



GIDEON'S EXPLOITS

Serving God In
Challenging Times

BOON-SING POH

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About the author

Boon-Sing Poh was born in Malaysia in 1954. Brought up in a pagan background, he was saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ while studying in the United Kingdom. He returned to Malaysia to become a lecturer in a university for six years, founded the first Reformed Baptist Church in the country in 1983, and was imprisoned for his faith from 1987 to 1988 for a period of 325 days. He is the pastor of Damansara Reformed Baptist Church (DRBC) in Kuala Lumpur, a contented husband, a thankful father of four sons, and a happy grandfather. He earned the PhD degree in Electronics Engineering from the University of Liverpool, UK, the Diploma in Religious Study from Cambridge University, UK, and the PhD degree in Theology from North-West University, SA.

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Dedicated to
the young people
God is raising up for His service.

Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| FOREWORD | ix |
| 1 GOD'S CALL TO GIDEON (Judg. 6:1-32) | 5 |
| 1.1 Background To Gideon's Calling (vv. 1-10) | 6 |
| 1.2 Hesitancy In Gideon's Calling (vv. 11-24) | 9 |
| 1.3 Confirmation Of Gideon's Calling (vv. 25-32) | 14 |
| 1.4 Conclusion | 17 |
| 2 THE PREPARATION FOR WAR (Judg. 6:33-7:14) | 23 |
| 2.1 Private Preparation (Judg. 6:33-40) | 24 |
| 2.2 Public Preparation (Judg. 7:1-8) | 28 |
| 2.3 Providential Preparation (Judg. 7:9-14) | 31 |
| 2.4 Conclusion | 34 |
| 3 THE STRATEGY OF WAR (Judg. 7:15-8:21) | 41 |
| 3.1 An Inspired Strategy (7:15-25) | 42 |
| 3.2 Two Disheartening Reactions (8:1-17) | 45 |
| 3.3 A Decisive Victory (8:18-21) | 48 |
| 3.4 Conclusion | 51 |
| 4 THE AFTERMATH OF WAR (Judg. 8:22-35) | 55 |
| 4.1 Gideon Set Good Examples | 56 |
| 4.2 Gideon Set Bad Examples | 60 |
| 4.3 Conclusion | 65 |
| 5 EPILOGUE (Judg. 8:33-9:6) | 69 |
| 5.1 A Burden For The Cause Of God | 69 |
| 5.2 The Later-generations Syndrome | 71 |
| 5.3 Faithfulness In Our Generation | 72 |

CONTENTS

5.4 Conclusion 74

FOREWORD

This series of studies on the life and ministry of Gideon reveals important lessons on the Christian life and service to the Lord. Unlike Gideon who fought with literal swords and spears, the New Testament church fights with “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:17).” The reason is obvious, for “... we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual *hosts* of wickedness in the heavenly *places* (Eph. 6:12).” Like Gideon, the Lord’s people must go forth into battle “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit (Eph. 6:18)” as they wield the sword of the Spirit.

The character of the person matters more than what he attempts to accomplish for the Lord. CH Spurgeon is supposed to have said, “God has His man for the hour, and the hour for the man.” In a sense, every redeemed person is that man for the hour, and he should see that the hour is for him. We live in an age that is both challenging and full of opportunities. The challenges are not insurmountable when there is trust in the Lord. The opportunities will be discernible to one tuned to know and do the Lord’s will.

As with Gideon, we must operate as a member God’s covenantal people. One who desires to serve God must be integrated into the life of a good local church. (It is beyond our purview here to consider what constitute a “good” local church. It is also beyond our purview to consider the place of para-church organisations.) By serving within, and from, the local church there will be plenty of oppor-

FOREWORD

tunities to serve in fellowship with like-minded churches, extending to the wider fellowship of God's people. The concept of serving God as a lone ranger is not a biblical one.

We are fighting the Lord's battles. We are His instruments in the unfolding of His purpose on earth. Victory in this spiritual warfare is assured, for the Lord has died for His people and risen from the dead. With His intercession for us in heaven, we go forth in His name. The words of Asa, a later warrior who shared the same spirit as Gideon, are appropriate (2 Chron. 14:11):

"Lord, it is nothing for You to help, whether with many or with those who have no power; help us, O Lord our God, for we rest on You, and in Your name we go against this multitude. O Lord, You are our God; do not let man prevail against You!"

B S Poh,
Kuala Lumpur, March 2023.

Judges 6:1-32

6 Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years, 2 and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which *are* in the mountains. 3 So it was, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up; also Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. 4 Then they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey. 5 For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts; both they and their camels were without number; and they would enter the land to destroy it. 6 So Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD.

7 And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried out to the LORD because of the Midianites, 8 that the LORD sent a prophet to the children of Israel, who said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel: ‘I brought you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage; 9 and I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. 10 Also I said to you, “I *am* the LORD your God; do not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell.” But you have not obeyed My voice.’ ”

11 Now the Angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth tree which *was* in Ophrah, which *belonged* to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon threshed wheat in the winepress, in order to hide *it* from the Midianites. 12 And the Angel of the LORD ap-

peared to him, and said to him, "The LORD *is* with you, you mighty man of valor!"

13 Gideon said to Him, "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 forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites."

14 Then the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?"

15 So he said to Him, "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."

16 And the LORD said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man."

17 Then he said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who talk with me. 18 Do not depart from here, I pray, until I come to You and bring out my offering and set *it* before You." And He said, "I will wait until you come back."

19 So Gideon went in and prepared a young goat, and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot; and he brought *them* out to Him under the terebinth tree and presented *them*. 20 The Angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay *them* on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so.

21 Then the Angel of the LORD put out the end of the staff that *was* in His hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire rose out of the

rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. And the Angel of the LORD departed out of his sight.

22 Now Gideon perceived that He *was* the Angel of the LORD. So Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord GOD! For I have seen the Angel of the LORD face to face."

23 Then the LORD said to him, "Peace *be* with you; do not fear, you shall not die." 24 So Gideon built an altar there to the LORD, and called it The-LORD-*Is*-Peace. To this day it *is* still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

25 Now it came to pass the same night that the LORD said to him, "Take your father's young bull, the second bull of seven years old, and tear down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the wooden image that *is* beside it; 26 and build an altar to the LORD your God on top of this rock in the proper arrangement, and take the second bull and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the image which you shall cut down." 27 So Gideon took ten men from among his servants and did as the LORD had said to him. But because he feared his father's household and the men of the city too much to do *it* by day, he did *it* by night.

28 And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, there was the altar of Baal, torn down; and the wooden image that *was* beside it was cut down, and the second bull was being offered on the altar *which had been* built. 29 So they said to one another, "Who has done this thing?" And when they had inquired and asked, they said, "Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing." 30 Then the men of the city said to Joash, "Bring out your son, that he may die, because he has torn down the altar of Baal, and because he has cut down the wooden image that *was* beside it."

31 But Joash said to all who stood against him, "Would you plead for Baal? Would you save him? Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning! If he *is* a god, let him plead for himself, because his altar has been torn down!" 32 Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, "Let Baal plead against him, because he has torn down his altar."

One

GOD'S CALL TO GIDEON (Judg. 6:1-32)

The book of Judges covers the period from the death of Joshua to the beginning of the reign of Saul. This was a period of about 300 years, from roughly 1350-1050 BC. (We have rounded the years to give an idea of the period we are concerned with.) Moses led the children of Israel out of Egypt, into forty years of wilderness wandering. Upon arriving on the eastern bank of the Jordan river, Moses died. Joshua took over as the leader to lead the people across the river Jordan, into Canaan. After driving out the Canaanite tribes, he divided the land among the twelve tribes of Israel. Before his death, Joshua challenged the children of Israel by saying, "...choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that *were* on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord (Josh. 24:15)." Although the nation pledged to serve Jehovah, they soon backslided after the death of Joshua.

The period of 300 years following the death of Joshua is described by the last verse of the book of Judges – "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes." The period of Judges was characterised by the cycle of idolatry on the part of the children of Israel, judgement from God who allowed foreign forces to attack them, the cry for help from the children of Israel, and deliverance by the hand of a judge. Gideon was one of the judges raised up by God to deliver His people. Before Gideon,

1. GOD'S CALL TO GIDEON (JUDG. 6:1-32)

a number of other judges had been used by God to deliver His people. In the 200 years before Gideon, there were four cycles of sin, judgement, cry for help, and deliverance. Firstly, there was the attack by Mesopotamia in which Othniel was the judge (Judg. 3:8). Secondly, there was the attack by Moab in which Ehud was the judge (Judg. 3:12). Thirdly, there was the attack by the Philistines in which Shamgar was the judge (Judg. 3:31). Fourthly, there was the attack by Jabin of Canaan in which Deborah was the judge (Judg. 4:2). Mesopotamia was north of Canaan, where Abraham (the ancestor of the Jews), had come from. Moab was east of Canaan, across the river Jordan. Philistia was south-west of Canaan, by the coast. The last enemy was a Canaanite, whose territory was just north of the Sea of Galilee.

The story of Gideon opens with the attack upon the children of Israel by the Midianites and the Amalekites – nomadic tribes from east of the Jordan. These were Ishmaelites, i.e. Arabic people who were descendants of Ishmael, the other son of Abraham. Gideon was raised up by God to deliver His people. The call of God to Gideon is most instructive to us on living the Christian life and serving God in our days. The well-known preacher of London 200 years ago, C. H. Spurgeon, was supposed to have said, “God has the man for the hour, and the hour for the man.” We will see that Gideon was the man for the hour of need among the children of Israel. God gave the call to Gideon. Gideon received a calling from God. We will consider the background to Gideon’s calling, the hesitancy in Gideon’s calling, and the confirmation in Gideon’s calling. Under each section, we will consider two points, and draw out lessons for ourselves as we proceed.

1.1 Background To Gideon’s Calling (vv. 1-10)

Oppression

Under the first section, Background To Gideon’s Calling, we consider the oppression under the Midianites. We are told in verse 1, “Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years...” In what way were the children of Israel doing evil? With the previous cycles of idolatry, judgement, cry for help, and deliverance it is not difficult to guess what evil was committed. Yes, it was idolatry! A prophet

was sent to them later who said, in verse 10, 'Also I said to you, "I am the Lord your God; do not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell." But you have not obeyed My voice.' It is a well-known fact that the pagans fear the deities that they worship whereas Christians fear the true God with a reverential fear. We would normally describe the fear we have of God as reverence, for combined with honouring Him is our love for Him. Our fear of God is not the same as a terror of God. The pagans, however, have a fear of their gods akin to terror. That said, we note that the children of Israel feared the gods of the Amorites which means that they were worshipping them – regardless of whether they revered, or were terrified of, those gods.

God's judgement came in the form of attacks by the Midianites and the Amalekites. They came only during the harvesting season, to attack the children of Israel and take away their grain and their flock. The children of Israel fought back but "the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel (v. 2)". We are told in verse 5, "For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts; both they and their camels were without number; and they would enter the land to destroy it." These marauding hordes came in such large numbers, riding their war camels to attack and raid. Their flocks came after them to eat up whatever grain and grass that were left. The children of Israel fled into the jungles and the mountains – hiding themselves in dens and caves, and building strongholds in the mountains. They were reduced to abject poverty, and lived in fear – ready to flee the moment the marauders came. This went on for seven years before they cried out to God.

We note the slowness of the children of Israel to learn their lesson. For the previous 200 years, there had been four cycles of sin-judgement-repentance-deliverance. They should have learnt the lesson after the first time. If they had not learned the lesson, they should have learned it the second time. If they had not learned it the second time, they should have learned it the third time. But no – even after the fourth cycle, they had not learned the lesson! In their own generation, they took so long to learn the lesson. The attacks of the nomadic tribes should have awakened them to the realisation that God was not pleased with them. They should have cried out to God for mercy earlier. They waited until the seventh year before finally crying out to God for help. This is an important lesson for God's children today. We have been redeemed and forgiven our sins

1. GOD'S CALL TO GIDEON (JUDG. 6:1-32)

in Jesus Christ. God has promised His blessing to us if we walk in His way. When we go astray, do we quickly return to Him in repentance? Or do we continue in sin hoping that God will bear with us a bit longer? We know that God will chastise His children who go astray. He does not want any of His children to be lost. He will restore them by giving gentle warnings, which become louder and more painful with time. There are some who are slow learners in this sense. They would continue in their stubborn ways and wait for God 'to turn on the screw', as it were. Why must you learn the painful way? Why be an unhappy child of God by remaining adamant in your sin? Let us not be slow learners. Let us be quick to repent and return to our God when we go astray. There is forgiveness for our sins in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Call to repentance

The second point to note under this section is the call to repentance. When the children of Israel cried out to God, no deliverance came immediately. Instead, God sent a mysterious prophet to them to call them to repentance. The name and background of this prophet are not given. God put it plainly to the children of Israel that He had redeemed them from bondage in Egypt, He had delivered them from their enemies, and given them the land of Canaan. The children of Israel were no better than other nations, yet God had entered into a covenant with their fathers to be their God. Was it too much for God to demand faithfulness from Him? The end of verse 10 says, "But you have not obeyed My voice."

