

GIDEON - THE DWARF WHO BECAME A GIANT

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And so it was, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against the in. And they encamped against them, and destroyed the increase of the earth, till thou come unto Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it. And Israel was greatly impoverished (Judg. 6:36).

The period when the children of Israel were ruled by judges was probably the most distressing time in the history of the Hebrew nation. The people had no permanent leader, no standing army, nor discipline. Men did what they desired and observed no law. At harvest time crops were destroyed by unscrupulous invaders, homes were burned, and the people were forced to live in mountain caves. The nation was greatly impoverished. The exploits of Gideon may be summarized under five headings.

Awestricken by an Angel

And 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).

The plight of Gideon's family was terrible, and it was at great risk the young man endeavored to make enough bread to sustain them through the winter. He descended from a cave in the mountains to thresh wheat, hoping he would be able to save at least a portion of the crop before the arrival of the dreaded invaders. When he saw an angel sitting beneath an oak tree and later witnessed the miracle that consumed an

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offering upon a nearby rock, Gideon trembled and said, "Alas, O Lord GOD! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face" (Judg. 6:22). It was evident that God saw in him qualities which had never been recognized. When Gideon was instructed to destroy the family idol, he became very afraid, but, accompanied by some of his servants, he did as he was directed. "He could not do it by day, that he did it by night" (Judg. 6:27). As conditions within the community deteriorated, THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD CAME UPON GIDEON, and a comparative dwarf was transformed into a giant!

Amazed by an Answer

And Gideon said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by my 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 (Judg. 3:36-37).

It is reassuring to know that God understands the frailty of His children and remembers that even the best of them are

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dust. Gideon had difficulty in believing he was to become a military leader and asked for signs to confirm what had been promised. When he put out a fleece and requested the Lord to perform a miracle, God did as He was asked. When Gideon desired a second miracle, the patience of the Almighty never faltered (see Judg. 6:39). Yet the testing of the man's faith continued. His army numbered 32,000 men, but when 22,000 of them confessed they were afraid and returned to their homes, Gideon trembled, for the enemy forces were as numerous as grasshoppers. When God announced the small army needed to be reduced even more, everybody wondered what was happening. Finally the leader was left with three hundred men, and apparently defeat was inevitable. Gideon looked at the equipment that consisted mainly of trumpets, pitchers, and lamps and thought his crusade to be suicidal.

It became evident to the ancient leader that God had no objection to being challenged. When he placed a fleece on the ground and asked that it would become wet with dew while

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the earth remained dry, it appeared he was seeking a miracle. Did the Lord smile when he heard the request? Poor Gideon! Had he forgotten that the Almighty had made both the fleece and the ground upon which it was placed? It is difficult to understand why it was necessary for the man to make a second request. Perhaps he wanted to be sure! Other benefactors might have resented the renewed petition, saying, "Isn't he satisfied? What more does he require?" God understood the anxiety of His servant and graciously granted his requests. The fleece remained dry while the earth was saturated with moisture. Gideon was a very wise man; many of his successors went ahead with their own plans assuming the Lord would endorse their decisions. It is wiser to seek the guidance of God first than to wait until impetuosity leads to disaster.

Assured by an Alien

And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Arise, get thee down unto the host; for I have delivered it into thy hand. But if thou fear to go down, go thou with Phurah thy servant down to the host (Judg. 7:9-10).

When the Lord saw that Gideon was afraid, He told him he could take a companion on the mission, As they crouched together in the darkness, they overheard two Midianites discussing a dream. Gideon's faith was immediately strength-

ened, proving that, with every emergency, the Lord supplied new grace. Even in those days God was expressing a truth Paul described centuries later. "God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it" (I Cor. 10:13).

I remember when I was a child in Wales, my mother kept chickens in the yard close to our home. She enclosed the area with wire and in the top section had red birds and in the lower part, white ones. Surrounded by hens, the cockerels were like kings. I was interested to see the two male birds spend their time facing each other beak-to-beak as they paraded along their side of the wire netting. As a child of five years I watched

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their antics and realized they hated each other. I asked my mother to open the door so that they could have a real fight. She was horrified and replied, "Son, I cannot do that. Those two birds cannot live together. One of them would kill the other." I was hoping to see a real battle, but my parent would not cooperate. I have since recognized those birds in other areas of life. Faith and Fear cannot live together. One will kill the other.

