

# JUDGES

## GOD PLUS GIDEON EQUALS A MAJORITY (6:1–8:35)

When Deborah and Barak won the great victory against Sisera, Jabin, and the Canaanites, they sang a touching song of victory which ended with this request: "Thus let all Thine enemies perish, O Lord; but let those who love Him be like the rising of the sun in its might" (5:31). The story closes with a powerful statement: "The land was undisturbed for forty years" (5:31). They enjoyed a time of peace. It would be encouraging if the book stopped with this victory, but that is not the case.

### **THE DARK BEGINNING (6:1)**

Chapter 6 begins with a discordant note: "Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; . . ." They turned again to the idols of the people who lived around them, the people whom they were to have driven out but did not. As a consequence of their sin, slavery came: ". . . and the Lord gave them into the hands of Midian seven years" (6:1). When they experienced the harsh treatment of the Midianites, they turned back, repented, and called to God.

The story of Gideon stresses God's deliverance. No other story in all of the Scriptures shows the power of God, as contrasted with the power of man, more than does Gideon's story. Gideon's forces were reduced to a mere three hundred to go against a huge mass of the Midianites, the Amalekites, and the sons of the East. That is the point of the divine record. Perhaps that is the reason so much attention is given to the rather interesting military details.

### **GOD CHASTISES ISRAEL (6:2-10)**

The sin of Israel is stated in one verse, while the oppression of

the Midianites is stated in the next four verses. The enemy would come across the Jordan River from the east and go almost to the Mediterranean Sea, all the way across the land, destroying the produce, leaving no sustenance in Israel, leaving no sheep, ox, or donkey. Some scholars believe that the plunderers came in and took the crops or stole the harvest. The text may not be saying exactly that. Out of sheer meanness and oppression, they may have come in to devastate the land. Verse 5 says, "For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, they would come in like locusts for number, both they and their camels were innumerable; and they came into the land to devastate it." Verse 6 adds, "So Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried to the Lord."

Before the Lord provided the deliverance, He made sure they knew exactly what had happened. He called for a prophet, and that prophet brought a message:

Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "It was I who brought you up from Egypt, and brought you out from the house of slavery. And I delivered you from the hands of the Egyptians and from the hands of all your oppressors, and dispossessed them before you and gave you their land, and I said to you, 'I am the Lord your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live'" (6:8-10a).

That prohibition against worshiping the gods of the Amorites would include all kinds of worship, would it not? The prophet was saying that they were not to bow down to them or show them reverence in any way.

The next short sentence is a key to understanding the reason why the people were being oppressed: "But you have not obeyed Me" (6:10b). In a moment we will find Gideon complaining to the angel of the Lord with these words:

O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, "Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?" But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian (6:13).

Is it not amazing how we human beings be-

have? Israel had sinned and surely knew that they had sinned. God sent a prophet to tell the people that their sin was the reason Midian was able to overrun them. Still, the hero of the story was asking, "Why?" Perhaps it is human nature.

### **GOD CHOOSES GIDEON (6:11-32)**

The Lord, even though they had disobeyed Him, sent a deliverer. The rest of the story, beginning in verse 11, tells about that deliverance.

#### **A Man of Fear**

Observe what Gideon was doing when the angel of the Lord came to him. He should have been a brave man of faith, but he was hiding. He was beating out wheat in the winepress. Maybe we should view him as being wise, because if he had been on the threshing floor beating out the wheat, chaff would have been rising in the wind, and the Midianites could have detected it from afar. They would have come and taken his grain. Maybe he was wise, but he was still hiding because of fear. The angel of the Lord said, "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior" (6:12). I picture Gideon looking around and asking, "Are you calling me a valiant warrior?" This is where he entered his complaint, saying, "If the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us?" (6:13).

Verse 14 says, "And the Lord looked at him and said, 'Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?'" That is not a question which requires an answer. Basically, it is just another way of saying, "I have sent you and, therefore, I will go with you and you will be successful." He said, "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). He knew, at least at this point, that he was not a valiant warrior. Do you remember Moses receiving his call? Gideon sounded like him: "Lord, please select someone else." Gideon's reply made him sound like many of us! The Lord said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man" (6:16).