Instead of raising a judge for them immediately, God called for repentance from His people. Let us remember the longsuffering of God in the whole episode. Four cycles of sin-judgement-repentance-deliverance had occurred in the past 200 years. Seven times in the past seven years the children of Israel had been raided by the Midianites and Amalekites. It had taken them that long to cry out to God? Is this a genuine cry of repentance or is it just to get deliverance from their problems? This reminds us of the multitude that came to hear the Lord's preaching. We are told in John 6:26, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled." There are many who come to church in order to gain something for themselves – financial help, healing from diseases, getting a potential life partner, etc. That is coming to church for the wrong reasons. We are told in 2

1.2. Hesitancy In Gideon's Calling (vv. 11-24)

Corinthians 7:10, “For godly sorrow produces repentance *leading* to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.” There are those who show sorrow upon hearing preaching, not because they are convicted of their sins against God, but because they are broken-hearted, caused by a broken relationship or by some other trials that they are facing. While we want to be sympathetic to those who are facing trials, we must be careful to distinguish between a sorrow of the world and genuine repentance.

Repentance from sin and faith in Jesus Christ must be preached together at the same time. Preaching the law of God is part and parcel of gospel proclamation. We must not tell people only about the love of God but also the justice of God in judging sin. We must tell people not only the need of believing in Jesus Christ but also the necessity of turning away from sin. The call of the gospel is both “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21)”. When the law of God is not preached, when sin is not mentioned, when there is no constant call to repentance, the church will quickly turn nominal. Many will be found in the church who are only Christians in name, who live worldly lives. If we want to be blessed by God, the first thing to do is to repent of our sins. That was the call given by the prophet to the children of Israel.

1.2 Hesitancy In Gideon's Calling (vv. 11-24)

We consider the second section which is hesitancy on the part of Gideon in his calling. Despite Gideon's hesitancy, God showed mercy to him, followed by giving him assurance of his calling. So, the two points under this section are “God's mercy to Gideon” and “God's assurance to Gideon”.

God's mercy

The Angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon when he was threshing wheat. Where was Gideon threshing wheat? Not on open, flat, ground where a wooden roller was pulled over the wheat repeatedly by a cattle. Instead, Gideon was using his feet to stamp on the wheat in the winepress! That showed there wasn't much wheat to thresh. The Midianites and Amalekites had raided them every year during the harvesting season. The children of Israel hid whatever wheat they could and carried with them whatever they could. Most of the

1. GOD'S CALL TO GIDEON (JUDG. 6:1-32)

wheat would have been taken away by their enemies, or eaten away by their livestock. We have seen, in verse 5, that the enemies “would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts...” Gideon was threshing wheat near to the vineyard, where the winepress was located, and under a terebinth tree instead of in the open. He was hiding from plain view of the enemies, in case they sneaked up on him.

Most of us would know that ‘the Angel of the LORD’ was the Son of God who appeared in the form of man. This was not the first time that He had appeared as man in the Old Testament age. He had appeared to Abraham and Moses before. His appearance as man was to foreshadow His incarnation – when He came to take upon Himself perfect human nature permanently by being born of the virgin Mary. The Angel of the LORD spoke to Gideon, saying in verse 12, “The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor!” Why was the Angel of the LORD appearing to praise Gideon? Was it because Gideon was brave in doing work when there was potential danger from the enemies? Or was it in anticipation of Gideon being appointed to be the judge to deliver the children of Israel? Perhaps this was just a general greeting of politeness. Of interest to us is the response of Gideon, found in verse 13, ‘Gideon said to Him, “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 forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.” ’

Gideon poured out a mouthful of words to the stranger, whom he did not recognise was the Angel of the LORD, showing that he must have been pondering upon these things. We know that “...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (Matt. 12:34).” Gideon’s words show, firstly, that he had a spiritual burden in his heart. When other people were concerned about their livelihood, their families, and their safety, Gideon was concerned for the cause of God. Gideon’s words also show that he was aware of God’s dealings with His people in times past. He knew the history of his people, “which our fathers told us about”. He knew the Scripture, which at that time consisted of the five books of Moses. Thirdly, Gideon’s words show that he had listened carefully to the words of the prophet who recently spoke to the nation. Other people in Israel would have heard the Scripture read to them but they had not been stirred in their hearts. The mysterious prophet had mentioned about God de-

delivering His people from bondage in Egypt, and about God delivering them from their oppressors. The message did not seem to affect the people except Gideon. It was like the incident told of a missionary who was invited to preach in a small church in Scotland. The missionary had prepared a message to preach on missions. Upon arrival at the church, he was dismayed to see that only a handful of old people were in attendance. He debated in his heart whether or not to preach on another subject but decided to stick to his original message. In the church was a young man who was playing the piano. The missionary's message spoke to this young man's heart and he became a missionary in Africa in latter days. He was David Livingstone. The word of God found a resting place in the heart of this one man, just as it did in the heart of Gideon.

The Angel of the LORD began to reveal His identity to Gideon. Verse 14 says, "Then the Lord turned to him and said, 'Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?'" Here was this stranger authoritatively sending him forth to save Israel, and saying "Have I not sent you?" Who was this person? Gideon must have begun to guess the identity of this person. Gideon had a humble view of himself. He demurred by saying, in verse 15, "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." The Angel of the LORD now spoke more forthrightly to Gideon, in the words of verse 16, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man." The Midianites may be many but they shall be defeated as though they were one man. Gideon would definitely defeat them. Gideon received his personal calling from God. God had spoken to him personally and commissioned him to be His servant. Gideon now asked to be given the opportunity to make an offering. His words in verse 18 should be noted carefully, "Do not depart from here, I pray, until I come to You and bring out my offering and set it before You." Gideon was going to worship the person!

That should be our response when God speaks to us personally. Today, God's normal way of speaking to us is not through direct words from heaven, not by angels, dreams or visions but by His written word. When God's word is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit applies the preached word to us personally. When you know that God has spoken to you, your response should be to worship Him. Gideon's diffidence is typical of those who are called to full-time service. An

1. GOD'S CALL TO GIDEON (JUDG. 6:1-32)

example was Moses who felt so inadequate to be God's servant. In Exodus 4, Moses tried to turn down the call of God until God's anger was stirred up against him. Jeremiah was reluctant to preach God's word until he could not hold himself back but to preach (Jer. 20:9). Paul felt compelled to preach God's word despite assessing himself as the worst of sinners (1 Cor. 9:16; 1 Tim. 1:15). One who is called by God to preach His word will obey the call despite feeling himself inadequate. God's grace is sufficient for him (2 Cor. 12:9).

God's assurance

Gideon must have prepared the offering as quickly as he could. We are told, in verse 19, that he prepared a young goat and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour. An ephah of flour was equivalent to about 22 litres. He also brought broth in a pot as a drink offering. At a time when food was scarce, Gideon was bringing as offering a young goat and unleavened bread made from 22 litres of flour! The lesson is clear. Gideon would not offer to God that which did not cost him anything. Instead, his offering was generous, given the circumstances of the time. That should speak to us all today. We must not offer to God that which does not cost us anything. Worship that does not cost us anything is no acceptable to God. The cost may be in the form of money, or time, or effort. It may cost us our health, our personal rights, or our relationship with certain people. Self-denial, self-sacrifice, and selflessness are required. We should not offer to God only our leftovers, after having indulged upon ourselves first. Along the same line of application, we must not serve God only "when we are ready". There are those who claim that they will be more serious in serving God when they finish their study, or when they start working, or when they are married, or when their children grow up. By the time you think you are ready to serve God more seriously, you might discover that you are no longer able to do those things that you had wanted to do. A similar situation occurs when a person claims that he is called to the Christian ministry upon retiring from his career. We would not regard the person as called to the ministry since he has spent his best years earning a living and making himself financially secure. It is good that a retired person wants to use his remaining years well in the Lord's service. We will find a slot in the work of the gospel for him but we would not regard him as called by God. If he is truly called, he would have given his life to serve the Lord when he was younger.

1.2. Hesitancy In Gideon's Calling (vv. 11-24)

The next thing we note about Gideon is that he was instructed what to do in making the offering. We read in verse 20, 'The Angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so.' The meat and unleavened bread were according to what was required to worship God. The broth was a drink offering. This shows that worship must be carried out according to God's word. There is such a thing as 'the Regulative Principle of Worship'. Although we no longer worship God in the way it was done in the Old Testament, the Regulative Principle still applies. The New Testament shows us how worship is to be conducted. We must not introduce elements that are not taught in Scripture. We must worship God in spirit and truth. So many churches today fail to keep this principle of worship, thinking that whatever is offered to God will be accepted as long as our hearts are sincere. How mistaken they are!

Verse 21 says, "Then the Angel of the Lord put out the end of the staff that was in His hand, and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire rose out of the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. And the Angel of the Lord departed out of his sight." This shows that God had accepted the offering of Gideon, just as in the days of Moses and Aaron, in Leviticus 9:24 – "...and fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces." It should be noted that this was a burnt offering before God which pointed to the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Christ's death was still future but it was the ground, or basis, of our acceptance before God. When the fire burst forth from the rock and consumed the meat and bread, and when the Angel of the LORD disappeared, Gideon was understandably shaken and frightened. Who would not be? Over and above the miraculous events, there was the understanding in Gideon that he had seen the Angel of the LORD face to face. If he had seen the Angel of the LORD, the Angel of the LORD would have seen him through and through as well. Gideon understood that God is perfectly holy while he was a sinner before God. He drew the correct conclusion that he deserved to die. Would he die? The voice of the LORD was heard saying to him, in verse 23, "Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die."

Peace! This is not merely a word of greeting for it is followed immediately with the statement that Gideon would not die. Gideon was spared death although he was deserving of death. All of us are de-

1. GOD'S CALL TO GIDEON (JUDG. 6:1-32)

scended from Adam and Eve and have inherited their sinful nature. All of us have sinned against God in thoughts, words, and deeds. We are unable to cleanse our sinful nature, and we are unable to do enough good to make up for our sins against God. We are deserving of eternal death in hell. God promised in the Old Testament that a Saviour would come to pay for our sins and to make our hearts clean. The Saviour has come. He is none other than Jesus Christ – the Son of God who has come to take upon Himself perfect human nature. Jesus Christ, as both God and Man, laid down His life on the cross to pay for the sins of His people. His blood shed on the cross of Calvary cleanses His people of their sin. When a sinner turns to God to confess his sins, and trusts in Jesus Christ for salvation, the punishment for his sins is regarded as taken by Christ when He died. The perfect righteousness of Christ is regarded as belonging to the sinner. In that way, he is forgiven by God of his sins, and accepted by God as His child. In that way, he is reconciled with God. That is what is called 'atonement'. Sin has been paid for, and reconciliation with God has been accomplished. That is peace with God! No wonder Gideon built an altar and called it "Jehovah Shalom", or "The LORD is Peace".

God had assured Gideon of his calling to be His servant.

1.3 Confirmation Of Gideon's Calling (vv. 25-32)

We come to the last section which is the confirmation of Gideon's calling. A person's 'internal calling' would be confirmed by what may be called his 'external calling'. In other words, the subjective sense of God's call will need to be confirmed by some objective indications to the church. In the case of Gideon, the external confirmation came in the form of his personal actions and the public acceptance of the people.

By personal actions

That night, God gave him clear instructions as to what he must do. He was to take a particular bull of seven years old belonging to his father to be sacrificed to God. His father seemed to have sacrificed a bull earlier to Baal. Gideon was to tear down the altar to Baal, a pagan god, belonging to his father, cut down the wooden image beside it, and build an altar on the rock there in the proper arrangement,

1.3. Confirmation Of Gideon's Calling (vv. 25-32)

and offer up the bull as a burnt offering to God. Again, attention to details according to God's word was required. The Regulative Principle of Worship came into play again! In Exodus 20:25, we are told, "And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it." This was probably what was meant by "the proper arrangement". Gideon's father, Joash, appeared to be a community leader of some kind for his altar was also a public altar, used by the people of the community.

Gideon must have struggled over the command given to him by God, just as Abraham must have struggled when God commanded him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. It was a task that needed the help of some men. Gideon took with him ten of his servants and went by night to accomplish the task. Verse 27 reveals two things that must be noted, "So Gideon took ten men from among his servants and did as the LORD had said to him. But because he feared his father's household and the men of the city too much to do it by day, he did it by night." Firstly, Gideon feared his father's household and the men of the city much. Who would not fear under such circumstances? The altar was not his own. It belonged to none other than his own father! It was a public altar and, therefore, belonged to the people of the city as well. Gideon therefore carried out the command of God under the cover of darkness. Secondly, Gideon did as the LORD had said to him. Despite his fear and trepidation, he did exactly as God commanded. Every point in the command of God was carried out. This was quite unlike King Saul in latter days who did not carry out God's command exactly, namely, to kill all living things among the enemies – both humans and animals (1 Sam. 15). Saul obeyed God in a general way but not in the particulars. He kept the king of the Amalekites alive and also the sheep and oxen. Gideon's obedience to God was thorough – both qualitatively and quantitatively. Gideon also displayed genuine courage. Courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to do what is right despite fear.

