

Judges 6–8:32: Gideon

By Thomas G. Reid Jr.

INTRODUCTION

The intention of the Holy Spirit in causing God's word to be recorded and preserved is of critical importance to understanding any portion of it. For some Biblical books, that intention is clear. The Gospel of John was written "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31). "The main point" of the Epistle to the Hebrews was that "we have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man" (Heb. 8:1–2). And so it is with the Book of Judges; twice we read, including the final verse of the book, "In those days *there was no king in Israel*; everyone did *what was right in his own eyes*" (17:6; 21:25; cf. 18:1; 19:1). From beginning to ending, this Book records how the people of God, both nation and church, did what they thought was right; they embraced the libertarian option with a vengeance, eschewing stable government and idolizing personal whim. But Judges also shows how God did what He thought was right, to encourage His people to recognize that, ultimately, it was the recognition of God's kingship other than that was lacking. A human king what help in many ways—political stability is a certain benefit, no matter how tyrannical—but it was the divine rule that was most needed. The recurring phrase "there was no king in Israel" implies that the Book of Judges was written after kings had been raised up by God for Israel with King Saul. Looking back, our unidentified author describes a period in the life of Israel that compared unfavorably with the period of monarchy.

OUT OF THE WINEPRESS JUDGES 6:1–24.

The world places great importance upon certain people

for their prowess in sports or talent for acting or machinations in politics. But the church and the nation should have different standards. The apostle Paul wrote to the church members in ancient Corinth about themselves: For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence (1 Cor. 1:26–29).

In God's choice of the next judge, Gideon, the same principle is applied to the leadership of the church and the nation that God has brought to the choice of His precious elect people.

I. The Crisis Before Gideon (1–10).

1. Perverse Rebellion (1–2).

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, 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.

The words are becoming distressing familiar (cf. 3:12; 4:1a): **the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD**, no doubt toward the end of the forty years of peace established by the Lord through Deborah and

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Barak (5:31b). The Israelites had forgotten the Lord's work for them, both in the long-term and the short-term, turning to other gods, including the Baals (see 6:25). The divine response was just as familiar: **the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years**, although the oppressor was different. The Midianites were descendents of Abraham through his concubine Keturah, sent away to the East, becoming semi-nomads dwelling in the northwestern portion of the Sinai Desert (Gen. 25:1–6). The connection between Israel and Midian was strengthened centuries later when Moses married a Midianite, Zipporah (Ex. 2:15–22). The current oppression of the Israelites thus came from the southeast, rather than from other directions, as in the times of the earlier judges Othniel, Ehud, Shamgar, and Deborah and Barak.¹ The current persecution lasted seven years, a timeframe redolent of perfection. And so, **the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel**.

This difficult period differed from the others in that it is recorded that **the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains**. As the Scottish Covenanters on the moors in the seventeenth century and the French Huguenots in the Cevennes Mountains in the eighteenth century, the people of God were forced to hide away from their persecutors. The three words used to describe these places of safety are difficult to translate, but the general sense of their meaning is clear enough; they were adapted by the Israelites as dwelling places. While today the open landscape of the highlands in Israel would offer few such hiding places, in those days it was forested and so provided better protection.

2. Periodic Raids (3–6).

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

1. In order, they came from the northeast (Mesopotamia), east (Moab), southwest (Philistia), and north (Canaan).

2. "It may be stated as a maxim, that whenever the nomade [*sic*] is the master of the cultivator, the impoverishment and ultimate ruin of the latter are inevitable." George Bush, *Notes on Judges* (Minneapolis: James & Klock, 1976), p. 80. Bush indicates that in the mid-nineteenth century when he was writing, the Arab Bedouin nomads continued to threaten settled peoples as the Midianites did in the time of Gideon.

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.

But the upland regions did not provide much arable land, so the Israelites continued to plant their crops in the more exposed valleys. However, **whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up ... they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza**, far to the southwest. In this evil endeavor, the Midianites were joined by the **Amalekites and the people of the East**. The Amalekites, descendents of Esau, participated in the oppression of Israel in the time of the judge Ehud, along with the more prominent Moabites (3:13). "The people of the East" could be a reference to these two peoples together or to other tribes living east of the Promised Land who joined with them to profit from the weakness of Israel. The economy of God's people was devastated, for the marauders left **no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey**. These farming animals were key to their agriculture: sheep were raised for meat, milk, and wool; the ox for heavy pulling and lifting; and the donkey for lighter pulling. And the livestock were hungry like their masters.

The purpose of the united oppressors was not to conquer Israel but to devastate it. The invaders **would come up with their livestock**, which ate the Israelite crops. The Midianites brought **their tents**, to provide shelter for longer or shorter periods of time in each location during the devastation, **coming in as numerous as locusts**, a very strong expression describing their horrific effects on the crops. **Both they and their camels were without number**, so it seemed to the shocked Israelites. **They would enter the land to destroy it**, employing the infamous 'scorched earth' techniques used by later invaders like General William Tecumseh Sherman, "marching through Georgia" in 1864 during the American Civil War. The end result was inevitable: **so Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites**.² More surprising in light of the Israelite abandonment of the Lord's worship was that **the children of Israel cried out to the LORD**, seeking a relaxation of His judgment upon them.

3. Prophetic Rebuke (7–10).

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.”