#### **A Man of Faith**

Gideon did his first testing here. He was

recognized as a man of faith, yet he required evidences. Certainly, he took the battle by faith! That is the only way an army of 300 could go against 135,000. Still, he tested the Lord all along the way.

Here is his first test: “. . . show me a sign that it is Thou who speakest with me. Please do not depart from here, until I come back to Thee, and bring out my offering and lay it before Thee” (6:18). He was gone for quite a while, because he prepared a goat and unleavened bread with a bit of flour, and brought the bread, the meat, and some broth in a bowl out to the angel of the Lord (6:19). The angel of the Lord said, “Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth” (6:20). The angel touched the food with his staff, and immediately fire came from the rock and consumed the offering. Then the angel of the Lord disappeared. Gideon knew it was the angel of the Lord, but he was frightened. He said, “Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face” (6:22). He apparently thought that meant that he would die. The Lord answered him from heaven by saying, “Peace to you, do not fear; you shall not die” (6:23). Gideon then built an altar and named it “The Lord Is Peace” (6:24). Obviously, the writer wrote about these events sometime after they occurred. The narrative about it was not written the day it happened. The next sentence says that “to this day” that altar still stands.

The Lord began His deliverance with the repentance of the leader. That is essential. He came to Gideon that very night and said,

Take your father's bull and a second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal which belongs to your father, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it; and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of this stronghold in an orderly manner, and take a second bull and offer a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down (6:25, 26).

Gideon did what the Lord had commanded at night. This valiant warrior so full of faith was afraid to do it in the daytime (6:27). Still, he did it, and he is to be commended for his obedience.

We can see the reason for Gideon's fear,

because early the next morning, when the people got up and found those two altars to Baal and the Asherah torn down, they immediately began to seek the one who had done the deed. When they discovered that Gideon had done it, they began to search for him. They went to his father's house and said, “Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has torn down the altar of Baal, and indeed, he has cut down the Asherah which was beside it” (6:30). Gideon's father was a powerful man. He stood boldly and reasoned with them and even threatened them and got by with it. He said, “Will you contend for Baal, or will you deliver him?” (6:31). He was saying, “If Baal has something against my son, let Baal contend for himself. After all, he is a god, isn't he?” He also added, “Whoever will plead for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because someone has torn down his altar” (6:31). They all backed off, but they changed Gideon's name. From that time forward he was known as Jerubbaal, meaning “Let Baal contend against him” (6:32). We should notice the significance of this episode. Before Gideon could lead the people of God against the enemy, the reason for the enemy's presence in the land had to be removed; the destruction of that reason, the idols, had to start with his own household. His father's idol had to be destroyed first. Ultimately, the nation needed to get rid of all of the Baals and the Asherim, but they needed to start with the man who was their leader. Gideon had done this, and his father was his first convert. The Lord was setting the stage for the battle.

### **A Man of Force**

The Midianites, the Amalekites, and the sons of the East assembled themselves, crossed over the Jordan River, and came to the Valley of Jezreel (6:33). The battle with the Canaanites mentioned in chapter 4 occurred just south of Mount Tabor in the valley of the Kishon River. This was almost the same place. It is interesting that these armies assembled on the same battleground, just slightly to the east of where the Valley of Jezreel extends toward the Jordan River. Since the enemy was in that same area, who would be called to fight? God sent for the same Israelites who had been called

forty years prior to this, Naphtali and Zebulun, and added Manasseh and Asher. Gideon sent for warriors to come, and 32,000 men responded. With such a powerful enemy, many soldiers were needed.

This brave man of faith, however, started his testing again. Gideon knew that the Lord had told him to go into battle. He had seen the angel cause fire to consume the offering. He had seen the Lord's protection after he tore down the altars to Baal and the Asherah. Still, he needed more proof from the Lord. Gideon asked,

If Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou hast spoken, behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou hast spoken (6:36, 37).