The spirituality of Gideon was obvious. His heart was submitted to God. He obeyed God faithfully. He displayed true courage. He trusted His God. Before fighting the enemies without, he had to fight the enemies within – the enemies of fear, compromise, and half-heartedness. Before he served God in the public sphere, he had to serve God in the private sphere. All these have applications to us today in determining the call of a person to the ministry of God's word. The person should be serving God faithfully in the local church be-

1. GOD'S CALL TO GIDEON (JUDG. 6:1-32)

fore he is appointed to hold office. There must be tokens of his calling by God from his character and personal service to God. Is he willing to serve in lowly capacities in the church? Has he taught in the children's Sunday School? Has he been involved in outreach, bringing the gospel to the unsaved? C. H. Spurgeon went a step further and required the fruit of some souls converted in his outreach effort. We would say that the fruit is seen in his involvement in outreach and in his teaching being accepted by others.

By public acceptance

We come to the next confirmation to Gideon's calling which was his public acceptance by the people. Gideon's destruction of his father's altar and idol, and the erection of a new altar to God together with the offering of the bull as a burnt offering, must have created quite a racket. They would have tried hard to do everything quietly but the inevitable noise attracted some spectators. The next morning, a crowd gathered to demand that Gideon be put to death for his actions. Mob frenzy was building up. From the spiritual perspective, there was contention between the forces of evil against the forces of light. Would the forces of darkness prevail, or the forces of light?

God had commanded Gideon to engage in the task. God would protect him. The way it happened was through the conversion of Gideon's father! Gideon's actions had not only awaken his father physically but also spiritually. He must have been shocked and angry at first but upon seeing Gideon's single-mindedness and hearing Gideon's explanation, Joash his father was turned around! Praise the Lord! Joash now arose to defend his son. He put it to the people with powerful logic. Let Baal defend himself. If by morning Baal is unable to defend himself, let those who defend him be put to death! That just stumped everyone. They couldn't rebut the logic. They became afraid of supporting Baal. They kept themselves quiet. That was the turning point for the people. They saw Gideon as a hero. They wanted to follow this hero. They gave him the nickname Jerubaal, meaning "let Baal contend". From then on, Gideon was accepted as their leader – the new judge raised up by God.

Our usefulness in God's service is often hampered by our own fear. God has His ways of turning the situation around. If we are prepared to trust and obey Him, He will turn the hearts of people around. A person called to ministry must be accepted by God's people. The members of the local church would have known the char-

acter of the person and observed his service to God in, and through, the church. The Scripture lays down the spiritual qualifications of the person in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. When the members of the church see that the person fulfils the scriptural qualifications, and has been serving well, they will be convinced of his calling to the ministry. His calling from God will be sealed by the church electing him to office.

1.4 Conclusion

Let us draw to a close. “God has the man for the hour, and the hour for the man.” The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few. There are many local churches that are without a pastor. While a pastor is not needed for the *being* of a church, he is needed for the *well-being* of the church. We must pray that God will raised up men for the pastoral ministry as well as for the missions field. There are those who claim to be called to serve God full-time who are not committed to the local church. We have great difficulty in accepting such claims. When first called to be a disciple of Christ, we are expected to be integrated into the local church – to *grow* in the church, to *serve* in the church, and then to serve *from* the church. This is required in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 in particular, and by the New Testament teaching in general. If there is no submission to God in the first calling as a disciple, how can we be convinced of the claim to the second calling to serve God?

The final application is for all God’s children. If you are not content with who God makes you to be, and where God wants you to be, you will never be happy with what God wants you to do. Seek to accept who God makes you to be, and where God wants you to be, and you will know what God wants you to do. You will then know that “the LORD is peace”. It had begun with your conversion. You heard the gospel and came to faith in Jesus Christ. In that way, you were reconciled with God. In that way, you knew “the LORD is peace”. You must continue to know “the LORD is peace” by being where He wants you to be – regardless of whether it is in the country of your birth, or overseas – regardless of your present location. Then seek to do what He wants you to do. Live for His glory! In all your pursuits, never forget that you are a citizen of God’s kingdom. Be involved in kingdom work. The Lord bless us all. Amen.

1. GOD'S CALL TO GIDEON (JUDG. 6:1-32)

* * * * *

Judges 6:33-7:14

33 Then all the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. 34 But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him. 35 And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, who also gathered behind him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.

36 So Gideon said to God, "If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said— 37 look, I shall 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 shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said." 38 And it was so. When he rose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water. 39 Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew." 40 And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground.

7 Then Jerubbaal (*that is*, Gideon) and all the people who *were* with him rose early and encamped beside the well of Harod, so that the camp of the Midianites was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley.

2 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.' 3 Now therefore, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever *is* fearful and afraid,

let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead.’
” And twenty-two thousand of the people returned,
and ten thousand remained.

4 But the LORD said to Gideon, “The people are still too many; bring them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. Then it will be, *that* of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall go with you,’ the same shall go with you; and of whomever I say to you, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ the same shall not go.” 5 So he brought the people down to the water. And the LORD said to Gideon, “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.” 6 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. 7 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.” 8 So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all *the rest of* Israel, every man to his tent, and retained those three hundred men. Now the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

9 It happened on the same night that the LORD said to him, “Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand. 10 But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant, 11 and you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.” Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outpost of the armed men who *were* in the camp. 12 Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels *were* without number, as

the sand by the seashore in multitude.

13 And when Gideon had come, there was a man telling a dream to his companion. He said, "I have had a dream: *To my* surprise, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed."

14 Then his companion answered and said, "This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp."

Two

THE PREPARATION FOR WAR (Judg. 6:33-7:14)

In the first talk, we considered “God’s Call To Gideon”, in which three main points were covered. Firstly, there was the background to Gideon’s call, in which the nomadic tribes of the east harassed the children of Israel and oppressed them for seven years. When the children of Israel cried out to God for help, an unnamed prophet called on the people to repent. The words of the prophet seemed not to have moved anyone in any significant way except for Gideon. Secondly, there was hesitancy in Gideon when he was called by God to lead Israel. A burden for God’s work combined with diffidence are signs of a call from God to be in full-time service. Thirdly, there was the external confirmation of Gideon’s personal obedience to God coinciding with the people’s acceptance of his leadership.

When the Midianites and Amalekites – the nomadic tribes of the east – intruded Israel and gathered for battle, Gideon quickly made preparation for war. There are three aspects to the preparation, namely, the personal preparation of Gideon, the public preparation of the army, and the providential preparation from God. These three key words starting with the letter “p” – personal, public, and providential – will help us in the study of the present passage. We will draw lessons for ourselves, keeping in mind that the literal wars of God’s people in the Old Testament are a picture of the spiritual warfare of God’s people in the New Testament. Our spiritual warfare consists of carrying out the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20.

2. THE PREPARATION FOR WAR (JUDG. 6:33-7:14)

A careful study of the Great Commission will reveal that it is a command to the local church to plant other local churches. The spiritual warfare we are engaged in extends to the personal level where we have to fight spiritual battles against remaining sin. Ephesians 6:10-20 address this aspect of our spiritual warfare, urging us to put on the whole armour of God. The preparation for war of the children of Israel provides us with lessons on the personal level, for the church, and in carrying out the Great Commission.

2.1 Private Preparation (Judg. 6:33-40)

Under the first section – Private Preparation – we draw out two lessons. The first lesson is on fellowship (vv. 33-35), and the second is on responsibility (vv. 36-40).

A lesson on fellowship

Verses 33-35 say,

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 gathered behind him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, who also gathered behind him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.

The Midianites and Amalekites appeared to have heard that Gideon was the new leader of Israel, for they came to the north of the country, near to Gideon. They crossed over the river Jordan and gathered in the Valley of Jezreel, south-west of the Sea of Galilee – at that time known as the Sea of Chinnereth. Gideon was called by God to lead the children of Israel, and not to fight alone. The Spirit of the LORD came upon him. He blew the trumpet to summon the people of his clan, the Abiezrites, who gathered around him. He then sent messengers to the other clans of his tribe, Manasseh, who gathered around him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. They also came to meet him. These were all tribes in the north, around the Valley of Jezreel. One notable tribe in the north seemed to be missing, viz. the tribe of Issachar. A careful study will reveal that the

2.1. Private Preparation (Judg. 6:33-40)

Valley of Jezreel was in the territory of Issachar. It would seem that the enemies came straight to the tribe of Issachar and subdued the people. For that reason, they were not summoned by Gideon – their territory was already occupied by the enemies! The enemies came on their war camels – as can be seen in Chapter 7:12 – and probably on war horses as well. They functioned better on the plain than in the mountains. They had carefully chosen the Valley of Jezreel as their battle ground.

We might wonder why Gideon did not summon the other tribes in the south to help fight the war. The reasons are not revealed to us. It might be because the battle ground was in the north of the country. It might be that God had given Gideon instructions to summon only the northern tribes, in anticipation of trimming down the army to just 300 men. After all, “the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon (v. 34)” indicating that God was guiding him. The fact that only the tribes in the immediate vicinity were summoned to help in the battle provides us with the first important lesson – namely that selective fellowship is necessary in gospel work. In practice, it is impossible to know every church, and every Christian, equally well. Studies have shown that a person will know an average of 200 people well, beyond which the relationship becomes tenuous. The Lord practised selective fellowship when He was on earth. Of the multitudes who followed Him, He chose only seventy men to be sent out two by two, to preach the gospel. He chose only twelve men to be apostles. Of the twelve apostles, He chose three – namely Peter, James, and John – to be with Him on certain occasions. Of the three, only John was known as “the disciple whom Jesus loved”. What criteria should govern selective fellowship?

Based on the teaching of Ephesians 4:1-6, two criteria are important – the right spirit and the right doctrine. The right spirit is taught in the first three verses – “...with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The right doctrine is taught in next three verses – “...one body and one Spirit, ...called in one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” Geographical proximity is another consideration, although it takes on less significance in today’s digitally connected world and more affordable transportation.

The second criteria should have the priority since it is objective, while the first is subjective, in nature. Truth determines practice.

2. THE PREPARATION FOR WAR (JUDG. 6:33-7:14)

Similarity in doctrine and practice is most conveniently shown by churches holding to the same Confession of Faith. There are occasions when even this is not sufficient without the same spirit of humility, mutual respect, and love for one another. Human and ecclesiastical relationships are plagued with sin and its effects! These were seen even in the time of Gideon. Having said these things, the necessity of selective fellowship in gospel work cannot be denied.

A lesson on responsibility

A second lesson is on responsibility. In verses 36-40, Gideon sought twice for a sign from God. In the first time, Gideon asked for the fleece of wool to be wet while the ground around it to remain dry. God granted him the sign so that he squeezed out a bowl of water from the fleece on the next morning. Gideon pleaded with God again, humbly saying, “Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more...(v. 39).” This time, he asked for the fleece to remain dry while the ground be wet with dew. Again, this sign was granted to him. Why did Gideon seek the signs from God? Didn’t God promise him already victory over the enemies? In Judges 6:14 the LORD had said to him, “Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?” Was Gideon doubting God’s faithfulness and His ability to fulfil the promise? Our answer would have to be in the negative. The problem was not with God but with Gideon. Gideon knew that he was himself only a man. Placed under his care were these people who specially belonged to God. Like King Solomon in latter days, Gideon was feeling the awesomeness of the responsibility placed upon him. Solomon had said, in 1 Kings 3:7-9, “...I *am* a little child; I do not know *how* to go out or come in. And Your servant *is* in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?”

Why did Gideon fear that he might fail God? Firstly, he had only half the nation behind him, since the southern tribes had not been summoned to help in the battle. He could not be certain of victory with such a small army against the mighty armies of the enemies. Secondly, although not fighting alone, he had the lives of the people under his responsibility. In asking for the signs, Gideon had said, in verse 36, “If You will save Israel *by my hand* as You have said...

(emphasis added.)” Weighing heavy on Gideon was the fact that God was going to save Israel *by Gideon’s hand*. Of course, Gideon should have had faith in God but, at the same time, can we not see the sense of responsibility in Gideon? The lives of the people had been placed in his hand! Thirdly, as a servant of God, Gideon wanted God’s blessing in every undertaking. We must see here not so much the signs but the prayer of Gideon. Gideon was being persistent in prayer just as Abraham had been persistent in praying for Sodom to be spared for the sake of his nephew, Lot. In Genesis 18, Abraham appeared to be bargaining with the LORD when, in fact, he was praying persistently. Abraham was requesting that the city of Sodom be spared from destruction if there were fifty righteous people, then forty-five, then forty, then thirty, then twenty, then ten. As it turned out, there were not even ten people who were righteous in the city so that the LORD destroyed it. Only Lot and his two daughters were saved.