Verse 7 repackages verse 6: **And it came to pass ... the children of Israel cried out to the LORD because of the Midianites.** The Lord heard the cries of His people and sent a prophet to the children of Israel, a disappointment no doubt to them when they were hoping for a military commander to drive off the invaders. This unnamed prophet said to them, “**Thus says the LORD God of Israel,**” using a well-known phrase that punctuates the Old Testament numerous times. Their God reminds them that **I brought you up from Egypt and brought your out of the house of bondage**, literally, the “slave quarters”, and for emphasis reminds them again that **I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of all who oppressed you.** Furthermore, in the conquest of the Promised Land inhabited by the Canaanites, God **drove them out before you and gave you their land.**

These two great victories which God accomplished for the Israelites should have prompted them to love and obedience, especially in light of the Lord’s command, **I am the Lord your God; do not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell**, which is not a citation of a specific verse but a summary of God’s teaching, using Amorites as a part for the whole. With the ancient gods being tied to specific locales, the Israelites were sorely tempted to add the local Canaanite gods to the Lord in a sort of pantheon, just to be on the side of safety. The Amorite gods may have been willing to share a spot in the hearts and worship of people with other gods, but it was not so with the Lord. At this point in the presentation by the prophet, the Israelites might have expected a recounting of God’s labors through the judges in recent centuries rather than these more remote actions, but the age of judges is not one to be generally praised, despite the Lord’s periodic activity on the behalf of His people; the clear-cut lines of the Exodus are more easily marshalled in favour of the divine argument. The prophet concludes his account of God’s revelation, **But you have not obeyed My voice.** The reader can justly wonder what the Lord’s reaction will be in light of the severity of this prophetic message.

Application

God’s people were happy to take the blessings of God without shouldering the resulting responsibilities of love and obedience which He imposed on them as part of the covenant of grace. God at least responded to their cry for help, although we do not read that the people repented of their sins. God always deals in mercy with His covenant people; perfect love and obedience being impossible to us this side of heaven (Jesus excepted), God’s mercy always is greater than His people’s sins.

II. The Calling of Gideon (11–24).

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 appeared to him, and said to him, “The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!”

God’s response to the cries of His people, beyond the verbal revelation of verses 8–10, requires some time to take form. **The Angel of the LORD came and sat under the terebinth tree which was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite.** Joash was a prominent citizen of the town of Ophrah, located somewhere in Manasseh (Josh. 17:2; 1 Chr. 7:14–18), probably close to Sichern (8:31). Joash had a terebinth or turpentine tree on his lands, a kind of tree common in highland areas and often used as a place for sacrifice and offerings, “because their shade is good” (Hos. 4:13). **The Angel of the LORD came and sat under that tree,** the second time this divine angel has appeared in the time of the judges (2:1–4).³

The next judge of Israel is then introduced, **his son Gideon**, which means “hewer” or “hacker”, an appropriate name for one who will later destroy the altar of Baal (6:28–32). Gideon **threshed wheat in the winepress.** Wheat was normally threshed in large quantities by oxen in open areas, but Gideon is threshing a small amount of wheat in the winepress, a depression in the ground, **in order to hide it from the Midianites.** Such were the times! **The Angel of the LORD appeared to him,** another pre-incarnational appearance of Jesus Christ. **The Angel said to him, “The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!”** There is a great

3. The Angel of the LORD is mentioned in Deborah’s Song in 5:23, and will later appear first to the mother of Samson in 13:3f. and then to her husband in 13:11f.

measure of humor in the Angel's approach to Gideon, who is hardly a valiant man, hiding his threshing in the depression in the ground, stripped down to his underpants for the hard work in which he was engaged, covered in sweat, with chaff stuck to his torso. God seems to prefer the weak things of the world to accomplish His purposes, and so it was with Gideon. Yes, Gideon would need the Lord's presence to become a valiant leader of God's people.

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?"

Gideon keeps his wits about him, indeed, does not directly respond to the greeting of the Angel, but asked him, **O my lord, if the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us?** The perennial question of God's people when they are suffering was on Gideon's lips—here was his chance to ask someone who would know better than a mere mortal why we suffer so in service to the Almighty. Gideon was probably thinking back to the Midianites' murder of his brothers at Tabor (8:18–19). Perhaps Gideon had heard the Lord's prophet, for he went on to ask a question using similar language to him: **where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, "Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt?"** The whole cluster of miracles—the ten plagues, change of Pharaoh's heart, parting of the Red Sea, and so forth—were but distant memories of a better time (and a better deity?) in Gideon's mind, for **the LORD has forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.** Gideon was not yet ready to lead God's people, for he blamed the Lord for their difficulties, rather than the people's sins; his own family had an altar to Baal on its land (6:25) where Gideon most likely had bowed down to a false god while still expecting his ancestral God to shower him and his family with blessings.

Then the LORD turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours." The eloquence of the young man was greater than his understanding of the situation facing

his people; if he remained in his current frame of mind, his strength would only be weakness. **You shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites.** God did not turn away from him in disappointment at this outburst, but continued to recognize qualities in Gideon which would be useful for leading the people of Israel to victory over the Midianites: **have I not sent you to do so?** At this point, Gideon began to realize with whom he was speaking, that He was not only an angel but God Himself; certainly the narrator wants his readers to understand that, now recording the words of "the Lord" rather than of "the Angel".