The Lord accepted his proposition, and the next morning when Gideon came out he found that the ground was dry. The fleece was so wet with dew that he picked it up and drained a bowl full of water out of it. Then the faithful warrior said, "Do not let Thine anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground" (6:39). God accepted the request, and the next morning the fleece was dry and the ground all around was wet. Gideon would need more proof before he actually went into battle, but he did take the next step.

### **GOD CONFIRMS HIS ARMY (6:33—7:15)**

The Lord said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, lest Israel become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me'" (7:2). If they had gone out with that many men, they would have thought that their army was that powerful, that the Israelites could take on the Midianites, Amalekites, and sons of the East, four men to one, and still win. Making this point is one of the principal functions of the story. Gideon, according to the instruction of the Lord, said, "Whoever is

afraid and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead" (7:3). More than two-thirds of his army, 22,000, went home, leaving him 10,000 to face 135,000 enemy soldiers. What did the Lord say? "The people are still too many" (7:4). They had to be told, "It is not you and your strength that will win the victory. It is Me and My strength." God said to take the remaining soldiers down to the water and have them to get a drink. Amazingly, 9,700 of them laid down their weapons and drank, while 300 of them scooped up the water and lapped it out of their hands, as a dog laps (7:6). The Lord chose the 300 that lapped the water to go against 135,000 enemy soldiers.

Gideon needed more proof that the Lord would be with him. Therefore, God said,

Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hands. But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp, and you will hear what they say; and afterward your hands will be strengthened that you may go down against the camp (7:9-11).

The two of them went down to the camp of the Midianites and heard two of the soldiers talking. One of them said, "Behold, I had a dream; a loaf of barley bread was tumbling into the camp of Midian, and it came to the tent and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down so that the tent lay flat" (7:13). His friend immediately responded that this was nothing but the sword of Gideon, for the Lord had delivered Midian into the hand of Gideon. "And it came about when Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, that he bowed in worship" (7:15). He did have faith at this point. It took him a long time to develop it, but he did have faith. With 300 men and peculiar instruments of war, he went out to meet the enemy, which numbered 135,000 men.

### **GOD CONFUSES THE ENEMY (7:16—8:21)**

Gideon and his men went out at the second watch of the night, taking trumpets and torches that were covered with pitchers. I can imagine how startled the enemies were!

One morning when my alarm clock went

off one hour before it should have, I bolted straight up in my bed. I was so astonished that all I could say was "Why?" Imagine how startled these people were in the middle of the night when they suddenly heard trumpets, then the crash of pitchers. When they opened their eyes, they saw torches on three different hills around them and heard trumpets blowing. God confused them. He caused them to turn with their swords and begin striking their fellow soldiers. The 300 soldiers of Gideon pursued their enemy and killed a number of them. Those soldiers who had gone home, the 9,700 plus the 22,000, joined in the pursuit. People from other tribes began to pursue the Midianites. The news reached the people of Ephraim, and they went to the fords of the Jordan River to catch the enemies as they returned to the east. They caught specifically Oreb and Zeeb, two Midianite lords, and killed them. That was fortunate, because the soldiers from Ephraim are recorded twice in the Book of Judges as coming to a leader, a deliverer, and saying, "You wronged us. You were going to battle and did not give us a chance." They appear to have been very angry with Gideon at this point. Gideon was a diplomat as he said,

"What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb into your hands; and what was I able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that (8:2, 3).

Later, when they tried that same kind of complaining with Jephthah, he killed many of them.

Gideon and his three hundred men crossed the Jordan in pursuit of the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna. They came to the city of Succoth, still in Israel, and Gideon said, "Please give loaves of bread to the people who are following me, for they are weary, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian" (8:5). The people of Succoth knew how powerful Midian was, so they responded by saying, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army?" (8:6). They wanted to be on the winning side. Gideon said that when he came back he would thrash their

bodies with the thorns and briers of the wilderness (8:7). He went to the city of Penuel and got the same answer. He said that when he came back he would tear down their tower, their wall of defense (8:9). Gideon and his army eventually caught up with the Midianites while the Midianites were resting. According to 8:10, there were 15,000 men, which means that 120,000 swordsmen had already fallen. God used 300 to overtake and destroy 15,000. It had to be the power of the Lord, did it not?