Here, we capture a glimpse of the inner life of Gideon. When he was first called by God, he had a burden and a diffidence toward his calling. The unnamed prophet had spoken, whose words found a lodging place in the heart of Gideon. When he had summoned the people for battle, he craved the blessing of God upon the battle that was about to be fought. The sense of responsibility for the lives placed under his care weighed heavy upon him. He was not lackadaisical towards the responsibility entrusted to him. Here was discipleship shown in its naked essence! The Lord Jesus Christ was to say, in latter days in Luke 9:23, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” Discipleship is private and personal, before it is manifested in service. Related to this is the fact that Gideon had to be a cut above the men he was leading. Clear leadership was needed in such a venture, and he did not want it to be a case of “the blind leading the blind” (Matt. 15:14). Accompanying these truths was the fact that Gideon was seeking assurance of God’s blessing upon the venture. Just as Solomon sought for wisdom from God at the beginning of his reign (1 Kings 3), Gideon was seeking for wisdom from God at the beginning of the battle. How was he going to defeat such a huge army before him? Wisdom was needed. Wisdom is not a commodity to be bought but a gift to be sought. James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.”

The lessons on the necessity of selective fellowship and of a sense

2. THE PREPARATION FOR WAR (JUDG. 6:33-7:14)

of responsibility in God's service completed the private preparation of Gideon for war.

2.2 Public Preparation (Judg. 7:1-8)

We move on to the public preparation of the nation for war. We draw out two lessons – to have faith rather than trusting in numbers, and to have character rather than valour. The first lesson is drawn from Judges 7:1-3, and the second from Judges 7:4-8.

Faith over numbers

Gideon brought his army of 32,000 men to the battlefield. The enemies were encamped north of the battleground while the Israelites were towards the south. Here, a severe trimming down of the army of Israel took place. In Judges 7:2, we are told,

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.’ ”

This must have shocked Gideon, in view of the number of the enemy forces before them. We are told, in Judges 7:12, “Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels *were* without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude.” However, the reason given by the LORD was clear. God had promised victory to His people, but He did not want the children of Israel to claim any credit for themselves. Gideon was told to proclaim to his army, ‘Whoever is fearful and afraid, let him turn and depart at once from Mount Gilead.’ A total of 22,000 men left, leaving less than a third of the original number. As we shall see, the men were not summarily dismissed but told to be on standby.

The tendency in many churches today is to measure the blessing of God by the number of people in the congregation. A big church is regarded as enjoying the blessing of God while a small church is pitied as lacking God's blessing. There is a failure to understand what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:6, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.” This is not a promise that there will be big numbers, but rather that it is God who sovereignly determines

the number. Related to this is the idea that a big labour force and big financial resources will result in more work done for God. It is forgotten that spiritual work is accomplished “ ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord of hosts (Zech. 4:6).” The danger of relying on the arm of flesh is very real. When David was at the peak of his glory, he commanded for the army to be numbered after the listing of all his mighty men. The matter was not pleasing to God for David was becoming proud and trusting in military might rather than in God. The LORD sent a plague to strike down 70,000 men in the army (2 Sam. 24:15). When Sennacherib of Assyria attempted to attack Judah, Hezekiah reminded the children of Israel, “With him is an arm of flesh; but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles (2 Chron. 32:8).”

We must learn from God’s dealings with Gideon never to trust in numbers, nor in the arm of flesh, and never to steal any of God’s glory. Our God must be trusted and given all the glory.

Character over valour

The next lesson Gideon and his men had to learn was the priority of character over valour. God’s way is not our way. In 1 Samuel 16:7, we are told, “...*the Lord* does not *see* as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” The ten thousand men remaining was still too big a number for God. These were brave men, for the timid ones had left. A test was given by which the right men would be chosen by God. Gideon was told to bring the men to the brook to drink. Those men who knelt down on their knees and put their heads to the water to drink were rejected. Only those who scooped the water with their hands to lap the water were retained. The number retained was a mere three hundred men! No reason is given to us as to why the manner of drinking the water was used as the criterion of choosing the men. There is a rightful place for inference from the context, to determine what is “necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture” – as stated in the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith (1689:1:6).

These men were being chosen for war. Only an elite few would be chosen. Obviously, the small number chosen could not rely on physical strength alone to win over the enemies. There must be brains and not just brawn. From the spiritual point of view, there must be character and not just valour. Those men who scooped the water with their hands to lap like a dog were more watchful than

2. THE PREPARATION FOR WAR (JUDG. 6:33-7:14)

those who knelt down to drink the water with their faces down. We read in verse 7, “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.” ’ Those not chosen were dismissed but not discharged. Like the others who had gone home earlier, they were to be on standby, to be called for duty at a moments notice.

The Scripture constantly emphasises the importance of character over strength. We are told in Luke 16:10, “He who *is* faithful in *what is* least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in *what is* least is unjust also in much.” In 1 Corinthians 3:12-13, we are told, “Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with* gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.” Being faithful and being conscientious are qualities of character. In Daniel 1:8, we are told this about Daniel and his friends, “But Daniel purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of the king’s delicacies, nor with the wine which he drank; therefore he requested of the chief of the eunuchs that he might not defile himself.” Daniel and his friends had character. They had been taught well and they held to principles. They refused to compromise over their faith. In 1 Corinthians 13:13, we are told, “And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” These are Christian graces, or gifts of God. They concern our character rather than our abilities. While the ability to do things well is an asset, more important is to have Christian character. A person who has faith in God, who is reliable, and who upholds the truth is much more precious than one who is smart, capable, and self-confident.

We must have faith in God rather than trust in numbers. We must value character above valour. You might be willing to serve the Lord but are you worthy to serve Him? Do you have the necessary Christian character? As a church, do we wait for a sufficiently big membership before we engage in missions? If yours is a big church, are you taking pride in your apparent success when more work can be done for God? Why are smaller churches being used by God more than your big church?

2.3 Providential Preparation (Judg. 7:9-14)

In this final section, on the providential preparation for war, we see God showing His grace to Gideon in verses 9-12, and then to Israel in verses 13-14.

God's grace to Gideon

In verses 9-11, we are told,

It happened on the same night that the Lord said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand. But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant, and you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp." Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outpost of the armed men who *were* in the camp.

It seems odd that God should send Gideon with his servant into the camp of the enemies to boost up his courage. In verse 12, we are told, "Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude." Gideon was being sent into the midst of the people he was afraid of! It did not make sense to human logic but God assured Gideon that he would hear what the people say which would strengthen him. God's way is not our way! God's word must be trusted. Gideon did what was commanded by God and he gained more than he expected. He was given the idea on how the battle was to be fought. He gained also the idea of what battle cry he should use. These we shall see in a moment. We need to pause here to note that Gideon's obedience to God gained him more than he expected. The goodness of God and the abundance of His mercy must be noted. This is expressed in Ephesians 3:20, "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

God's promise of victory was sufficient for Gideon. On the basis of that promise, Gideon could have gone forth to face the enemies. But no, God had to strengthen Gideon first. If Gideon was fearful, his army would be fearful, too. He wouldn't have been able to hide

2. THE PREPARATION FOR WAR (JUDG. 6:33-7:14)

his fear for long. It would show in his demeanour, his words, and his actions. Feelings can be infectious! Furthermore, God had not revealed the strategy of battle to Gideon. With so small an army under his command, he couldn't be expected to depend on sheer number to fight the battle. He just didn't have the number! Gideon, however, obeyed God. By taking the first step of obedience, he was going to be shown the next step to take, and the next step after that. In our walk with God, divine guidance come to us by obeying His word. Instead of waiting for the whole plan to be laid out, we are often led a step at a time. Abraham's pilgrimage of faith is an example. God promised to give him a land and many descendants. The details were not given to him. He obeyed God to separate himself from his people, and God unfolded His plan to him a step at a time.

Faith is strengthened by facing the task at hand, not by fleeing from it nor by weighing up the possible outcomes. This is not to say we do not make plans, or we do not have an objective in all that we do. We are only saying that it is important to trust and obey God when His will for us is clear. In the case of the twelve spies sent out by Moses, in Numbers 14, ten of them gave a negative report of the land of Canaan. They frightened the people about the giants in the land and their fortified cities. They claimed that they were like grasshoppers in the sight of the people of Canaan. They projected their fear to imagine the thoughts of the people of Canaan! Only Joshua and Caleb advocated going in to take the land. If God had commanded them to take the land, He would give them the victory. But the people were swayed by the majority, instead of listening to Joshua and Caleb. We know the consequence of that episode. The children of Israel ended up wandering in the wilderness for a total of forty years! Back to Gideon, he did what was right. Although it seemed contradictory to human logic, he went into the midst of the enemies because God had commanded him. He knew that he would be safest where God wanted him to be. For ourselves, we must remember the words of the Lord in Matthew 28:20, "...and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age." Carrying out the Great Commission faithfully can be a lonesome affair. Few are those who would persevere in this work. But we are safest where the Lord is.

God's grace to Israel

We consider the next point, namely God's grace to Israel. Gideon and his servant went into the midst of the enemies. Gideon overheard

the conversation between two men in the enemy camp. One man was saying that he had a dream in which a barley loaf was seen hurtling toward their camp. The barley loaf struck one of their tents, causing it to collapse. The other man answered in the words of verse 14, “This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp.” From the conversation between these two men, Gideon came to the awareness that the enemies were in the grip of terror. If the enemies were in the grip of terror, half the battle was already won! Over and above that, Gideon was given the idea how the battle was to be fought. Gideon had only 300 men with him. God had not revealed how he was to fight the battle. The small army of Gideon could be easily swallowed up by the enemies. The war could not be fought in a conventional way. It took a man like Gideon to realise that God was revealing to him the battle strategy! He had to adopt psychological warfare! He must “play taiji”.

Let me explain. The Chinese martial arts may be divided into two broad categories – the external schools and the internal schools. The external schools rely on techniques, speed, and power to overcome the opponents. The internal schools cultivate inner awareness, an understanding of body structure, and the principles of neutralising force. One principle is expressed as “*si liang po qian jin*” which, translated literally, is “four *liang* shattering a thousand *jin*”. One *liang* is equivalent to 50 grams so that four *liang* would be 200 grams. One *jin* is 0.5 kilograms so that 1000 *jin* would be 500 kilograms. The principle is saying that we may use 200 grams of force to counter the force of 500 kilograms. In practice, the powerful attack of an opponent is neutralised by deflection, only to be turned back on the opponent himself. Gideon was to take advantage of the sense of terror in the enemies and turn it upon themselves. We shall see how that worked out in the next study.

Apart from the strategy for battle, Gideon picked up the idea of the battle cry he should adopt. The man who responded to the dream told to him by his companion had said, “This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon...” Gideon was to adopt that and adapt it into “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon” (v. 20). Gideon would place the name of God first followed by his own name. God had called him to lead the people. His own name must be used. There is no place for false humility in a crucial time like that he was in. However, God’s name must be placed first for it was God that he trusted and

2. THE PREPARATION FOR WAR (JUDG. 6:33-7:14)

it was God's battle that he was fighting. We are reminded of how William Carey called upon others to engage in the work of missions by giving the title of his talk as "Expect Great Things From God; Attempt Great Things For God". "Expect Great Things, Attempt Great Things" became Carey's motto. The order of the two parts must be noted. It was "Expect Great Things" before "Attempt Great Things" because God must be trusted before humans attempt anything. Similarly, Gideon adopted the battle cry, "The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!" – which reflected his correct theology and good sense.

God's grace was shown to Gideon and to the children of Israel. The providential preparation of the nation for battle was complete.

2.4 Conclusion

We have considered the private preparation of Gideon, followed by the public preparation of the nation, for war. Finally, there was the providential preparation in which the circumstances of the time were used by God to minister to Gideon and the nation. Apart from the lessons we have learned along the way, we close with three applications.

Firstly, we do not seek God's guidance by "putting out a fleece", as Gideon did. Gideon lived at the time when the Scripture was not yet completed. He was engaging in prayer more than seeking God's will, for God had already promised him victory. Today, we have the completed Scripture. It is our only authority in all matters of faith and practice. We seek guidance from God by applying Scripture prayerfully to our situation. We may seek the counsel of mature Christians, we must consider God's providential dealings with us, and we must take the first step of obedience to be led into the next step. Scripture is sufficient to guide us into God's will. The Holy Spirit who inspired the writing of God's word will use the written word to guide God's children.

Secondly, we need to be conscious that carrying out the Great Commission is engaging in spiritual warfare. We no longer fight with literal weapons but with "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:17)". We are fighting God's battle, not ours. We must use the means He has provided for us, namely, the preaching of God's word and prayer. We serve God in, and through, the local church. The local church has fellowship with like-minded churches. In these

ways, God's work is carried out and God's kingdom is extended. God will give us the victory.