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"

Gideon now seemed chastened, asking, **"O my Lord, how can I save Israel?"** The dialogue has become reminiscent of Moses interacting with God at the burning bush (Ex. 3:11–14 and 4:1–17). Gideon, like Moses before him, did not sense the capabilities in himself necessary to lead a nation before the Lord and against its enemies. **Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh,** using a military word referring to a thousand soldiers; Gideon did not have enough soldiers at his disposal to engage the Midianites. Joash led a small, insignificant family within the tribe, although it had at least ten servants (6:27) and at least two bulls (6:25), suggesting a false sense of modesty on Gideon's part. As well, **I am the least in my father's house.** Gideon was the youngest son, in that society a particularly lowly position which nobody would respect.⁴ **The LORD said to him, "surely I will be with you."** Are there more beautiful words than these coming from God, words of covenantal loyalty despite man's inadequacy and sin? **And you shall defeat the Midianites as one man.** God promised victory over the Midianites; the language could mean that the Midianites will be like a single soldier to defeat, or that the Israelites will work together to defeat them, united into a single person. Both understandings are valid.

The dialogue has reached a turning point. Gideon **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."**

4. As was David, who later served as a distinguished king of Israel (1 Sam. 16:11–13).

It was now clear that Gideon suspected that the Angel was the Lord Himself. Like Moses (Ex. 4:1–9), Gideon asked for a sign to confirm the identity of the One with whom he was conversing. Unlike later (6:36–40), Gideon himself did not choose the kind of sign he was seeking, but let the Lord do so. Gideon did not wait for a response to his request, but urged the Angel, **do not depart from here, I pray, until I come to You and bring out my offering and set it before you.** This respectful urging allowed Gideon to offer the hospitality necessary for an exalted guest; in replying as he did, he was possibly remembering Abraham’s offering to the Lord in Gen. 18:1–8. The Angel agreed, **“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.

The meal took shape. Gideon went in to his home, where he prepared a young goat, and, to gain some valuable time by not waiting for bread to bake, unleavened bread from an ephah of flour. Then, the meat he put in a basket. Gideon added a third item to the menu: he put the broth in a pot. With the bread, he brought *them* out to Him under the terebinth tree and presented *them*. But the Angel did not eat the meal prepared for him by Gideon. 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” on top of the young goat and the unleavened bread. And he did so. It should have been obvious to Gideon that the Angel was preparing for a burnt offering. 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. This gesture, reminiscent of several events connected to the Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 4:2–4; 7:19–20; 8:5,6;16; 9:22–23; 10:12–13; Num. 20:7–11; cf. Ex. 10:21; 14:21,26), led to a miraculous intervention by God: fire arose out of the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. “While the narrative offers no interpretation of the act, its significance is clear: when a

deity consumes the meal a worshiper has brought, this is a sign the latter has found favor in the deity’s sight.”⁵ **And the Angel of the LORD departed out of his sight**—the method is not indicated—leaving behind an astonished young man.

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.

Gideon’s lunch had been confirmed, as he perceived that He *was* the Angel of the LORD. But instead of focusing his mind on the divine acceptance of his sacrificial meal, Gideon panicked. Alas, O Lord GOD! For I have seen the Angel of the LORD face to face. While not expressed in the passage, Gideon was well-enough trained in the Scriptures to know the danger he faced, for God had told Moses, “No man shall see Me, and live” (Ex. 33:20; cf. Judges 13:22). To calm his fears, the LORD said to him—how is not specified—“Peace *be* with you; do not fear, you shall not die.” After all, like Jacob wrestling at Peniel (Gen. 32:25–31), Gideon had not seen the Lord Himself but His Angel in human form. Centuries later, people would see Jesus of Nazareth, but not be struck dead before the Godhead in human form.

So Gideon built an altar there to the LORD. It was a common practice in ancient times to build such a shrine either in a place of a theophany (Noah in Gen. 8:20; Abram in Gen. 12:7; Jacob in Gen. 35:1,7) or of a major divine act (Moses in Ex. 17:15), although these were not the only reasons to do so (Abram in Gen. 13:18 and 22:9; Isaac in Gen. 26:25; Jacob in Gen. 33:20; Joshua in Josh. 8:30). Gideon named the altar The LORD-*Is*-Peace, appropriating the word that the Lord Himself had pronounced concerning his relationship with His servant Gideon. God had reestablished peace with one Israelite and would soon do so with the rest of His covenant people, and He would bring peace on earth to his beleaguered people. To this day when the narrator is writing many years later (or why else mention the fact?), the altar *is* still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites, Gideon’s hometown.

5. Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, c1999), p. 263.

Application

God's call to special office in the church or nation is often given to those least likely to have been chosen by their fellows, whether it is Moses or Gideon or many others of whom we read in the Scriptures. Many are called even in their sin and misery (Saul of Tarsus) or before their birth (John the Baptist). Many have serious impediments: the judge Samson was lustful; King Saul was mentally unstable; the disciple Matthew was a traitor and a thief. In each case, God was pleased to use the imperfections in men for His purposes; in many cases, like Gideon, He acted in a special way to equip the man for his calling, making him into a valiant warrior for the benefit of God's people. And so Gideon began to become the leader God meant that country bumpkin to be. When God calls nothings, He is reserving to Himself all the glory which would otherwise be shared with mere mortals.

How similar to Gideon is our Lord Jesus Christ, destined from all eternity to accomplish great things in this world! But He was born in a lowly state among the animals, apparently a bastard; He grew up in a backwater of a despised people; He learned the simple skills of the carpenter; He defied the social expectations of the time in a myriad of ways; He drew a motley crew of misfits around him; He was abandoned by almost everybody near the end; and He was finally executed in the most cruel fashion that governments have ever legally sanctioned. And yet God was pleased to raise Him to His right hand, above all principalities and powers, to rule the heavens and the earth, men and nations, now and forevermore.

