under the tree in what we see as a theophany. His address to Gideon is one of encouragement and favor as He says, "The Lord is with you, o valiant warrior". These are heavy words to give to a young, unassuming man, especially one who would appear to have neither the traits of valor or a warrior. Let us never forget that God knows things about us that we don't know. Back to the theophany. I say this because when the angel addresses Gideon, we are told "the Lord said", or "the Lord looked", however we know that no one has seen God face to face, the Holy Spirit is without form, therefore I conclude that it was Christ.

This interaction is interesting because as the Lord speaks, Gideon has questions for Him. "If the Lord is with me then why am I down here hiding my labor from the Midianites?" "If the

Lord is with me then why are we such a desolate land?" These seem like legitimate questions, however we are reminded that it was not God who abandoned His people, it was His people who abandoned Him. This interaction is interesting for other reasons as well. We are told not to tempt or test the Lord (Deut. 6:16, Mat. 4:7) but immediately upon receiving his instructions to deliver Israel from the hands of the Midianites, Gideon asks for a sign. Because God is patient, kind and merciful, He does give Gideon a sign after an offering is given. Gideon believes the Lord and then proceeds to instigate the people of the city so that he may get their attention. As commanded by the Lord, he takes two bulls and with a handful of servants tears down a temple built to Baal and replaces it with an altar to God with the burnt offering of a bull resting on it for the unfaithful city dwellers to see as they arise early in the morning. This becomes comical because they are enraged at what they have awoken to and immediately begin to inquire as to who the culprit could be. After proper investigation is practiced, they conclude that Gideon is the culprit and demand that his father send him out so that they may enact their revenge. Gideon's father's response is one of wisdom, faith, courage and humor as he says "why do you need to take revenge, if your god is so awesome then let him contend for himself". Their god does not contend for himself and the deliverance of Israel from the hands of the oppressors thanks to the faithfulness of the Lord is about to be under way.

The exact time frame of Gideon's acts I am not entirely certain of. I do know that it had to have taken more than a few hours because he took the time to assemble troops from throughout the nation and send messengers to inform others what was about to take place. Once again we see that Gideon is still not so sure about all of this as he has the audacity to ask God for yet another sign just to make sure this is really supposed to happen. God answers with a sign and I don't know if Gideon felt relief or panic but it was at this time that everything began to fall into place. As the Midianites gathered to the north, Gideon and 32,000 rag tag troops gathered near the spring of Herod pumping themselves up to do battle with relentless warriors. At this time God has a trick up His sleeve as he informs Gideon that 32,000 is too much and he needs to send some home. As he inquires as to who might be having second thoughts or might be a little afraid, 22,000 depart and decide they are not up to the task of battle. That had to be hard for Gideon to bear, watching so many depart from the fight. But God had yet another ace up His sleeve when He tells Gideon that he still had too many. Put to the test once again, 9,700 fail leaving Gideon with an army of merely 300 men. How on earth is Gideon supposed to defeat tens of thousands of Midianites with only 300 men? The thing is, if they had gone into battle with thousands then they would have assumed the glory for themselves and God knew that. God wanted Gideon and the sons of Israel to know who fought their battles and who is worthy of glory. God and God alone, all they have to do is do what their told.

The unconventional battle takes place in the dead of the night as 300 men split up into three groups of 100 on three sides of the Midian camp armed with nothing but a pitcher with a torch inside in the left hand and a trumpet in the right. They likely had swords in sheaths at their sides but we are not told so it is not relevant. What happened next is nothing less than

extraordinary. The trumpets blast and the pitchers are shattered leaving torches in the left hand and trumpets in the right with loud yells startling the Midianites to the point that they don't know which way is up and they begin to slay one another with their own swords in the midst of all the confusion. Gideon's army put them on the run without drawing a weapon. As they chased after the cowardly army in hot pursuit of their generals Zebah and Zalmunna they began to grow slightly famished. As they came to the communities of Succoth and Peniel they asked for provisions but were denied. Gideon assured them that after he disposed of the Midianite army he would return to take revenge for their failure to help God's army. Remember what Christ had to say about being homeless, sick, hungry; helping brothers and sisters in need are the same as helping Him, denying those in need is akin to denying the Father. As the pursuit carries on, Gideon and his army catch the Midianites and slay the remaining members of the army as well as the generals and the king. Upon their return he holds true to his promise and destroys the communities of Succoth and Peniel.

The battle is over, Israel is free to live in public without fear of heathens robbing and pillaging their land. The Lord has used Gideon to liberate His people once again. But oh the aggravation that Gideon (and God) must have felt when the people immediately approached Gideon and begged him to be their ruler. What were they thinking? They do not need an earthly ruler, they need the Lord and Gideon tells them as much. "I shall not rule over you nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you." My goodness gracious, have they learned nothing over the course of this current path to redemption? This does give them some years of grace, however. We are told that Israel enjoys peace for 40 years during the life of Gideon while he is there to remind the people who the one true God is. Unfortunately, because we are given a prescribed amount of years of peace we know that the peace will end. Stay tuned for the rise of Gideon's son Abimelech and his tyranny giving rise to the next judge to free Israel.