Thirdly, we need to be convinced that character is more important than physical strength, that faith in God is more important than human resources. Many Christians look to big churches, big numbers, and big money to accomplish God's work when God intends to use the few who are committed to Him. You must look for, and join, a church where the word of God is faithfully taught, and the people love God – as shown by their love for His word and His people. Seek to be the Christian you ought to be before seeking to do great things for God. When you make Christian character your priority instead of seeking great abilities and great opportunities, the latter will be added to you. Matthew 6:33 says, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

* * * * *

Judges 7:15-8:21

15 And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, "Arise, for the LORD has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand." 16 Then he divided the three hundred men *into* three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers. 17 And he said to them, "Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do: 18 When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, '*The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!*' "

19 So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that *were* in their hands. 20 Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers—they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing—and they cried, "The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!" 21 And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled. 22 When the three hundred blew the trumpets, the LORD set every man's sword against his companion throughout the whole camp; and the army fled to Beth Acacia, toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah, by Tabbath.

23 And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites.

24 Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the mountains of Ephraim, saying, "Come down against the

Midianites, and seize from them the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan.” Then all the men of Ephraim gathered together and seized the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan. 25 And they captured two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side of the Jordan.

8 Now the men of Ephraim said to him, “Why have you done this to us by not calling us when you went to fight with the Midianites?” And they reprimanded him sharply.

2 So he said to them, “What have I done now in comparison with you? *Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?* 3 God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. And what was I able to do in comparison with you?” Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that.

4 When Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who *were* with him crossed over, exhausted but still in pursuit. 5 Then he said to the men of Succoth, “Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian.”

6 And the leaders of Succoth said, “*Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?*”

7 So Gideon said, “For this cause, when the LORD has delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers!” 8 Then he went up from

there to Penuel and spoke to them in the same way. And the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered. 9 So he also spoke to the men of Penuel, saying, "When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!"

10 Now Zebah and Zalmunna *were* at Karkor, and their armies with them, about fifteen thousand, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East; for one hundred and twenty thousand men who drew the sword had fallen. 11 Then Gideon went up by the road of those who dwell in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah; and he attacked the army while the camp felt secure. 12 When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them; and he took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army.

13 Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle, from the Ascent of Heres. 14 And he caught a young man of the men of Succoth and interrogated him; and he wrote down for him the leaders of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men. 15 Then he came to the men of Succoth and said, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you ridiculed me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your weary men?' " 16 And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth. 17 Then he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

18 And he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "What kind of men *were they* whom you killed at Tabor?" So they answered, "As you *are*, so *were* they; each one resembled the son of a king."

19 Then he said, "They *were* my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if you had let

them live, I would not kill you.” 20 And he said to Jether his firstborn, “Rise, kill them!” But the youth would not draw his sword; for he was afraid, because he was still a youth.

21 So Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Rise yourself, and kill us; for as a man is, so is his strength.” So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments that were on their camels’ necks.

Three

THE STRATEGY OF WAR (Judg. 7:15-8:21)

We have considered God's call to Gideon to lead the children of Israel at a time when the nomadic tribes of the east had been harassing the children of Israel for seven years. Gideon was burdened for Israel at the same time that he was diffident in responding to the call. God assigned him the task of destroying his father's altar and image of the pagan god, Baal. Gideon faithfully carried out God's command, which led to his acceptance by all as judge, or leader.

We then considered the preparation for war. The Midianites, joined by the Amalekites, had gathered in the Valley of Jezreel, in Israelite territory, for war. God made private preparation for Gideon by giving him the signs of "putting out the fleece". God next made public preparation of the army by trimming it down to just 300 men. God then made providential preparation for the nation by sending Gideon and his servant into the enemy camp where he overheard a conversation between two men which turned out to be instrumental for the war. One man was telling the other of his dream, in which a barley loaf came tumbling into the camp and knocked down a tent. The other man interpreted it as Gideon's army attacking and destroying them.

Continuing from there, we wish to consider the strategy adopted for the war against the Midianites and Amalekites. Our Scripture passage may be divided into three parts: (i) an inspired strategy (7:15-25); (ii) two disheartening reactions (8:1-17); and (iii) a deci-

3. THE STRATEGY OF WAR (JUDG. 7:15-8:21)

sive victory (8:18-21). Since wars in the Old Testament foreshadow the spiritual warfare we are engaged in as we carry out the Great Commission, we shall draw out lessons on how we are to serve God today.

3.1 An Inspired Strategy (7:15-25)

Psychological warfare

Gideon, upon hearing the conversation of the two men, worshipped God. This speaks well of the character of Gideon. God had sent him into the midst of the enemies for the purpose of strengthening him, as stated in Judges 7:11, "...you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp." Gideon was now strengthened because he knew the enemies were terrified of him and the army of Israel. This was the first effect upon Gideon. The enemies were not aware that Gideon had only 300 men with him. But knowing that the enemies were terrified was half the battle won! Gideon was thankful to God for strengthening him, so he worshipped. However, there was more to it than this. Gideon had been shown now how God was going to give him the victory, with so small an army on his side. From knowing that the enemies were in terror, Gideon realised that God was showing him how to proceed in the battle. In that instant, the strategy of battle became clear to him! It was going to be a psychological warfare. This was the second effect upon Gideon. Thirdly, the conversation of the three men provided Gideon with his battle cry. One of the men had said, "This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon..." The sword of Gideon! That was it! Gideon would use this as his battle cry, but with a slight modification. In a flash, Gideon saw all these and was overwhelmed with gratitude to God. He could not help but worshipped.

Gideon divided his army into three troops. He would lead one of the troops. The other two were to go along the flanks of the enemies. There was no time to waste in explaining to everyone in the army. Indeed, the strategy was best kept confidential at this point. Gideon commanded the army to imitate what he did – to sheave up their sword, leaving the two hands free; to take a torch and hide it in a pot, probably dangling on a string and held on the left hand, and to hold a trumpet on the right hand. Clear instructions were now

3.1. An Inspired Strategy (7:15-25)

given that when he blew the trumpet, everyone was to follow suit, and when he broke the pitcher, the others were to follow, so that the enemies would hear the sound and suddenly see the light of the torches. They were then to shout, “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!” These instructions were carefully followed, as can be seen in Judges 7:20. Gideon was too sound in his theology to want to leave out the name of the LORD, or to put the name of the LORD second. No, the name of the LORD must be first, followed by his own name. Gideon was a leader and understood that he had to lead. He therefore included his own name after that of the LORD, instead of leaving it out because of false humility. This was not the time to be squeamish about such matters.

The light and the sound appearing suddenly in the night on three sides of the enemies sent them into panic. Remember that they were already on edge, in terror, when this happened. The enemies ran helter-skelter, got into one another’s way, feared for their own lives, and struck out at anyone they bumped into. Everyone was for himself. This was the first time that God caused the enemies of Israel to destroy one another. It was not going to be the only time. In 1 Samuel 14:20, we read of the Philistines killing one another when Saul led the Israelites against them. In 2 Chronicles 20:23, the Ammonites, the Moabites, and the Edomites killed one another when Jehoshaphat led the Israelites against them. God had also destroyed Israel’s enemies in other ways. In 2 Kings 7:6-7, God caused the Syrians to flee upon hearing the noise of chariots and horses. In 2 Kings 19:35, we learn of the angel of the LORD striking to death 185,000 Assyrians in one night in the days of Hezekiah. In the days of Abraham and Lot, Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by “brimstone and fire” from heaven (Gen. 19:24). In the days of Moses, God killed the Egyptians with hail (Exod. 9:25) and destroyed the household of Korah and those aligned with him by an earthquake (Num. 16:31-34). The point we are making is that God intervened miraculously on behalf of Gideon and the children of Israel in the battle.

Physical reinforcement

The enemies fled south, knowing that they had to cross the ford on the river Jordan at the border between Manasseh and Ephraim. It seemed that they had crossed over from the east at that point, so that they now made for escape at the same point. We are told in Judges 7:23, “And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher,

3. THE STRATEGY OF WAR (JUDG. 7:15-8:21)

and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites.” The men had been sent home earlier because God commanded for the army of Israel to be reduced to only 300 men. Those who were sent home appeared to be on standby, for they quickly gathered to help their brethren.

Gideon then sent messengers throughout the mountains of Ephraim appealing for them to cut off the escape route of the Midianites. The Ephraimites readily acceded and managed to capture two princes of the Midianites. They killed the two and brought the heads to Gideon on the other side of the Jordan. This gesture was an acknowledgement of their recognition of Gideon’s leadership.

We see here the combination of divine intervention and human effort to achieve success in service to God. Gideon had been guided divinely into adopting the battle strategy. God had intervened miraculously in the battle, causing the enemies to kill one another. The northern tribes had quickly gathered to reinforce their brethren as the enemies fled. The Ephraimites were summoned to help in the pursuit of the enemies. The children of Israel had each done their part to contribute to the victory.

Divine sovereignty and human responsibility are not contrary truths but complementary truths. To be more precise, we would say that divine sovereignty encompasses human responsibility, and human responsibility is subsumed under divine sovereignty. God is in control of the events and circumstances of life. He has revealed His will for us in the Bible. We must trust Him and obey His word. In short, “Trust and obey” summarises how we are to serve God.

Another lesson we must learn is the necessity of fellowship between churches to accomplish gospel work. The Great Commission cannot be accomplished by any one church alone. We can each do only that much, and no more. Our abilities, resources, opportunities, and time are limited. Each church should serve God faithfully in the corner of the vineyard He has assigned to us. It is not wise to stretch ourselves too thin, and “have a finger in every pie”. We are aware that many churches have the opposite problem of not doing enough, when the needs are so great, and the opportunities are so many. They do not stretch themselves far enough. They are content with the little they are doing – very much like individual Christians who keep up the minimum to appear as respectable Christians. Such churches, and such Christians, need to awaken to the command of Scripture – to “walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil (Eph. 5:15-16).” Here, we

3.2. Two Disheartening Reactions (8:1-17)

are considering churches and individuals who are unrealistic in the assessment of their own abilities. In matters that are beyond our ability to do, we must enlist others to help out. We have learned that the degree of fellowship between churches is dependent on the spirit and the truth that are held in common (Eph. 4:1-6). Like-minded churches should work together in missions, involving others as the need arises.

The strategy for the battle had been inspired by God, through the conversation of the two enemy-soldiers. It was to include the use of psychological warfare, and the use of physical reinforcement from all the available tribes of Israel.

3.2 Two Disheartening Reactions (8:1-17)

From Ephraim

Two disheartening incidents happened in the campaign against the Midianites. The first came from the Ephraimites who felt slighted for not being invited to fight the Midianites from the beginning. We might ask why Gideon did not involve the Ephraimites in the first place. A few reasons may be suggested. Firstly, the battle ground was in the north of Israel, in the Valley of Jezreel. Gideon might have thought that the northern tribes should solve their own problem before involving the southern tribes. Secondly, Gideon was from the tribe of Manasseh, which was related closely to the tribe of Ephraim. The two tribes descended from the two sons of Joseph, namely Manasseh and Ephraim. We may argue that there was all the more reason for involving Ephraim. On the other hand, there could have been tension existing between these two tribes since Ephraim, the younger brother, was given the pre-eminence in the covenant blessing of Jacob (cf. Gen. 48:17-19). In time, Ephraim became stronger than Manasseh such that when the nation of Israel split into two after the death of King Solomon, the northern nation was named Ephraim. The “big-brother” attitude of Ephraim could have deterred Gideon from involving them in the battle. Thirdly, God could have intimated to Gideon of His intention to trim down the army so that there was not much point in involving more tribes in the battle.

The tribe of Ephraim used some strong words to express their displeasure. We are told in Judges 8:1, ‘Now the men of Ephraim said to him, “Why have you done this to us by not calling us when you went

3. THE STRATEGY OF WAR (JUDG. 7:15-8:21)

to fight with the Midianites?” And they reprimanded him sharply.’ How would Gideon respond? Such a situation could have easily escalated into something ugly. Gideon, however, chose to defer to the Ephraimites and spoke well of them. In Judges 8:3, Gideon said, “God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. And what was I able to do in comparison with you?” A potential flash point was averted. We might inquire deeper and ask why Gideon adopted this soft approach toward the Ephraimites compared to his harsh response to the people of Succoth and Peniel later. We have noted Gideon’s wisdom and trust in God on earlier occasions. Here, a number of factors would have been taken into consideration. Firstly, the Ephraimites did respond when summoned to help out. They had been quick to respond. Secondly, the Ephraimites were keen to join in the war against the Midianites. It wasn’t a case of reluctance to help out but a keenness to be involved. Thirdly, there was still the mopping up needed in the war. If the Midianites were allowed to escape, they could regroup and launch another attack later. The opportunity of striking a telling blow could not be allowed to slip by. Why quarrel among brethren when there was a more important task to accomplish?