O YOU OF LITTLE FAITH. 6:25–40.

When a group of Presbyterian elders decided that a critical need had developed for a conservative theological seminary to serve Southern Presbyterians, one of them approach Erskine Wells, an elder in the First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi. Wells protested that none of these laymen knew anything about theological education, that no money or professors or library were available, that they were certain to fail. His interlocutor looked him in the eye and said, "Erskine, how big is your God?" Wells gulped and replied, "When do we start?" The result is Reformed Theological Seminary, with many hundreds of students on five major campuses spread throughout the southern United States of America.

6. James B. Jordan, *Judges: God's War against Humanism* (Tyler, TX: Geneva Ministries, c1985), p. 123.

Our faith is often small compared to the God who engenders it in our hearts through the working of His Spirit. It was so in the case of the judge Gideon.

I. The Conduct of Gideon (25–32).

1. A Night's Work (25–27).

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.

Gideon's call to leadership in Israel began **the same night** (literally, and ambiguously, "the next night"), before the effects of the Angel of the Lord's appearance to him could begin to wane. The God of Israel had reiterated His interest in His people by appearing to their next judge as an angel; now it was the time for that judge to express his concomitant commitment to the God of Israel by his own actions. **The LORD said to him, . . . "Tear down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the wooden image that is beside it.** The reader is caught by surprise by the realization that Gideon was living in a household with two pagan images in the garden, but the Canaanization of the people of God had borne its ugly fruit even in isolated Ophrah. The altar of Baal would have been used to present sacrifices to appease the nature god; the wooden image, literally "the Asherah", was a carved figure with exaggerated sexual organs, whose uses are best left unexpressed, as in the text itself. Gideon was commanded to tear down the one and to cut down the other. Only by separating himself from such pagan worship would Gideon be truly ready for the work to which God has called him, and only then would the people of Israel enjoy the blessings of the Promised Land: "Joash and his people had sought fertility and prosperity for their land by worshipping fertility gods and goddesses. The result had been virtual starvation. If they return to the Lord, the true Giver of life, fertility, and prosperity, things will change."⁶

To this negative command a positive command was added; Gideon was to **build an altar to the LORD your**

God on top of this rock in the proper arrangement. Once the offending pagan images had been eliminated, Gideon must construct a religious center for the true worship of the God of Israel to take place; indeed, doing so in the same location, obviously a prominent location, where Baal had been worshipped hitherto, would express Yahweh's superiority over the Canaanite deity. Emphasis is placed on offering the sacrifice in the way that God had commanded,⁷ for God is always to be worshipped as He has commanded and in no other way, as Jesus Himself emphasized in His great commission to His church: they were to be "observing all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). As the Puritan Richard Rogers has written on this passage, "Nothing goes forward happily in the commonwealth, except good order be taken first for the welfare of the Church, namely, by rooting out and casting down idolatry and superstitious worship of God, and ignorance, and a planting and establishing of the true preaching of the gospel."⁸

But what would serve as the sacrifice on the altar? **Take your father's young bull, the second bull of seven years old ... take the second bull.** This mature bull would have the strength to help topple the false deities and then would serve as the offering upon the new altar; it is quite possible that this bull was being raised to be offered in worship to Baal, thus creating a delicious irony in the new context in which it would be sacrificed. And who would offer the sacrifice? Gideon himself: **offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the image which you shall cut down.** Although Gideon was not a descendent of the priestly line of Levi, God commanded what is otherwise forbidden: someone not of the priestly race must offer a bloody sacrifice in God's honor (Ex. 28:1; Heb. 5:4). In extraordinary times, it is sometimes necessary for God to effect such changes. In serving as a priest, Gideon foreshadowed Jesus of Nazareth, who offered Himself as a perfect substitute for the sins of the elect, although Jesus was a descendent of King David, not of Aaron or Levi.

Gideon took ten men from among his servants, suggesting that the work of toppling the pagan gods was physically demanding, **and did as the LORD had said to him,** surely no more than the Lord could have expected of him. **But because he feared his father's household,** apparently devoted to the worship of Baal despite their Israelite roots, **and the men of the city,** who could be expected to be very annoyed by treating their gods in such a way, **too much to do it by day, he did it by night.** "Some may blame Gideon for demolishing Baal's altar by night, fearing relatives and city fathers. I doubt it matters. Did God tell him to do it by day? Did

God tell him he couldn't be afraid? Or did God simply tell him to do it? Evidently, obedience was essential and heroism optional."⁹

2. A Morning's Discovery (28–30).

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 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."

The activities of the eleven men were soon enough found out. **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.** In a small town where nothing much happened, this event was big news! **So they said to one another,** naturally enough, **"Who has done this thing?"** The people of Ophrah indicate no surprise that their cultic highpoint lay in ruins. With eleven men involved, it was not too difficult to find someone willing to identify the culprit. **And when they inquired and asked, they said, "Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing."** Who exposed the crime is not identified. But now the pagans in Ophrah had an object for their wrath. They angrily confronted Gideon's father: **"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."** Religion was taken seriously in those days! Nothing short of death was the penalty for such blasphemous disrespect for the Canaanite deities; Gideon had been right in his assessment of his neighbors' likely attitude toward the sacrilege he perpetrated. Notice how these pagans easily slid over the fact that an altar to the God of Israel

7. The word translated "proper arrangement" is used of the battle line in warfare (1 Sam. 4:2,12,16) and for the setting out of the lamps in the sanctuary (Ex. 39:37), both senses being appropriate in the present context.