They brought Zebah and Zalmunna back and presented them to the people of Succoth. Gideon thrashed the men's bodies with thorns and briers. He went to Penuel and tore down their tower and killed the men of the city because they had refused to help God's people and cause.

It became known during an interrogation that Zebah and Zalmunna had killed some of Gideon's own brothers. Therefore, Gideon said they would die. He called his young son, Jether, to kill them. Jether was no braver than his father had been earlier. He was afraid to do it, so Gideon killed them himself.

### **THE DARK ENDING (8:22-35)**

This story, when told to children's classes, usually is made to end at the deliverance. It would be wonderful if it actually stopped there. The function of this section of Scripture is not just to tell about some exciting piece of military history, not just to tell about deliverance, although that is one of the purposes. It is in God's Word to show a recurring pattern. With no king in the land, no adequate spiritual leadership, the people constantly returned to sin.

Israel recognized their need for leadership, so they said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son" (8:22). He said that he would not rule over them, but he took the opportunity to make a request of them. The Ishmaelites wore earrings, and Gideon said, "I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil" (8:24). They were glad to give their deliverer some of their gold. Verse 26 says, "The weight of the earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, . . ." He received the rings, in addition to the ornaments, pendants, and purple robes that were on the kings of Midian and the neck bands that

were on their camels. A very rich spoil was given to him, but what did he do with it? "Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household" (8:27).

Before the story could end, the pattern started again. Actually, idolatry probably did not come into the picture until after Gideon died. Verse 33 reads, "Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god." Verses 34 and 35 are important:

Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon), in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel.

Thus, the story ends with a sad note.

## LESSONS FOR US

### Be Pure

Remember the message of the angel. God did not simply allow enemies to live among the Israelites for their companionship. Look at all that God had done for Israel. The people's response to the goodness of God was totally inappropriate; it was the opposite of what it should have been. That is a lesson for us today. What He has done for us is even greater than what He had done for them. It is easy for us to give Him an inappropriate response as well. Rather than giving our lives to Him who gave His life for us, it seems to be the way of human nature that we accept all of the good from Him and keep all of ourselves for ourselves.

### Be Believing

Gideon responded in faith. We too must live by faith. The New Testament states three times that the righteous shall live by faith. Do not be too hard on yourself if sometimes you want to make sure that what you are doing is the will of God. You should not, however, ask God to provide a specific sign to show you what He wants of you. That is a dangerous attempt to control God. While He accepted Gideon's request, He certainly has not prom-

ised to do that for us: He has not promised to answer our requests in the way that we ask Him to or at the time we direct Him to. Instead, we need to open the Bible and study the instructions that He has already given us.

Gideon's faith is held up to us as an example. He is on the list of faithful men and women in Hebrews 11:32-34. He did great things by faith, and that is an example for us. Let us emulate his faith and not his testing of the Lord.

### Be Grateful

The most powerful lesson that comes directly from this text is found in 8:34, 35. The people forgot the Lord even after He had done so much for them. This victory was so powerful that it is mentioned three times in the Old Testament and is referred to in Hebrews 11. Isaiah 9 and 10 and Psalm 86 contain references to Gideon's tremendous victory. Still, the people forgot. How could they forget?

Do we not have the same tendency today? If some great thing happens in your life through the hand of the Lord, do you remember what God has done for you? More clearly than seeing the hand of the Lord in our own lives, we can read the objective record of what God has done in the Bible. That cannot be doubted. Look daily at what He has done. It is easy for us to get so involved in living and in the cares of life that we forget about Him! I challenge each one of us, as we go about our daily routines, to take care not to forget Him. When your schedule becomes full and you are running faster and faster, getting farther and farther behind, do not forget Him! The man or the woman who lives without an awareness that the Lord is in charge, without an awareness that we will all die, without remembering the Lord daily, wastes the gift of life. Such a life will come to a sad end, just as the story of Gideon does.