Gideon’s conciliatory response to the Ephraimites was exemplary. It demonstrated the truth of Proverbs 15:1, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” We do well to learn from Gideon how we are to handle potentially explosive situations in our relationship with others, and especially between fellow believers.

From Gad

As Gideon and his forces pursued the Midianites, they had to cross the river Jordan to the east, and then cross the Jabbok to the south. This was the territory of Gad – one of the two and a half tribes who settled on the eastern part of the Jordan in the days of Moses. The tribes that settled there were Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh. Hot in pursuit of the two Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, Gideon and his exhausted men came to the city of Succoth to seek food. The people of Succoth treated them contemptuously, saying (Judg. 8:6), “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?” This was bad. They were fellow Israelites, badly treating their brethren in need. Gideon responded accordingly, in the words of Judges 8:7, “For this cause, when the Lord has delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand,

3.2. Two Disheartening Reactions (8:1-17)

then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers!” The next city they came to, namely Penuel, responded to Gideon and his men in the same way as those in Succoth. Had they been talking about Gideon’s exploits among themselves, and built up a negative perception of him? If gossip and slander have caused much harm to the reputation and ministries of many preachers today, it could have happened to Gideon in his days. Penuel prided itself for having a strong tower in the city, which they thought was their refuge if attacked by the enemies. Gideon responded to the people of Penuel by saying (Judg. 8:9), “When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!”

We pause to ponder on the bad behaviour of the Gadites. They were not one in heart with their fellow Israelites. They refused to provide food to brethren who were exhausted and hungry, and while on a crucial mission of pursuing the enemies. They were sarcastic toward Gideon and his men. Apathy towards Gideon’s cause was bad. Rejection of brethren in need was worse. To assault with unkind words those who had not harm them was worst. The situation can be compared to those who react to the gospel. Being indifferent to the gospel is bad. To despise the gospel and those who bring it is worse. To attack the Christians for their faith is worst.

Gideon and his men managed to capture the two Midianite kings. Instead of killing them immediately, Gideon proceeded with matters that demanded his attention. After all, the two enemies were now captured and could do no harm. The first business was to mete out punishment on the people of Succoth and Penuel. Gideon caught a man of Succoth and made him write down the names of the leaders of the city, There were seventy-seven men. Upon arrival at Succoth, he paraded the two Midianite kings before them, took the seventy-seven leaders, and dragged them – probably with horses – through thorns and briers laid down on the ground. In that way, they were tortured. Next, Gideon came to Penuel, paraded the two Midianite kings before the city, and pulled down the tower. He then killed the men of the city – most likely only the leaders, just as he had tortured only the leaders in Succoth. The two cities deserved the punishment meted out to them. Their bad behaviour and the punishment meted out to them are recorded in Scripture to their shame, and for our learning. We are our brothers’ keepers. We should share in the burden of kingdom work, as we serve the same Lord. While we have no right to mete out the death penalty in the church, biblical discipline

3. THE STRATEGY OF WAR (JUDG. 7:15-8:21)

should be exercised toward those who sin.

In the midst of serving the Lord, there are bound to be such incidents. Not everyone in church will share the same vision, and the same burden. We should not be discouraged by such brethren but seek to win them over with correct teaching. Those who are recalcitrant will have to be ignored as we press on doing God's work. However, if they overstep their bounds and hinder the work of God, or sin in other ways, church discipline will have to be meted out.

Gideon handled the two disheartening reactions to the war well. He deferred to the Ephraimites who were keen to be involved. He punished the Gadites who were contemptuous toward brethren in need.

3.3 A Decisive Victory (8:18-21)

Two Midianite kings captured

In Judges 7:12, we are told this of the enemies, "Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude." In Judges 8:10, we are told, "Now Zebah and Zalmunna were at Karkor, and their armies with them, about fifteen thousand, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East; for one hundred and twenty thousand men who drew the sword had fallen." The Amalekites had been killed while others had escaped. The Midianites had 15,000 men left while 120,000 had died. Although left with 15,000 men, this was still quite a formidable number. The original army that rallied around Gideon was 32,000 men before it was trimmed down to 300 men. The 32,000 men, combined with the men from Ephraim, would have been more than adequate to fight the remaining 15,000 Midianites. In Judges 8:12, we are told, "When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them; and he took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army." It was a decisive victory!

We have noted that the two Midianite kings were not killed immediately because they were needed as proof of Gideon's victory to the people of Succoth and Penuel. Gideon was thorough in handling the war. One battle after another was handled thoroughly – first, in the Valley of Jezreel, then in the pursuit of the Midianites across the river Jordan, then in the capture of the two kings. The

3.3. A Decisive Victory (8:18-21)

necessity of being thorough while serving God is seen in the incident of Elisha and Joash the king of Israel, in 2 Kings 13:19. Joash was told to shoot an arrow out of the window, which he did. Elisha then declared what he was revealing to Joash, saying in verse 17, “The arrow of the Lord’s deliverance and the arrow of deliverance from Syria; for you must strike the Syrians at Aphek till you have destroyed *them*.” Joash was then asked to strike the ground with his arrows. Joash struck the ground three times, and stopped. Elisha was angry with him, saying, “You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck Syria till you had destroyed *it*! But now you will strike Syria *only* three times.” Joash proved himself unequal to the task of destroying the Syrians. Gideon, however, was thorough in the war with the Midianites. We are told, in Judges 8:28, “And the country was quiet for forty years in the days of Gideon.” In the Old Testament, peace in the nation was a blessing of God (cf. 2 Chron. 14:6).

Today, we do not fight literal battles. Instead, we are engaged in a spiritual warfare, in which we wield “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Eph. 6:17)”. We must carry out the Great Commission with thoroughness. Thoroughness in missions is measured not so much in the number of converts and the number of churches planted, but in the quality of the disciples made and churches planted. Let us be thorough not only quantitatively but also qualitatively.

Two Midianite kings executed

The next incident revealed something personal to Gideon which had been suppressed until this moment. Gideon had carried in his heart this ache which was not appropriate to be made public up to this point, for the people might think that he was acting out of personal vendetta. No, he was a national leader, handling a national crisis. That was uppermost. Personal considerations could be handled later. That time had come. He brought out the two Midianite kings and questioned them concerning the brothers of Gideon they had killed at Tabor. It appeared that these Midianite kings had gathered intelligence concerning Gideon’s family, perhaps with the view of killing Gideon himself. Word had come to Gideon of his brothers’ death which he had kept to himself. He asked the two kings, in the words of Judges 8:18, “What kind of men *were they* whom you killed at Tabor?” The two kings tried to ingratiate themselves with Gideon,

3. THE STRATEGY OF WAR (JUDG. 7:15-8:21)

perhaps hoping that they might be spared death. They answered, “As you *are*, so *were* they; each one resembled the son of a king.” Now, look at Gideon’s response, in verse 19, “They *were* my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the Lord lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you.” They had killed Gideon’s actual brothers! Gideon would have spared the Midianite kings if they hadn’t been so cruel. They deserved death.

Gideon had been in self-control, dealing with Succoth and Penuel before he dealt with personal issues. We see here the truth of what is expressed in Proverbs 14:10, “The heart knows its own bitterness, and a stranger does not share its joy.” Gideon had had many personal experiences with God. The Angel of the LORD had appeared to him when he was first called by God. God had granted him the sign of the fleece. God had guided him to hear the conversation of the two men in the enemy camp which revealed the strategy of battle to him. What other experiences he had enjoyed from God were known only to himself. Truly, no stranger shared in his joy. At the same time, there had been trials which others were not aware of. He was singled out for elimination by the Midianites, only to escape at the expense of the lives of all his brothers. There would be other trials that we do not know of. The hint of some trials in his family was seen in his son’s refusal to execute the Midianite kings. Many a preacher who have been mightily used by God have had hidden trials. The Chinese evangelist, John Sung, who was mightily used by God in China and Southeast Asia in the 1940s carried in his body a painful inflamed fistula. C. H. Spurgeon, the mighty preacher in London in the 1800s, was often cast down with depression. William Carey had to care for a demented wife while in the mission field. Adoniram Judson lost his wife on the mission field, remarried, and lost his wife again. King David was deeply hurt by the defection of his trusted counsellor, Ahithophel, as is clear from Psalm 41:9. Paul spoke of his “thorn in the flesh”. The Lord was betrayed by one of his close disciples. Truly, the heart knows its own bitterness!

Gideon wanted to give his son the honour of executing the two Midianite kings, but the youth was afraid to do so. Gideon ended up executing the two kings himself. He took away the ornaments that were on their camels’ necks, so that none could falsely claim the credit of killing the two kings. Gideon had placed God’s work above self. This was seen in his conciliatory attitude to the Ephraimites, in his firm dealings with the cities of Succoth and Penuel, and in

avenging the deaths of his brothers. There was the precious quality of self-control seen in him. Little wonder God gave him a decisive victory! Self-control is so important in those who would be used by God.

3.4 Conclusion

We have considered how Gideon was given the inspired strategy of battle, how he handled the two disheartening events in the course of the war, and the decisive victory given to him by God. We have drawn out lessons for ourselves along the way. We shall close with some observations.

Firstly, we learn of the sufficiency of Scripture to guide us in the work of missions. We have seen that Gideon putting out the fleece was not so much to teach reliance on signs than the need to be persistent in prayer. Gideon obeyed God's word which came to him in various ways. Today, we have the completed Scripture which is our only authority in all matters of faith and practice. The Holy Spirit who inspired the writing of Scripture continues to speak to God's people through the Scripture. God's work must be done in God's way. God does not send us out on a journey without giving us a roadmap. God does not command us to build His temple without giving us a blueprint. The Scripture must be humbly studied and followed.

Secondly, we learn that in the work of the gospel, not everyone will share the same vision and burden that we have. We must not expect everyone to be supportive of what we do. In the case of Gideon, the northern tribes were supportive of him, followed by Ephraim. We do not read of the southern tribes joining in the war. The Gadites of Succoth and Peniel were not supportive. On the one hand, there are those who should be more concerned for God's work but are not. On the other hand, there are those whose burdens lie elsewhere and should not be expected to share our burden. At bottom line, we should learn to be "sons of encouragement" as Barnabas was, instead of pouring cold water on those who are keen to serve the Lord in some ways. We must avoid the negative attitude of the ten spies in Moses's days and have the attitude of faith that Joshua and Caleb had instead (Num. 13, 14).

Thirdly, we learn that Gideon had the qualities of trusting in God

3. THE STRATEGY OF WAR (JUDG. 7:15-8:21)

while being responsible in his service to Him. Gideon placed the concerns of God's kingdom above personal considerations. He was self-controlled, decisive, and thorough in serving God. He reminds us of Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 31:20-21, who "did what was good and right and true before the LORD his God", and "did it with all his heart". The Lord prospered him. Let us pray for, and cultivate, these qualities in ourselves. And may the Lord prosper us, to His glory!

* * * * *

Gideon 8:22-35

22 Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian."

23 But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you." 24 Then Gideon said to them, "I would like to make a request of you, that each of you would give me the earrings from his plunder." For they had golden earrings, because they *were* Ishmaelites.

25 So they answered, "We will gladly give *them*." And they spread out a garment, and each man threw into it the earrings from his plunder. 26 Now the weight of the gold earrings that he requested was one thousand seven hundred *shekels* of gold, besides the crescent ornaments, pendants, and purple robes which *were* on the kings of Midian, and besides the chains that *were* around their camels' necks. 27 Then Gideon made it into an ephod and set it up in his city, Ophrah. And all Israel played the harlot with it there. It became a snare to Gideon and to his house.

28 Thus Midian was subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted their heads no more. And the country was quiet for forty years in the days of Gideon.

29 Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house. 30 Gideon had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives. 31 And his concubine who *was* in Shechem also bore him a son, whose name he called Abimelech. 32 Now Gideon the son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of Joash his

father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

33 So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. 34 Thus the children of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; 35 nor did they show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

Four

THE AFTERMATH OF WAR (Judg. 8:22-35)

War is never pleasant. Some wars are necessary such as when a country is attacked, it has to fight off the enemies. A civil war within a country might have to be fought when fundamental liberties are threatened. We do not wish to be diverted into debating the validity of wars but note that the wars of the Old Testament are recorded for our learning. Christians do not propagate the faith by literal wars but by wielding “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”. This we have pointed out time and again. The Great Commission is an abiding command given by the Lord to the church. Until He returns to judge the world, the church must engage in preaching the gospel to win souls to Christ, in gathering the converts into local churches, and in strengthening the churches by teaching the members the word of God. The spiritual warfare we are engaged in extends into the Christian life, for personal sanctification is of the essence of the building up of the church. This is made clear in passages such as Ephesians 6:10-13, which remind us that we are engaged in a spiritual warfare. The wars of the Old Testament have much to teach us about personal sanctification and missions.