8. Richard Rogers, *A Commentary on Judges* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), p. 322.

9. Dale Ralph Davis, *Judges: Such a Great Salvation* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 2000), p. 98.

now proudly stood atop the remains of their pagan cult installation.

3. A Father's Defense (31–32).

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."

While Gideon's father Joash had permitted a pagan worship site to be erected on his property, probably even joining in its veneration, he displayed a more noble character in confronting the lynch mob before him, in order to defend his son. **Joash said to all who stood against him, "Would you plead for Baal? Would you save him?"** These rhetorical questions have nuances which are lost in English translation. The first often has a legal cast to it, so the meaning becomes: Are you going to stand up in defense of Baal? The second question contains the verb used by the narrator to define the activities of the judges in Israel, so its meaning is: Will you deliver Baal from disaster? The implication in Joash's words should have been clear to them: why would you defend such a weak deity that he cannot resist his images being overturned?

Then, Joash threw down the gauntlet to the mob: **Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning!** If one of them were to kill his son Gideon, then, as his father, he would make sure that Gideon's death were quickly avenged (Gen. 9:6). No, Baal needed to be called to account, not Gideon. **If he *is* a god, let him plead for himself, because his altar has been torn down!** Notice that Joash carefully refrained from admitting the guilt of his son, and thus of Joash's household, in the matter. The mob's anger seemed to have been satisfied with the logic of Joash's argument and the immediate danger passed. But Gideon could not escape, even if he had wanted to, an association with his first act as judge in Israel. **Therefore on that day Joash called him Jerubbaal**, an ambiguous name which could mean positively, "Let Baal contend" ("if he could" being understood), or negatively, "Baal contends", implying that he can. Since the heart disposition of Joash was unclear at the time he created this nickname, either meaning could have been meant. Even the following sentence left the meaning of the name ambiguous: **"Let Baal plead against him, because he has torn down his altar"** can

be understood in two very different ways, since "plead" can be either negative or positive. As so often in the Book of Judges, the narrator wants his readers to think through the issues involved.

Application

God's people must break decisively with the gods of this world, for Yahweh will be worshiped and served alone. We must be absolutists, not rendering ourselves impotent before the cacophony of religious voices among the nations. We must root out false worship in all its forms, from the worship of the state in left-wing politics to the glorification of mere humans in the popular press. Enthusiasm for the unique claims of Jesus Christ to world hegemony will often prompt savage reprisals from those not yet convinced of His identity and work. "The servant is not greater than his master," Jesus Himself warned us of what to expect in this life (John 15:20).

As Gideon's father defended him against violent enemies desiring to kill him, so our Father protects us against our enemies, whatever form they take and whatever danger they present to us. Sometimes, however, our Father permits us to be slaughtered for the sake of the gospel, promising us everlasting life in a place without suffering and death. The martyr's crown is nothing we should seek, but there are some who must accept it.

II. The Confirmations to Gideon (33–40).

The judge Gideon was still finding his way forward in leading God's people against His and their enemies. God was pleased to send four confirmations to Him of the divine support for Gideon's efforts, beyond the first confirmation in the fire which consumed his offering (6:17–21). Another confirmation will come later (7:9–15). **1. The Spirit of the Lord (33–34a).**

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;

For the eighth year in succession (6:1), **all the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the East, gathered together.** Here, these two peoples together appear to make up the people of the East, unlike 3:3, where three groups seem to be indicated. United, they were stronger in pursuing their destructive ways. **They crossed over the Jordan River and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel**, a fertile valley giving easy access in several directions

to additional lands to plunder. The people of God were once again facing the destruction of their crops and thus of their livelihoods and even lives, huddled in their mountainous retreats.

But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon. As with Othniel earlier (3:10) and Jephthah (11:29) and Samson (13:25; 14:6,19; 15:14) later, God’s Spirit came upon one of the judges. The verb used here means “to clothe with” and implies that Gideon was completely possessed by the Spirit for the work at hand.

Whom God appoints to office in his kingdom he also qualifies. The qualification is the Spirit of Jehovah . . . as the angel of Jehovah who calls Gideon is the Second Person of the Trinity revealing himself as the preincarnate Messiah, so the Spirit of Jehovah is the third Person of the Trinity revealing himself as the Spirit of the preincarnate Messiah. This Spirit is the power and wisdom of God in the judge, by which the covenant people are saved.¹⁰

Gideon must have sensed the divine equipping that the Spirit’s possession of his being involved, confirming his sense of call to lead Israel against its invading enemies.

2. The Gathering of the Tribes (34b-35).

34 (continued) 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.

Gideon moved to gather together an army sufficiently large to successfully confront the pagan invaders. He blew the trumpet, an effective form of local communication in the mountains and valleys of northern Israel. His own clan in the tribe of Manasseh was the first to respond, as the Abiezrites gathered behind him. But they were hardly sufficient against a large enemy which, after repeated incursions, had become reasonably familiar with the territory in which they would have to fight. Gideon sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, who also gathered behind him. The trumpets worked only so far, thus personal representatives were sent throughout his tribe, and the response was equally positive. **He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and they came up to meet him.** As representatives from three additional northern tribes had joined his forces, recognizing him as a judge in Israel, Gideon now knew that God had indeed called him to deliver His people from their enemies. With his own tribe coming from

the south of the Valley of Jezreel and the other three tribes from coming north of it, Gideon was in a position to attack the people of the East from two fronts, which is usually more effective than a one-front attack. Noticeably lacking from the list of tribes was the fifth northern tribe, Issachar, which had earlier worked with Deborah and Barak (5:15) and would later produce one of the minor judges, Tola (10:1).

