

## The Compassion of God and the Nation of Israel

### II. - Gideon and the Midianites

*"And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, and said unto him, The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour. And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? And where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? But now the Lord hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites. And the Lord looked unto him, and said, Go in this thy might and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: Have not I sent thee?"* (Judges 6:12-14).

The children of Israel had been oppressed by their perennial enemies, the Midianites, for seven long years. But had God not promised to deliver them from all their enemies? Yes, indeed, but there was a proviso—they must do all the Lord commanded. Did that mean that they had to be perfect in every detail? Apparently not. *"And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years."* So what was this evil? What it came down to was that they had gone after false gods—a perennial problem with Israel. The Lord put up with all kinds of mischief by His children, but idolatry was unacceptable. God was waiting for Israel to turn from its false gods and turn to Him—that was all. When they did that at last, swiftly, the Lord provided a deliverer in the person of Gideon.

And a less likely man for the job He could not have chosen. An angel appeared unto Gideon and addressed him as "a mighty man of valour." He found Gideon hiding out from the Midianites and attempting to thrash some grain, unseen by them. He was certainly no hero, challenging the enemy on behalf of his people. He was the quintessential doubter. His immediate response to the angel (probably an appearance of Christ Himself) is—"Where is the Lord? I thought He was supposed to help us, but He has forsaken us." Christ ignored his protest—*"And the Lord looked upon him, and said, 'Go in this thy might and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?'"* The conversation continued (apparently Gideon did not recognize the Lord) with Gideon's mournful disclaimer, *"Why look at me, my family is poor, and I am the least in my father's house."*

Once again, the Lord ignored his complaint and said, *"I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man."* We have an important clue here to our reactions to God's promises. Remember that faith is a gift of God and has to do with God's energizing of us and not with our feelings of confidence about what God is going to do. The human mind and its emotions are unreliable regarding our interactions with God. It made no difference how Gideon felt about it. God had a particular purpose and plan, and He was going to do what He wanted to do both in the life of Gideon and with His actions toward Israel. The time had come for God to act, and nothing would hinder His purposes. We often put too much weight on the human factor, assuming God can't function without our concurrence and support. The entire history of the Bible shows this to be an inadequate judgment. If God's work with us depended on the stability of our attitudes, we would all be in trouble.

Gideon finally gets the picture, and shrinking from the assignment, he asks for a token that is impossible in the human sense. It is the famous (or infamous) fleece ploy on which believers put an undue amount of dependence. Gideon wanted to put a piece of wool out in the elements and have it dry in the morning with the ground around it wet from the dew. And so it happened. Still not content, he decided to reverse the action and wanted the wool to be wet and all the ground around it dry. And so, again, it happened. The first action of God was not enough for Gideon, and he had to have a second one. That is so often true of the "token" ploy. Asking God for tokens is initially uncertain because it puts the unreliable human brain into interpreting the token and then accepting it. In the New Testament, we have a much better situation in the presence of the Spirit within us. The Spirit will guide us when our fleshly mind is uncertain. The most reliable thing to do is to say to the Lord, "See to it that I do what I am supposed to do." As with Gideon, God has ways of coming to us despite our human weakness and accomplishing His will through us.

Being in a position of weakness is amply illustrated in the story of Gideon, in that Gideon was undoubtedly a primary example. But God did not pay attention either to his weaknesses or his complaints. David says, "*He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust*" (Psalm 103:14). Paul, in the New Testament, records God as saying, "*My grace is sufficient for thee: for My strength is made perfect in weakness.*" Paul follows by saying, "*Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities [weaknesses], and reproaches, and necessities, and persecutions, and distresses, for Christ's sake: For when I am weak, then I am strong*" (II Corinthians 12:9,10). This verse was said in the context of Satan's buffeting of Paul, which is the situation Gideon found himself in regarding the Midianites. God selected what was probably the weakest member of the family of Israel and turned him into "a mighty man of valour." It is not a matter of what we want to do for God but what He wants to do through us.

The saga of weakness continues as God pared Gideon's "volunteers" down to three hundred men from many thousands. His primary point seemed to be that if there were too many Israelites fighting the Midianites, they would have taken the credit for it. This has been true in Israel today. In general, the Jewish people feel that they won a heroic victory when they took over Israel from the Arabs. They do not as yet give God the actual credit. However, according to the prophecies of Scripture, the day will come when they will be glad to give Him credit. Meanwhile, through the grace and strength of God, Gideon was changed from a cowering weakling, hiding out from the Midianites to one who challenged Baal, the false god of Israel, and cut down the groves in which they worshiped him.

But even that exhibition of strength on Gideon's part was possible only by the energy of faith that God gave to Gideon. The story of the lamp and the clay pitchers is well known, but it would not have mattered what instrumentality was used. God gave Gideon specific instructions, which he followed, but actually, God could have blown on the armies of the Midianites and disintegrated them. We humans often need these symbols of power to strengthen our resolve. It is not a matter of strengthening our faith. That's something of God, but perhaps the human mind needs something to give it peace and confidence.

The routing of the Midianites was complete, as God had promised, but afterward, there was an encounter with the men of Ephraim, who were dissatisfied with how

Gideon handled things. It is common for great victories to be followed by satanic disruptions. He hates seeing us get along so well and stirs up the troops to fight among themselves. If you have had a great victory and the winds of discouragement follow it, pay no attention; it's merely the grumbling of the enemy who lost his battle. The great lesson of Gideon is that the Lord does hear us when we cry for deliverance. The problem with Israel was that they did not ask for help for seven years. Had they asked sooner, they probably would have had it. And, of course, it is a great lesson in the compassion of the Lord, who does not turn a deaf ear even to His wayward children. If things have gone awry, do not assume the Lord has left you. He may tarry a bit in His response for His reasons, but if you walk away from the Lord in discouragement, how will you get help? Another lesson, of course, is that He takes the weak to confound the mighty. This is a message of Zechariah in the Old Testament—*"Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts"* (Zechariah 4:6). Paul picks up this theme to the Corinthians—*"For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty"* (I Corinthians 1:26,27). What we bring to the Lord in every situation is ourselves. What He gives to us is His energy of faith and His power to do whatever it is that He wants to do with us and for us.

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