We have considered God’s call to Gideon, the preparation for war against the invaders, and the strategy of war. Lessons have been drawn out on personal sanctification and missions. There are more lessons that can be learned from the life of Gideon with regard to carrying out the Great Commission and personal sanctification. In

4. THE AFTERMATH OF WAR (JUDG. 8:22-35)

this study, we shall make an overview of the life of Gideon. We shall consider, first, how Gideon set good examples followed by how Gideon set bad examples.

4.1 Gideon Set Good Examples

Towards God: reverence and humility

After the victory over the foreign invaders, the men of Israel came to request for Gideon to rule over them. Gideon had been acknowledged as a leader up to this point. Otherwise, the people would not have rallied around him to fight off the enemies. The people were obviously grateful to Gideon for leading them to victory. They must have been impressed with his character, shown in the way he conducted himself. Gideon had passed the tests of action and character, as it were. What about the test of motive? Would he accept the offer to become king of Israel? Indeed, the offer was not made to him only but to his son and grandson as well. In other words, the people were willing to have Gideon begin a new dynasty of rule in the nation of Israel. Gideon, however, turned that request down, saying in Judges 8:23, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you.”

The response of Gideon spoke well of Gideon’s character. He proved to be the person we have found him to be. He had shown himself reverential and humble toward God. We have noted his diffidence when called upon to lead Israel. We have seen him “putting out the fleece” to secure the assurance of victory from God. We have seen him using the battle cry, “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!” He placed God’s name first instead of his own. By turning down the offer to be king, Gideon revealed that his motive throughout had been to serve, and to glorify, God. It was not to glorify himself, or for personal gain. However, now that all had been accomplished well, was there no place for reward – to enjoy the fruit of his labours? We would say there was a place for that, and Gideon was not going to make that an issue – as we shall see in a moment. The issue must be looked at from other angles.

Firstly, was it right in God’s sight to become king of His covenantal people? If God had not revealed *that* as His will, Gideon was not going to accept the offer from the men. Secondly, the men were obviously sincere in their offer to Gideon at that time but would they

4.1. Gideon Set Good Examples

change their mind in later days? Would the next generation accept him? Would the future generations accept his son and his grandson? Perhaps Gideon was reminded of how the Egyptians forgot about Joseph, as recorded in Exodus 1:8, “Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” Of course, there was a difference in that the Egyptians were pagans while these were God’s people. However, when we take into consideration the fallen human nature, would there be a difference in behaviour? The closing verses of this chapter are telling. Judges 8:33-35 say,

So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. Thus the children 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 house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

Gideon was a man after God’s own heart. He was a godly man. He was reverential and humble before God. He understood the principle taught in latter days by the Lord Jesus Christ, in Luke 17:10, “So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, ‘We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.’ ”

Towards nation: diligence and perseverance

Gideon set a good example in his relationship with God. Gideon also set a good example in his relationship with the nation. While leading the nation in service to God, he showed forth the qualities of diligence and perseverance. In the battle against the foreign invaders, we read in Judges 8:4, “When Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over, exhausted but still in pursuit.” A lesser man would have given up the pursuit since they were so exhausted. Furthermore, the enemies had fled. “We have won!” Gideon could have said. But no, Gideon persevered in the pursuit of the enemies. We have seen how thorough he was, both quantitatively and qualitatively. He would not settle for anything less than the best he could give. Where did he get the strength from? He was a man of faith. God gave him the strength. We are reminded of Isaiah 40:31, “But those who wait on the Lord shall re-

4. THE AFTERMATH OF WAR (JUDG. 8:22-35)

new *their* strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”

While being thorough in his service to God, Gideon did not show a false piety like Saul in a similar situation in later days. In 1 Samuel 14, we read about the children of Israel fighting against the Philistines. Saul adopted a false piety saying in verse 24, “Cursed *is* the man who eats *any* food until evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies.” In contrast, Saul’s son Jonathan had common sense, saying in verses 29-30, “My father has troubled the land. Look now, how my countenance has brightened because I tasted a little of this honey. How much better if the people had eaten freely today of the spoil of their enemies which they found! For now would there not have been a much greater slaughter among the Philistines?” The false piety of Saul nearly cost Jonathan his life. The people protected Jonathan and prevented Saul from killing him. In the case of Gideon, he sought food from the people of Succoth and Penuel. While these cities were not friendly toward him, other cities could have provided food to him and his men.

Despite the discouraging response of the people of Succoth and Penuel, Gideon continued in his pursuit of the two Medianite kings, Zebah and Zalmuna. We read in Judges 8:11-12,

Then Gideon went up by the road of those who dwell in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah; and he attacked the army while the camp felt secure. When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them; and he took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army.

We cannot help but want to take our hats off to Gideon! He observed the enemy camp, and struck when the enemies felt secure. He thoroughly destroyed the army. This was no case of foolhardiness. It was single-mindedness of the highest intensity. He knew when to work, and when to rest. We are reminded of the example set by our Lord. In John 4:34, the Lord said, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.” In John 9:4, He said, “I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; *the* night is coming when no one can work.” We might get the impression that, with the Lord, it was all about work. However, we find in Mark 6:31 what happened in the midst of intense work, “And He said to them, “Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while.” For there

4.1. Gideon Set Good Examples

were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat.' Zeal for the Lord and common sense are not mutually exclusive. Both are complementary qualities. Let us have true diligence and perseverance in our service to God.

Towards self: discernment and self-control

Gideon also set a good example in having discernment and self-control. He spoke peaceably to Ephraim in a potentially explosive situation, realising that the Ephraimites had a desire to be of service to God. They were upset for having been left out, not for having caused problems. His words to them were conciliatory, acknowledging their achievement despite coming in late. In Judges 8:2-3, he said,

“What have I done now in comparison with you? *Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?* God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. And what was I able to do in comparison with you?”

In contrast, Gideon appeared to have dealt harshly with the people of Succoth and Penuel. In Judges 8:16-17, we are told,

And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth. Then he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

The behaviour of the cities of Succoth and Penuel was unacceptable. They were apathetic toward the plight of the nation, which was under attack by the hostile forces. That was bad. They refused to help their countrymen who were fighting for the nation, and in a situation of need. That was worse. They poured scorn on the army of Israel, expecting Gideon to fail in his mission. That was worst. They had disqualified themselves as covenantal members of God's people. If not dealt with firmly, they could set a bad example and incite others to behave in a similar way. Gideon had the courage to punish them as they deserved. We are reminded of Ananias and Sapphira being struck dead for lying against the Holy Spirit in the infant church, in Acts 5.

Another instance of Gideon's discernment and self-control was in his handling of the two Midianite kings. He preserved them alive

4. THE AFTERMATH OF WAR (JUDG. 8:22-35)

until all other necessary matters were settled. He was obviously sincere when he told the two kings that he would have spared them if they had spared his own brothers. The two kings, however, had been cruel – killing Gideon’s brothers when they couldn’t find Gideon himself. In Judges 8:21, we read about the outcome:

So Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Rise yourself, and kill us; for as a man *is*, so *is* his strength.” So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments that were on their camels’ necks.

In war, one could not afford to be squeamish. Knowing when to be firm and when to be compassionate requires great wisdom. In matters of church discipline, great wisdom is needed to discern the difference between weakness of faith and wilful disobedience to God’s word. As a general rule, we should prefer to err on the side of charity without compromising on faithfulness to God.

4.2 Gideon Set Bad Examples

Gideon set good examples in his attitude to God, in his service to the nation, and in his character. Sadly, Gideon also set bad examples in three areas which we will now consider. He was not a perfect man. He was a man with a nature like ours. We must learn from his weaknesses as well – not to imitate him, but to avoid his mistakes.

The past: erecting an idolatrous memorial

The first mistake of Gideon was an incident that occurred with regard to what was past. The war was over. Victory was relished. The nation could look forward to having peace. However, should the war just won be forgotten? Had not God given them the victory? Should we not remember God’s goodness to us? Gideon would likely have remembered that Joshua erected a memorial from the twelve stones taken from the river Jordan, recorded in Joshua 4:19-23. And didn’t the eastern tribes build an altar by the Jordan as a witness between them and the western tribes? This occurred also in the days of Joshua, which was not too long ago (cf. Josh. 22:29). What better way to remind the people, not only of God’s goodness but also of Gideon’s role, in the victory over the Midianites? Gideon requested from the people the earrings from the plunder of the enemies, which

4.2. Gideon Set Bad Examples

they willingly gave to him. He had the earrings melted down to be made into a golden ephod, which was a replica of the robe worn by the high priest.

We are told of the outcome in Judges 8:27,

Then Gideon made it into an ephod and set it up in his city, Ophrah. And all Israel played the harlot with it there. It became a snare to Gideon and to his house.

The golden ephod became an idolatrous object of worship to the superstitious people. The expression “to play the harlot” means to commit idolatry by worshipping the object. What began well and with good intention soon turned awry. Gideon failed to take into consideration the sinful nature of man. His big household were also drawn into idolatrous practice. Gideon might have objected at first, but he was the one who had set up the object. As long as the object was not destroyed, it remained a snare to the people. With time, Gideon tolerated the practice and he was ensnared. When Gideon died, the nation turned even more idolatrous. We read in Judges 8:33,

So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god.

That was not the only time that Israel turned a memorial object into an item of worship. The bronze serpent made by Moses as commanded by God, to deliver those who were bitten by fiery serpents, became an idolatrous object (2 Kings 18:4). People of all cultures have a tendency to build memorial objects – often to remember the good deeds or achievements of men. There are also vain people who would build monuments to themselves, as was done by Saul (1 Sam. 15:12) and Absalom (2 Sam. 18:18). Since there is a propensity in superstitious people to worship such memorial objects, it would be better not to build them but to name utilitarian things after the people or the events we wish to honour – for example, roads, buildings, halls, libraries, scholarships, etc. It is one thing to be remembered by others after our death. It is another thing to seek to be remembered while we are alive. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?” Those who set their expectations too high must remember God’s word to Baruch,

4. THE AFTERMATH OF WAR (JUDG. 8:22-35)

in Jeremiah 45:5, “And do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek *them*; for behold, I will bring adversity on all flesh.”

In the case of Gideon, we read in Judges 8:34-35,

Thus the children 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 house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

The people were fickle-minded. After the death of Gideon, he and the good he had done were forgotten.

We must seek to glorify God, and Him alone.

The present: living like a king

The next thing Gideon did wrongly was to live like a king while he turned down being king. It was right for him to turn down being king. However, he overlooked the need to act consistently. Consistency in our living is so important. I used to have a school teacher who smoked heavily. In regard to his smoking, he once said to the class, “Do what I say, do not do what I do.” That was not consistency! A missionary we knew lived in a luxurious house located in a poor neighbourhood. That was not consistency! Gideon became complacent and lived inconsistently by having many wives. The eastern kings of those days had many wives and concubines. In the Scripture, we find David and Solomon having many wives and concubines. In the book of Esther, we read of the kings having many wives. In Judges 8:29-32, we are told,

Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house. Gideon had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who *was* in Shechem also bore him a son, whose name he called Abimelech. Now Gideon the son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

Although not holding the title of king, Gideon was the recognised judge, or leader, over the people. His lifestyle, however, was no different from that of a king. Even if Gideon did not think of himself as king, his children certainly behaved like princes. We are told in Judges 9:1-2,

4.2. Gideon Set Bad Examples

Then Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem, to his mother's brothers, and spoke with them and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, "Please speak in the hearing of all the men of Shechem: 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal reign over you, or that one reign over you?' Remember that I *am* your own flesh and bone."

Consistency in the Christian life is so important. We do not witness to the world only by our words but also by our lives. A person who is zealous in preaching the gospel but lives an inconsistent life is not likely to be an effective witness for God. A person who does not preach much but lives a consistent life is likely to be an effective witness for God. A person who is zealous in preaching and also lives a consistent life will be greatly used by God.

Consistency in the Christian life is so important. Sadly, we are most inconsistent in consistency.

The future: no preparation for succession

We are told in Judges 8:28,

Thus Midian was subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted their heads no more. And the country was quiet for forty years in the days of Gideon.

Having peace in the country was a blessing from God. For forty long years there was peace under the leadership of Gideon. Immediately after the death of Gideon, people forgot him and the good he had done. The people became worse in their idolatry. His children fought among themselves and the nation plunged into chaos. What went wrong? What could Gideon have done?

In the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, we find Him training disciples by teaching them and sending them out two by two to preach. He trained twelve disciples so that they could pass on His teaching when He was gone. The apostle Paul says, in 1 Corinthians 11:1, "Imitate me, just as I also *imitate* Christ." In his ministry, he trained up Timothy, Titus, and many other men. In the more settled situation of latter years, he instructed Timothy to train up others, saying, in 2 Timothy 2:2, "And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also." Notice that four generations are involved – Paul,

4. THE AFTERMATH OF WAR (JUDG. 8:22-35)

Timothy, those who were to be trained up by Timothy, who would in turn teach others. In the days of Moses, Joshua was the one who took over the leadership of the nation. In the days of Samuel, the schools of the prophets were started (1 Sam. 7:15-16; 19:20). The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 must be seen to include the idea of training preachers from generation to generation. The training of successors is an established teaching of the Scripture.