But although the Lord had provided these two confirmations without Gideon even seeking them, they were not enough for him to proceed.

3. The Wetness of the Fleece (36–38).

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.

The third and fourth confirmations to Gideon of his calling recorded in the latter portion of chapter 6 are like the one found earlier in the same chapter, in that Gideon requested them. **Gideon said to God**, in personal prayer, that he wanted to test “**if You will save Israel by my hand as You have said,**” since Gideon was still uncertain in face of the many obstacles before him. **I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor**, presumably the same winepress that he was using when the Angel of the Lord approached him (6:11). **If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground around it, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand as You have said.** Gideon’s faith was weak, and so he sought a sign that required God to suspend a law of the universe which He had created. This particular request was highly relevant to the question at hand, since the Baals were nature gods, and so Gideon will be able to compare the relative power of Yahweh against the ones who were unable to stop him from toppling their images and building an altar to the Lord in their places (6:25–27); but should that earlier confirmation not been sufficient on this point? Gideon’s request was also an appropriate one in a rural area known for its dews. **And it was so.** God does not condemn Gideon for his lack of faith by this point. **When he rose early**

10. David J. Engelsma, *Unfolding Covenant History: An Exposition of the Old Testament*, volume 5, Judges and Ruth (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, c2005), p. 58.

the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water, while the ground around the fleece was bone dry. But could this confirmation have been an unexpected but not miraculous natural occurrence? When humans make such demands of God, it is hard to create a test in which all other possibilities have been eliminated, as a research scientist would.

4. The Dryness of the Fleece (39–40).

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 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.

The Lord had passed the test, but Gideon was not through demanding confirmation from Him. Gideon said to God, “Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more.” The judge was obviously aware that God had reason to be angry with such lack of faith in him. But even small faith can be bold before a gracious God like Israel’s. Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; Gideon recognized that he was testing God. Let it now be dry on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew. The reverse request was again answered positively, as **God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground.** Gideon had received the two confirmations which he had sought and asked for no more, as he had said.

Application

God’s positive responses to Gideon’s tests, asking for signs to confirm God’s calling and promises, show His patience with those of weak faith in Old Covenant era. But the time has long since come when such tests are no longer acceptable in God’s sight: “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah” (Mt. 12:39). Now that Jesus of Nazareth has died and come back to life through resurrection from the dead, no human being needs an additional sign to believe and obey.

Ultimately, the size of our faith is related to the size of the God towards whom it is exercised. With a whole-Bible understanding of the true and living God, nobody need test God anymore. We know all that we need to know to trust Him with our lives.

THE SWORD OF THE LORD 7:1–22.

We thrill to the story of battle, anticipating victory, dreading defeat, rejoicing with the victorious, commiserating with the vanquished. Few military victories of the nation of Israel were more decisive and amazing than that which Gideon accomplished “by the sword of the Lord” against the Midianites. However, that victory began in a paradoxical way.

I. THE LORD REDUCED AN ARMY IN SIZE (1–8).

1 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.

Nomadic Midianites entering the Promised Land from the southeast, where they had dwelt in the desert beyond Edom for some centuries, had overwhelmed the Israelites for seven long years (6:1). The invaders were related to Abraham through his son Midian, born to him by the concubine Keturah (Gen. 25:1–2). The main camp of the Midianites was now located by the hill of Moreh in the valley, that is, the valley of Jezreel, south of Mount Tabor and about thirteen kilometers northwest of Mount Gilboa. Gideon gathered together a small army and encamped to the south of the Midianites, **beside the well of Harod.**

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.’”

Gideon’s force consisted of 32,000 soldiers (7:3), who faced 135,000 Midianite soldiers (8:10). In modern warfare, the attacking army is expected to have from two to four times more soldiers than the opposition, in order to hope to be successful in overwhelming a dug-in force. Gideon had just the reverse: the Israelites had fewer than one man for each four Midianites. Therefore, he might have expected that the LORD would advise caution in attacking so numerous an opponent with so few. Jesus certainly did (Luke 14:31): “What king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?” However, the message received from **the LORD**, the covenant God of Israel, was that **the people who are with you are too many** for Him to accomplish His

purpose through Israel! It was not merely, as Seutonius put it long ago, that “even with many legions, it is always the few who win the battle.”¹¹ Rather, the danger existed that, when its victory would be secured, **Israel claim glory against Me**. They might even go so far as to advance the idea that, “**My own hand has saved me.**”

Application

Our hearts are such that we are always prone to claim glory for ourselves, rather than to give all the glory to God. Whether Israel is viewed as a Church or as a Nation—for it was both—the LORD knew that Israel could attribute the victory to itself and not to the true Victor, unless the odds were totally hopeless. So it is today. God will have the glory that is rightfully His, which is why He chooses to do so much through small, despised churches rather than through the widely-respected mega-churches. And in the spiritual victory over our enemies typified by Gideon’s, God claims all the credit, despite what so many professing Christians believe about their contribution, however slight, to their salvation.

