

# MATURING A MAN OF VALOR

• JUDGES 6—8 •

*"Then the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, 'The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior'" (6:11, 12).*

Throughout Judges, we are confronted with unusual men called judges whom God used to deliver Israel from oppression. Scant information is given on the background of the first four judges prior to their calling. The story of the fifth judge, Gideon, is different. Details of his early life are given.

Judges 6 begins with God's people being enslaved to the Midianites. The people of Midian were a nomadic people who lived in the area of northwestern Arabia. Since Midian was a son of Abraham and Keturah (Genesis 25:1, 2), the Midianite people were distant relatives to Israel.

The oppression under the Midianites lasted for only seven years, but it was so severe that God's people had to live in caves that were carved out of the mountains (6:2) and had to raise their crops in secret. The Midianites would destroy everything in sight. The soldiers of Midian were "like locusts for number" (6:5), and Israel was so "impoverished" by the oppression that they "cried to the Lord" (6:6).

Instead of immediately granting their request for deliverance, God sent a prophet to them. His message traced God's faithfulness to His people

from the days of Egyptian bondage. God had been with them and had provided for their every need. He commanded them to stay away from the gods of the people around them, but they had not listened. Now God wanted His people to understand that He owed them nothing. If deliverance was to be granted, it would be strictly due to His goodness and mercy.

While that message was being delivered, the angel of the Lord was meeting with the next deliverer of the people. The angel came to Ophrah, a little town to the east of the Jordan in the territory of Manasseh. He found Gideon threshing wheat in a winepress out of the sight of the Midianites. The angel called to Gideon, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour" (6:12; KJV). Who was the angel addressing? Surely not Gideon? He was in a winepress hiding from the enemy! However, the angel was not addressing Gideon as he *was*. He was addressing Gideon as he *would be*!

Gideon responded, "O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? . . ." (6:13). Then God Himself told Gideon, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?" (6:14). Gideon cried, "O, Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house" (6:15). Gideon had some growing to do, and his training was about to begin.

After being assured of God's strength to accomplish the task, Gideon asked for a visible

sign. God's word alone was not enough. When Gideon brought the angel a meal of veal, soup, and some cakes of bread, the angel told him to spread it out upon a rock. The angel then stretched out his staff and touched the rock. A flame emerged from the rock and burned up everything that was on top of it. The angel quickly vanished. Gideon had been given the sign he requested. This miracle caused Gideon to realize the identity of the angel, and he built an altar and worshiped God.

That evening, God instructed Gideon to destroy the altar to Baal and replace it with an altar to God (6:25-32). Gideon took one of his father's bullocks and asked ten men to go with him. When they arrived at the site, he tore down Baal's altar, built an altar to Jehovah, offered a burnt offering on Jehovah's altar, and then slipped away into the night. At dawn the men of the town discovered what had been done. After investigation, they concluded that Gideon did it. They gathered at Gideon's house, demanding that Gideon's father send him out to receive the death penalty. Gideon's father defended him, saying that if Baal were truly God, he would defend himself. That made sense to the men, and they left. From that day forward, Gideon's father referred to him as Jerubbaal, meaning "let Baal contend." Little did Gideon's father realize that Gideon was soon to become the champion of Jehovah!

The Midianites had pitched their camp in the Valley of Jezreel, just across the Jordan from where Gideon lived. The Spirit of God descended upon Gideon (6:34). He called for soldiers from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and a huge army gathered for the battle.

As the time for battle drew near, Gideon, having second thoughts, wanted another sign. This time, however, Gideon suggested the sign. He set a piece of wool on the ground and asked that on the following morning the wool be drenched with dew and the ground around it be dry. The next morning it was as Gideon had requested. That was impressive, but Gideon was not satisfied. He now asked that the wool be dry and the ground around it be wet. In His merciful patience, God performed this third sign for Gideon.

Gideon pitched his camp next to the spring of Harod which was in Mount Gilboa. The Midianite forces were to the north of them in the valley below. Here God looked at Gideon's army of thirty-

two thousand men and said, "Your army is too big." Gideon, therefore, told his army that anyone who was scared could go home. Twenty-two thousand picked up their tents and left. God looked at the ten thousand remaining soldiers and said, "Your army is still too big." Gideon was told to take his army down to the water and let them drink. Those who were to fight would be selected. At the water, three hundred scooped water into their hands and lifted it to their mouths. The remainder knelt on their knees and put their heads in the water to drink. God selected the three hundred and told the others to go home. With three hundred men, Gideon was to face 135,000 Midianites.