Gideon had forty, long, years of peace in which he could have trained up leaders to succeed him. Instead, he appeared to have been complacent and neglected this ministry. An indication of his complacency is seen in the character of his son. We are told in Judges 8:20,

And he said to Jether his firstborn, “Rise, kill them!” But the youth would not draw his sword; for he was afraid, because he was still a youth.

Gideon was giving his son the honour of killing the two Midianite kings. His son, however, was not up to the task, for he was afraid. We might wrongly think that Gideon was being unreasonable to assign a heavy task upon a young boy. In 1 Samuel 17:33, Saul tried to dissuade David from going out to fight Goliath, saying, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are a youth, and he a man of war from his youth.” The same word for “youth” is used here as in Judges 8:20. Gideon’s son would have been of age between 17 to 20 years. In the case of David, he had killed a lion and a bear while taking care of his father’s flock. He was able to single-handedly slay Goliath, the giant. In the case of Gideon’s son, he was weak and fearful.

The world debates over whether leaders are made or born. From the teaching of Scripture, we learn that salvation is of the Lord. No amount of education and training can save anyone. God, however, uses the means of hearing the word to save sinners. Similarly, preachers are called by God and not made by teaching and training. God, however, uses the means of teaching and training to extend His call to His chosen servants, and to equip them for service. Gideon had not trained his children well. In this regard, Gideon was like Eli who, although faithful as a priest, failed to train his children well. In 1 Samuel 2:12, we are told, “Now the sons of Eli were corrupt; they did not know the Lord.” God was not pleased with Eli’s failure in his domestic life. In verse 34, God pronounced his judgement, saying,

“Now this shall be a sign to you that will come upon your two sons, on Hophni and Phinehas: in one day they shall die, both of them.” The failure of Gideon in his domestic life was extended to his failure in nurturing and training successors. This should not surprise us for, in 1 Timothy 3, among the qualifications needed of elders are their ability to control their children and having godly wives. Although leaders are raised up by God, the means should be in place to teach God’s word and to guide the people in the way they should go. Gideon failed to train his son and the people in the way they should go. If Gideon and his household were ensnared by the golden ephod, how was he to provide the leadership in spiritual matters?

We are attracted to William Carey’s motto, “Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God”. Let us be clear that greatness in the things we attempt for God does not lie in quantity but in quality. Far better to have a few churches that are strong and faithful, than to have many churches that are weak and go astray in the next generation. Equally, far better to have one faithful man like Timothy than to have many who are like Demas, in 2 Timothy 4:10, who forsook Paul, “having loved this present world”.

4.3 Conclusion

Gideon set good examples of being reverential and humble in his service to God, being diligent and persevering in his service to the nation, and being discerning and self-controlled in himself. He set bad examples in erecting a memorial which became idolatrous, in living like a king although turning down the position of king, and in failing to prepare for succession. The closing verses of the passage are very sobering. Verses 33-35 say,

So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. Thus the children 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 house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

One closing lesson is that every generation has to fight its own battles. We have a responsibility to provide the teaching and training

4. THE AFTERMATH OF WAR (JUDG. 8:22-35)

in God's word and in God's work, and pray for the Lord to provide the labourers. We must not be too worried about the battles to be fought in the days ahead, for the Lord will be with His people and lead them to victory.

Related to this is the need to serve God well in the place He has placed us. We do not want to be half-hearted in our service to God, nor to produce shoddy work for God. We must not wish for better conditions to prevail before we give our utmost to God. A single-mindedness and burden for God's cause is a precious gift from God. Seldom is this seen today.

We end by reminding ourselves of the burnt offering of the young bull made by Gideon at the beginning of his ministry. The offering pointed to the atoning sacrifice of Christ. In our service to God, we do not want to lose sight of the cross of Calvary. We want to magnify the name of Jesus Christ. We want to proclaim the message of "Jesus Christ and Him crucified". We want to point sinners to the Lord who died and rose again to save. To Him be all the glory! Amen.

* * * * *

Gideon 8:33-9:6

So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. 34 Thus the children of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side; 35 nor did they show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

9 Then Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem, to his mother's brothers, and spoke with them and with all the family of the house of his mother's father, saying, 2 "Please speak in the hearing of all the men of Shechem: 'Which is better for you, that all seventy of the sons of Jerubbaal reign over you, or that one reign over you?' Remember that I *am* your own flesh and bone."

3 And his mother's brothers spoke all these words concerning him in the hearing of all the men of Shechem; and their heart was inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, "He is our brother." 4 So they gave him seventy *shekels* of silver from the temple of Baal-Berith, with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless men; and they followed him. 5 Then he went to his father's house at Ophrah and killed his brothers, the seventy sons of Jerubbaal, on one stone. But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, because he hid himself. 6 And all the men of Shechem gathered together, all of Beth Millo, and they went and made Abimelech king beside the terebinth tree at the pillar that was in Shechem.

Five

EPILOGUE (Judg. 8:33-9:6)

We end our series of studies by making an overview of the life and ministry of Gideon. Three matters we have alluded to previously deserve further attention. One of them concerns the beginning of Gideon's ministry. The second concerns the long period of rest for the children of Israel under Gideon. The third concerns the events that follow Gideon's death. We shall see that consistency in our walk with God is so important.

5.1 A Burden For The Cause Of God

We have seen how Gideon was called by God into His service. Gideon's words to the Angel of the LORD, whom he did not recognise at that time, are worth noting (Judg. 6:13),

“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 forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.”

Gideon must not be seen as unduly pessimistic – a man of little faith. Instead, we should see him as having a burden for the kingdom of God. He was grieved by the oppression of God's people. He was outraged by cruelty of the enemies. He was yearning for deliverance to come from his God. Like David of latter days, Gideon was concerned

5. EPILOGUE (JUDG. 8:33-9:6)

for God's cause (Ps. 74:22). God's cause was bound up with the cause of Zion (cf. Isa. 34:8).

The church today is in need of those who are similarly burdened for God's kingdom. Otherwise, when will refreshing come from the presence of the Lord? Many who profess the name of the Lord have compromised their faith. Not a few have fallen away. Worldliness has crept into the church, as seen in the style of worship adopted by many churches, and the lifestyle of the members. The excesses of the Charismatic movement, which arose in the 1960s, have lingered on. The Lord's Day is not honoured by those who should have known better, in reaction to the legalism seen in some quarters. Powerful, anointed, preaching has disappeared from conservative churches. Uncertainty, and division, over many issues prevail among Christians. The weakness of the church has been laid bare.

The unbelieving world has made inroads into the church on many fronts, forcing undue attention on issues such as abortion, the ordination of women to ministry, the LGBT+ movement and same-sex marriage, Critical Race Theory and its implications on pluralism and inclusivism, the use of gender-neutral words, etc. Many church leaders have succumbed to the onslaught. They are now apologetic over these issues, if not voicing support for them. We know that the church in every age has its own battles to fight. But where are the Gideons among God's people, who care enough for God's cause and the plight of the church?

Before some misguided individuals begin a crusade against the world over these issues, let us be reminded that God is not found in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire (1 Kings 19:11-12). Instead, He is found in the still small voice that speaks to the heart. The words of Psalm 46:10 speak to us today, "Be still, and know that I *am* God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" Before God deals with the issues of the day, He deals with the hearts of His people. His priority is our character rather than our contribution. We know that the needs are many. It is true that the harvest is plentiful, while the labourers are few. Our reading of Scripture, however, leads us to believe that the labourers sent out by the Lord into His harvest will be those whose hearts are surrendered to Him.

Do you have a burden for God's cause?

5.2 The Later-generations Syndrome

In Judges 8:20, we are told what happened when the two kings of the Midianites were captured. Gideon said to his firstborn son, Jether, “Rise, kill them!” Jether, however, was not up to the task when given the honour of executing the two kings of Midian. While we acknowledge that God makes each individual different from others – each with his own gifts – we note that Jether was not a young child. His father wouldn’t have asked him to do what was beyond his years. He was a lad of possibly seventeen years old, living in an age when war was common. Gideon seemed to have failed to train up his children in the way they should have gone.

We read from Judges 8:29-31 these words: “Gideon had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son whose name he called Abimelech.” All seventy sons, except one, were killed by Abimelech later. All the sons of Gideon were not God-fearing. Instead, they were idolaters, as were all of Israel after the death of Gideon. We are told in Judges 8:33-35,

So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god. Thus the children 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 house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

This was the “later-generations syndrome” – a common phenomenon observed in many missions situations. Missionaries labour to preach the gospel to a community which is then blessed with a revival, when many are soundly converted. In the next generation, the children of the converts become lax with regard to spiritual things, so that nominalism begins to set in. In the third generation, a bigger proportion of the children become nominal. By the fourth generation, nearly all become nominal. By this stage, the community is Christian only in name. It will need to be re-evangelised.

The lesson is clear – believers must not take for granted that their children will come to faith simply because they have been brought up in Christian homes and in the church. Familiarity with spiritual

things might make them complacent such that they are only Christian in name, but not in reality. This seems more likely to happen in churches that practise infant baptism, since the baptised children have been taught that they are ‘covenant children’ when they are not regenerate. There is no guarantee, however, that churches that practise believer’s baptism will be spared this phenomenon.

Christian parents must invest time and effort in the spiritual development of their children. There must be daily family worship at home. The children must worship with the parents in church and attend Sunday School where the gospel is proclaimed. The salvation of the children should be an item of regular prayer by the parents and in the church. We must not only be concerned about serving the Lord. We must be concerned about our domestic life as well.

Where are the young spiritual warriors today?

5.3 Faithfulness In Our Generation

We have seen the words of Judges 8:35, “Thus the children 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 house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.” These words remind us of what happened after the death of Joshua, in Judges 2:10, “When all that generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation arose after them who did not know the LORD nor the work which He had done for Israel.” It also reminds us of what happened after the death of Joseph, in Exodus 1:8, “Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.”

We are greatly mistaken if we hope to be remembered well by the immediately following generation. Some of us might be remembered well by later generations, but not the immediately following generation. The Reformers and the Puritans are thought of well today in conservative and Reformed circles, but not by the generations that immediately followed them. Otherwise, there would have been no departure from the truth they taught and fought for. It is proper to prepare for the truth to be propagated to later generations. In 2 Timothy 2:2, we read these words of the apostle Paul to Timothy, “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”

That, however, is different from preparing for ourselves to be remembered. Towards that end, Saul erected a monument for himself (1 Sam. 15:12). And so did Absalom (2 Sam. 18:18). It was a futile exercise, for no one thought well of them after they died. Even the ephod made by Gideon became a snare to Gideon and to his house (Judg. 8:27).

What, then, should we do? We must not set our expectations too high upon our service to the Lord. Even if mighty revivals sweep through the globe, we are to be sober-minded in our estimation of things. There will be trials and tribulations, even in our own generation. There will be those who desert us, and attack us. “Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12).” Gideon had to contend with the Gadites in his time. The apostle Paul was disappointed by Demas who “loved this present world” and departed (2 Tim. 4:9), and by Alexander the coppersmith who did him much harm (2 Tim. 4:14). The Lord was betrayed by none other than one of His close disciples. Earlier in His ministry, many of those who followed the Lord left Him (John 6:66). To prevent ourselves from being unduly disappointed with the apparent lack of progress, we must remember the words of the Lord to Baruch, ‘ “And do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek *them*; for behold, I will bring adversity on all flesh,” says the Lord (Jer. 45:5).’

Stating it positively, we must be faithful to God in our generation, knowing that He sovereignly controls all things and will bring His purposes to pass. That includes the need for us to prepare for the truth to be propagated to the future generations, with no thought of whether we will be remembered in the future. It means meeting the needs of our time by bringing the truth to bear upon the people of our time. It means dealing with the real issues instead of majoring on minor things. The truth of God’s word is our weapon, which is to be wielded prayerfully, and “being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints (Eph. 6:18).” Just as personal sanctification is to be pursued in the company of “those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart (2 Tim. 2:22)”, the sanctification of the local church must be pursued corporately. Romans 12:1-2 say, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which* is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may

5. EPILOGUE (JUDG. 8:33-9:6)

prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

Since the spirituality of the local church seldom rises above the spirituality of the leaders, it is incumbent that only godly men are appointed to office. It is incumbent upon church leaders to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18)”, and be examples to others. In Philippians 3:17, the apostle Paul says, “Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.” In Hebrews 13:7, we are told, “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of *their* conduct.” We must be consistent all-round – in our service to God, in our domestic life, and in the example we set to others.

Are we setting the example of a consistent walk with God to others?

5.4 Conclusion

Gideon’s life and ministry inspire us to be the people that God will use in our generation to accomplish His purposes. We are challenged to be consistent all-round – in the church, in our home, and in society. We are exhorted to be persevering in the faith, trusting in our Lord. The Lord says, in John 15:5, “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.”

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