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.

As the battle nears, even the most valiant warrior can become **fearful and afraid**. Such soldiers can become not only a weakness in themselves, but they can easily sway others to adopt the same dangerous attitude. In the principles of warfare provided in Deuteronomy 20, we read in verse 8, “The officers shall speak further to the people, and say, “What man is *there who is fearful and fainthearted*? Let him go and return to his house, lest the heart of his brethren faint like his heart.”¹² The LORD told Gideon to offer, **in the hearing of the people**, just that opportunity to leave for home to any who had become fearful. No fewer than **twenty-two thousand returned**, so only **ten thousand [soldiers] remained** at Gideon’s disposal. The ratio was now more than thirteen to one against Israel, already impossible odds!

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.”

But **the Lord** maintains that the ten thousand are still too many. So, He proposes to Himself test them on Gideon’s behalf, in a manner that does not make immediate sense to us. Why should it matter how a soldier drinks **the water** from the brook flowing from the spring (or well) of Harod? Because one of the positions “placed a premium upon alertness and the display of a soldierly spirit,”¹² and the other did not. Just as an American cowboy of the nineteenth century was rarely found without his boots on—even in bed!—the Israelite soldiers were not to get down in a vulnerable position, but were to be ready to act on a moment’s notice. Staying on their feet would permit them to spring into action against the enemy without a second being lost.

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 them in the valley.

To the dismay of Gideon, no doubt, only **three hundred men** were left to him when this second stage of divinely-mandated elimination had been completed, for **all the rest of the people got down on their knees to drink water**, and were then dismissed, **each man to his tent**. But the LORD is perfectly clear in the promise He makes to Gideon: **By the three hundred men who lapped like a dog I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand**. Gideon sent the other soldiers home, with their provisions and their trumpets, both of which he might have thought could prove useful later in the fight against the Midianites. As Gideon watched them leave, he had a choice to make: to believe the LORD or to follow the departing men,

11. Quoted in J. P. Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal, and Homiletical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), p. 122.

12. Arthur E. Cundall, *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1968), p. 110.

leaving the Midianites triumphant over the people of God. Gideon stayed, trusting that God would provide a most improbable victory, His forces being now outnumbered by 450 to 1. Gideon had to believe that the few who really counted had been left for the battle.

Application

Church and nation can always do more with few than with many. It is the dedicated few who do almost all that is good. In a day of small things, when the great events and movements of the past seem far away and of little influence, it is not defeatism to admit as much. But it requires better leadership to use the few who are available. For over seventy years, the members of the Soviet Communist Party completely dominated their nation and widely influenced the rest of the world, but never counted more than eight percent of Soviet adults among its members. Surely for the sake of the King and Redeemer we few can do as much, and all for the benefit of others, not ourselves! Indeed, it was an army of one Who accomplished the victory over all our enemies we want others to come to enjoy.

But we have no specific promise nor spectacular revelation to encourage our faith in times of small efforts, as did Gideon. Truly, "faith is the evidence of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1)—more today than it was even in Gideon's time. For we must believe the Word of God as it comes to us, in the pages of Holy Scripture, for "faith comes from hearing and hearing from the word of God" (Romans 10:17). In that way, we are called to an even greater faith than that displayed by Gideon, one of the great examples of faith (Hebrews 11:32).

II. THE LORD SENT A DREAM OF CONFIRMATION (9–15a).

The Lord is now pleased to develop the faith of Gideon further.

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 the 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 seashore in multitude.

Gideon may have found it hard to sleep that **same night**, realizing that it was his responsibility to develop the means whereby the LORD would use three hundred men to defeat 135,000 (8:10). The LORD was, as so often, going to use human means to accomplish His goals in this world. During the night, the Lord told Gideon that He had already delivered the Midianite camp into his hand. But first, Gideon needed to reconnoiter the camp. Knowing the fear that must have welled up in his heart, the LORD encouraged Gideon to take **Purah his servant** with him for company. The purpose of this dangerous endeavour was not to test the defenses nor to plan for the fight, but rather to listen, to listen to **what they say** in the camp.

Gideon and Purah must have wondered what they needed to hear as they approached **the outpost of the armed men of the** thousands of Midianites, encamped with **the Amalekites**. The latter people had allied themselves with the Midianites, in order to benefit from the sin-induced weakness of Israel. So, **all the people of the East** were now ranged against them! The Amalekites had first confronted the people of God at Rephidim in the wilderness of Sinai (Ex. 17:8–13). As a result, God had promised that "I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven" (Ex. 17:14). Responsibility for meting out that terrible punishment is given later to Israel: "You will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget" (Deut. 25:19). The reason? "Remember what Amalek did to you on the way as you were coming out of Egypt, how he met you on the way and attacked your rear ranks, all the stragglers at your rear, when you were tired and weary; and he did not fear God" (Deut. 25:17–18). Now, Gideon has the opportunity to work out this command.

Application

Faith develops by exercising it, like a muscle in the body. Faith is not passive, it is active. Faith is never apart from good works, or else it is dead (James 2:17). The faith of Gideon and Purah is particularly striking, as the odds against them were so great.

Not only were the invading soldiers as **numerous as locusts**, but **their camels were without number, as sand by the seashore in multitude**. Camels had been domesticated for the first time not long before this time, and

“the first known razzia of camel nomads is the Midianite invasion.”¹³ These impressive and hardy beasts gave the invaders a significant advantage over the Israelites on the battlefield, or, so everyone on both sides of the battle line must have thought.