Before the battle, God gave Gideon one more sign, the only sign that was initiated by God without a request from Gideon. Gideon slipped into the Midianite camp below where he overheard soldiers discussing a dream that one of them had dreamed. In the dream a barley cake had tumbled into their camp and knocked over a tent. One soldier said, "This dream represents Gideon whom God has chosen to destroy the forces of Midian" (7:14). With the assurance that the Midianites were on the verge of panic, Gideon worshiped God and returned to his camp.

Gideon divided his three hundred men into three companies of one hundred each. Each man was given a trumpet, a torch, and an empty pitcher to place over the torch. At Gideon's signal, they were to break their pitchers and blow their trumpets. The pitchers hid the light of the torches until Gideon's army was in position just outside the camp.

Upon Gideon's signal, the men broke the pitchers. Suddenly, three hundred torches appeared on every side of the Midianites. With the sound of the trumpets echoing in the valley and the torches all around them, the Midianites thought that a massive army had invaded the camp and began to fight one another in the dark. Gideon's army of three hundred stood safely outside of the camp until many in the Midianite army were dead. After the remainder ran out of the valley, God's people gathered out of Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh to pursue them (7:23). Gideon sent a request for assistance to the tribe of Ephraim who responded by blocking the waters where the Midianites might cross to return to their land east of the Jordan. The Ephraimites were able to capture two of the Midianite princes.

Gideon continued in pursuit of the Midianite kings as they fled to the east side of the Jordan (8:4). As they came to Succoth and Penuel, Gideon's army was exhausted and in need of food. The people of both Succoth and Penuel refused to help since the kings of Midian were not yet captured. Gideon led his men farther until they came to Karkor, where the remaining fifteen thousand soldiers were killed and the kings were captured. Gideon told his firstborn son to kill the two kings. Since the boy was still young, he was unable to do it. Gideon took the sword and executed the kings, and the victory over Midian was complete (8:20, 21).

Within this story, God shows how He can transform a cowardly man into a mighty champion. God's method of maturing this man of valor reminds us of how we become mature in Christ.

#### **A LACK OF CONFIDENCE (6:11-15)**

When Gideon was first approached by the angel of the Lord, he was anything but "a mighty man of valour." Though he complained about the suffering that Midian was causing, he was reluctant to be a part of the solution. When asked to help, he began making excuses for why he could not respond. He lacked confidence.

Some Christians are willing to do God's work, but lack confidence. A Christian may see what needs to be done, but lack the spiritual maturity or the self-confidence to do it. Every child of God must go through this stage. People in this circumstance need not feel guilty about it. They simply need to recognize their situation and grow spiritually to overcome it.

We overcome our lack of confidence by pushing ourselves into new areas of service. Visiting a shut-in person, teaching a Bible class, and setting up a Bible study with someone are examples of service which can be rendered. If we are to be active in service to God, we must push ourselves to do good works, even though we may not initially be comfortable in doing them.

John said, "Greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Brethren who are hesitating because they lack confidence simply need to quit looking at the size of the job and begin looking at the size of God!

Mark Twain said, "Thunder is impressive, but lightning gets the job done." Words may get

the attention of the masses, but faithfulness and determination get the job done!

Two men were discussing their difference in size. One was a large man, and the other somewhat smaller. The smaller man said, "If I were as big as you are, I'd go out and kill a great big bear with my bare hands." The larger man replied, "Plenty of smaller bears are out there." We can wish we had more talents and opportunities, or we can use the talents and opportunities we have. If we are not using those we have, what would we do if God gave us more? It is not how many abilities we possess, but how much we are willing to be used by God that makes the difference! Wherever you worship, work is waiting to be done. If you are to be like Gideon in growing out of a lack of confidence, you must do what you can, when you can, with whatever resources you may have. You will be one step closer in becoming "a mighty man of valour."