The heart of Gideon resembled, so to speak, my mother's garden. He knew both fear and faith, but it was quite a while before faith destroyed his unbelief. Nonetheless, the Lord never lost patience with His servant, and ultimately the enemy was vanquished.

Assisted by the Almighty

And the three hundred blew the trumpets, and the LORD set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host, and the host fled . . . And the men of Israel gathered themselves together... and pursued after the Midianites (Judg. 7:22-23).

"The ancient Israelites divided the night into three four-hour watches lasting from sunset to sunrise; that is from 6 P.M. until 6 A.M. The first watch is not mentioned in the Old Testament. According to this, Gideon's attack must have taken place soon after 10 P.M. or toward eleven. Later generations of Hebrews adopted the Roman division of four watches."

The night was very dark, and assured of their safety, the Midianites were sleeping. It was approaching night when Gideon divided his 300 men into three companies and placed them strategically around the enemy encampment. Probably each man was armed with a shield and sword, but their main equipment consisted of a bugle and a pitcher which contained a lighted lamp. At the prearranged signal the pitchers were shattered and the trumpets blown, and the result was devastating. Aroused from their sleep by the thunderous crashing and piercing bugle calls, the bewildered men stared into the darkness

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to see hundreds of lights in all directions. Believing they were about to be attacked, they imagined their comrades to be enemies and began killing each other. The Lord took advantage of the situation, and within a short time, utterly confused, the Midianites were running for their lives. Pandemonium filled the camp, and before the Hebrews could strike a blow, the battle was won. When Gideon surveyed the battlefield, he remembered that God had said: "The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands. lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, mine own hand hath saved me" (Judg. 7:2). Had it been necessary, Jehovah could have destroyed His foes without receiving help from anyone. He permitted a small company of men to participate in the conflict, to teach the entire nation that victory is assured "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit. saith the LORD of hosts" (see Zech. 4:6). The safest way to overcome a foe is to follow the guidance of God. His soldiers may suffer temporary setbacks, but they cannot lose the war!

Attracted by Articles

And Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey.

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(They had golden earrings because they were Ishmaelites.)
And they answered, We will willingly give them. And they spread a garment, and did cast therein every man the earrings

of his prey. And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was a thousand and seven hundred shekels of gold; beside ornaments and collars, and purple raiment that was on the kings of Midian, and beside the chains that were about their camels' necks (Judg. 8:24-26).

Gideon was one of the outstanding characters mentioned in the Old Testament, but it must be remembered he was only human. His attraction for jewelry destroyed his integrity. He had been an impoverished man trying to survive Midianite aggression. Yet afterward he lived and died as a king. His fame was established when he became God's associate. His fortune was assured when he received the wealth scattered

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over a battlefield. The ancient Ishmaelites from whom the Midianites descended adorned themselves with golden necklaces and earrings, and even their camels were decorated with golden chains. When thousands of their soldiers lay dead upon the battlefield, an immense treasure awaited the conquerors. Gideon knew this, and the opportunity to become wealthy was irresistible. He asked for compensation, and the people agreed to give him the earrings and chains formerly possessed by the enemy. These were placed on a garment spread upon the ground. With his wealth Gideon built a shrine in the city of Ophrah, where he placed an ephod such as was worn by the high priest of Israel. Doubtless this was meant to be a reminder of the victory over the Midianites, but unfortunately, "all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house. . . . And the country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon" (Judg. 8:27-28). "And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age, and was buried in the sepulchre of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites" (Judg. 8:32).

It is extremely difficult to understand how this great man of God could worship idols. Evidently the love of money affected his heart, and his association with idolaters polluted his mind. His story provides a warning for every child of God. As long as Gideon listened to the Lord, he was safe. When he lost that intimate fellowship and pandered to base desires, he lost his serenity. He conquered the Midianites but lost the conflict against himself.

1. The Pulpit Commentary, vol. 3 (Peabody, Mass. Hendrickson Publishers, 1984).

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