## GOD'S INVITATION

I plead with you to be a servant of the Lord. Jesus said, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; ..." (Mark 16:16). That is the beginning. Then we can spend our lives listening to the Word, following and obeying Him, and remembering to give Him the

credit and praise for every victory. If we live every day with Him, we can live eternity with Him.

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## EXEGETICAL NOTES

6:1-6—The pattern is repeated.

6:16-24; 36-40; 7:9-15—Gideon had faith only after much proof.

6:25-32—Gideon and Joash were idolators. Repentance began at home.

7:2—This verse is a key to the purpose of the account.

8:22-35—The narrative has a sad ending. The pattern starts over again before it ends.

8:34, 35—The people forgot!

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### *Our Plans and God's Purposes*

When we get to heaven, perhaps God will show us what we really did with our lives on earth. For example, He may say to the widow of Mark 12:42-44, "You gave your two mites to help with the care of the temple, but I used those two mites to teach people how to give for hundreds of years. Let Me show you what a preacher in 1993 said about you as he motivated people to give." That widow probably did not know in life that her deed would have such lasting consequences.

God may show us that when we gave \$9.95 to buy a book for a preacher in another country, we were really winning souls to Christ by the hundreds. The book taught the preacher, the preacher taught the hundreds, and the hundreds came to Christ. Our deeds are not isolated; in all that we plan or do, we are working either for or against God's great purposes.

Herod's cruel decree for all the baby boys two years old and under to be killed (Matthew 2:13, 14) brings before us some truths concerning our plans and God's purposes.

1. *We Can Oppose God's Purposes.* We, as free-moral beings, can oppose God's purposes. Herod exercised his freedom of choice in a self-serving way. He tried to kill the Messiah that God was bringing into the world to save man. God has not made us into robots. We can choose and plan freely. He has made it possible for us to defy His almighty hand.

2. *We Cannot Cancel Altogether God's Purposes.* Herod could oppose the purposes of God, but he could not eliminate them. God, through His providence, would carry out His purposes. Herod announced his decree to destroy God's purpose, but God sent His angel to preserve it. We can violate the law of gravity, but we cannot cancel it. We may break ourselves against the law, but we will not remove it.

3. *We Always Lose When We Oppose God's Purposes.* From the human point of view, it seems as though Herod wielded great power. He could speak and his will would be done; he could walk among the people and they would bow. From the divine viewpoint, however, the powerful Herod ultimately lost because he opposed God's purposes. Herod is known to every Bible student, but he is known as a loser, not as a winner. God's ways are right and are to be desired by all. He who opposes them will find that he has made a big mistake.

4. *Others Are Affected When We Oppose God's Purposes.* When Herod misused his freedom of choice, others were hurt. When God made it possible for us to choose what is right, it also became possible for us to choose what is wrong. When He gave every man freedom of choice, it became possible for innocent people to be hurt by evil men. Nations, cities, and individuals hurt others when they oppose the purposes of God. We are all part of a community. The decisions we make affect others as well as ourselves. For example, a drunken driver may kill an innocent child.

5. *God's purposes are being fulfilled in God's world whether we are able to see it or not.* The birth of Jesus occurred according to God's divine plan even though Herod opposed it. From the human viewpoint, God's plan was being thwarted; but His plan was actually being fulfilled.

We can learn from Herod's actions that we can oppose God's purposes, that we cannot eliminate God's purposes, that we always lose when we oppose God's purposes, and that others are affected when we oppose God's purposes.

We all like to be on the winning team. Someone has said, "I know how the drama of life turns out. I have read the last chapter of the

book, and those on God's side win."

We must allow the purposes of God to carry us to victory. A raging river cannot be opposed successfully, but if we get into the

right kind of boat, the river can carry us to our destination. The river is our friend or foe, depending upon whether we join it or oppose it. So it is with the purposes of God.

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