#### **A LACK OF COURAGE (6:17-40; 7:9-14)**

Gideon was afraid. When the angel told him about God's plan to rescue His people from Midian, Gideon's fear caused him to hesitate. He wanted a sign. Gideon wanted assurance that he would be successful. When the enemy was prepared for battle and his own army had been called to arms, he wanted another sign. The next morning, the fleece was wet and the ground around it was as dry as dust. That was not enough for Gideon. He delayed the battle for another night so that God could give him one more sign. When he awakened the next morning, the fleece was dry and the ground around it was soaked. Finally, Gideon was ready to act.

When God asked Gideon to go into the Midianite camp where he would receive his fourth and final sign, He said, "But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp." We are told, "So he went with Purah his servant. . . ." The fact that Gideon took his servant with him proves that he was still frightened. However, instead of *hesitating* in his fear, he was now *acting* in faith in spite of it.

Many excuses for not doing the work of God are prefaced by the words, "I am afraid." If we act in faith in spite of our fears, a whole new world will open up for us.

It is said that skydiving is one of the most thrilling experiences one can have. This is hard

for me to believe, but imagine the excitement of falling from the heights, and, for a few seconds, being a part of the sky. But has there ever been a skydiver who has not faced fear? People who never act in faith in the face of their fears will never experience the thrill that awaits them.

The cure for fear is to identify our fears and act in faith in the face of them. The excitement of accomplishing things in the kingdom is unsurpassed by anything else in this world. Through the power and the mercy of God, we can introduce people to Jesus. Once we have told them the sweet gospel story and they respond by becoming His children, we have actually touched eternity!

The adrenaline we possess in our bodies is amazing. Driven by adrenaline, people have ripped doors off hinges and lifted automobiles. It is time for our spiritual adrenaline to flow as we see people we love who need Christ. If that is not enough to get our adrenaline started, what will it take?

The story of Gideon's development into "a mighty man of valour" is *not* a story of a man who never knew fear. It is a story of a man who faced his fears with faith. If we are ever to become "mighty men of valour," we, too must overcome our fears with faith.

### **A LACK OF COMMITMENT (7:15—8:21)**

When Gideon acted in faith, a tremendous victory was won for God's people. God will fight the battles and win the wars when His people are willing to fight. His major concern is not our expertise or special talents, but our willingness to report for duty.

While no physical battles are being waged today by Christians, God's people are fighting battles with Satan. God will make sure we are victorious if we will look to Him for strength.

For instance, God is with us in our battle with temptation. James 1 reminds us that temptation comes from the devil and from within. However, when temptation comes, we can win over it through His power. God will provide "the way of escape" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

We often look for the way of escape from temptation from some outside influence, but the way of escape is not some mysterious outside influence. The way of escape originates from within. One can determine to receive God's help and win over it. When we try to defeat Satan ourselves without looking to God, Satan will always win.

James 4:7 says, "Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you." First, we must submit ourselves to God. Then, we will receive the strength to resist Satan. Satan is not afraid of us. If he can pull us away from God, he will beat us every time. However, Satan cowers before the God who works inside of us. If we are to win in our battle against temptations, we must turn them over to God.

We also battle against indifference. When Moses was about to die, he set before God's people a challenge from God: ". . . I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (Deuteronomy 30:19; KJV).

One mother took her five children to the ice cream parlor. When they arrived, they found that only two flavors were available—vanilla and chocolate. The mother commented on how they should have some other flavors. The man behind the counter replied, "If you only knew how long it takes people to decide between these two flavors, you wouldn't have any other flavors either." That is the way it is in our battle against indifference. We have only two choices—life or death. Jesus said, "He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters" (Matthew 12:30).

In a battle, a soldier must be decisive; he cannot have mixed priorities. Either every ounce of his energy is concentrated on the battle, or he will die a failure. God granted Gideon an amazing victory once Gideon committed himself.

### **CONCLUSION**

God was able to transform Gideon from a coward behind a winepress into "a mighty man of valour" through confidence, courage, and commitment. Though Gideon began by making excuses, he soon set out on his God-given mission. Though at one point he hesitated because of his fears, he soon began to act in faith in the face of his fears. When he acted, he won a great victory for God. These are the stages through which every child of God must go.

Each of us is currently in one of these stages. Each of us must examine himself and decide where he is in his development. It is all right to stand in need of growth. But we must not become stagnant. God can mold us into mighty men and women of valor in His service!

—Craig Tappe