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.”

As Gideon approached the outpost of the Midianite camp, he overheard a soldier **telling a dream to his companion**. This surprising dream involved a barley loaf that **tumbled into the camp of Midian** and caused a **tent** there to collapse. Dreams were used by God to communicate with his people in the Old Covenant, perhaps most notably when the butler and baker were imprisoned with Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 40). But throughout the Middle East, dreams were considered as giving unusual insight into the future. And so it was with this dream.

The soldier’s companion interpreted the dream accurately, as later events proved. A **loaf of barley bread** symbolized something poor, weak, and defenseless, as wheat bread would have been eaten by wealthier people. To Gideon and Purah, Israel certainly now seemed poor, weak, and defenseless, and it would have been the same with its enemies. A **tent** was an appropriate symbol of a nomadic tribe like the Midianites, which lived in such housing as they followed their flocks to find water and pastures. Therefore, the interpreter concluded that God had **delivered Midian and the whole camp** to be defeated by their opponents. God had already promised Gideon as much—“You shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you? ... Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man” (6:14,16)—and the dream and its interpretation confirmed that earlier comment. But what was truly extraordinary was the soldier’s initial statement: **This is nothing else but the sword of Gideon!** Gideon was expecting to wield the sword for the Lord, but these words tempted him to think of himself as the principal actor in the violent struggle ahead. But even a pagan knew better: it is God who will have **delivered Midian and the whole camp**. Gideon was continuing to learn

to understand God’s active involvement in His people’s life, in order both to bring victory and maintain faith.

15a And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshiped.

We might have expected Gideon to rush back to the Israelite camp to organize a quick assault on the enemy, as the debilitating news spread quickly among the Midianites and the Amalekites that a dream had been interpreted to indicate that they were about to lose in warfare to the handful of Israelites camped before them. Instead, Gideon takes the time to worship the LORD.

Application

Undoubtedly, some believers today would like to receive dreams and their interpretations from the LORD. But that is to forget that the redemption of the elect has made undoubted progress since the time of Gideon. We have ‘a more sure word of prophecy’ (2 Peter 1:19), for it is a reality, not a dream, that Jesus has come into this world, vanquishing all His, and our, enemies. We already know what Gideon had to learn in his unique circumstances. Should that not encourage us to worship Gideon’s God? The accomplishment of the promised victory is not long in coming.

III. THE LORD GAVE A VICTORY OVER MIDIAN (15b-25).

15b 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!*’”

Preparations for the defeat of the Midianites moved forward quickly. Gideon **returned to the camp of Israel**, where he delivered a brief pep-talk: **Arise, for the LORD has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand**. The men knew that it was impossible for them to defeat the enormous throng spread before them. But they acquiesced

13. William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), p. 132.

to the command of their leader—who must have been perceived as the most extraordinary of leaders by his men—depending on the promise of the LORD to bring them victory. **The three hundred men** were divided into **three companies**, which has been a traditional military practice throughout the millennia, in order to increase the effectiveness of the attack and to decrease the danger if part of the army fades during the battle. Each man was given three items: a trumpet, an empty pitcher, and a burning torch inside the pitcher. Their hands are now full, with no fighting instruments in either of them. They must have wondered, what could Gideon hope to accomplish in fighting this way, except our annihilation?

Although Gideon was instructing them to fight in a most unorthodox way, he was not expecting more of his men than he expected of himself. **Look at me and do likewise.** The decisive moment for attack would be announced **when I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me.** The noise of all the men trumpeting at once would be impressive, as would their shout, “*The sword of the LORD and of Gideon.*” In the United States, there is an upscale department store called Lord & Taylor. It was not founded by a Mr. Lord and a Mr. Taylor, as one might suppose, but by Mr. Taylor, who was a Christian and wanted his business to put God first. Hence, the name of the store. So, too, the Israelites gave the LORD top-billing, even as they recognized in their slogan the reality that General Gideon was crucial to their success in battle.

Application

The best leader leads from the front, as did Gideon. He convinced his men to fight in a most unexpected and intriguing way. Perhaps by the time they inched up to the Midianite camp, they had some idea of the battle plan and could appreciate its wisdom as much as its creator did. But the three hundred, like Gideon, showed faith in the LORD, just as they expressed confidence in their general. The best leader leads by humbling recognizing his dependence upon God, as Gideon did, and even as Jesus did, who was no less a personage than the Son of God! The church and the nation need leaders like Gideon, and followers like his soldiers.

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

14. Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, c1999), p. 283.

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 the Abel Meholah, by Tabbah.

Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outpost of the camp, poised to commence the attack. They arrived at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch. Such a time—at the darkness of midnight—was a bad time to attack if the opposition were alert, an excellent time if they were skittish. One third of the Israelites **blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers**, and the other two companies of one hundred men each joined them in doing so. Altogether, the three hundred shouted, “**The sword of the LORD and of Gideon.**” Most soldiers would have fled in panic at the employment of such a ridiculous attack tactic, but **every man stood in his place all around the camp.**

It was, in fact, the Midianites who panicked, with the sudden noises and lights creating the impression of a much, much larger force surrounding them.¹⁴ And so **the whole [Midianite] army ran and cried out and fled.** Three reactions are described: running, yelling, and fleeing, each of them appropriate to an army being suddenly routed in the dead of night. Moreover, **the LORD set every man’s sword against his companion throughout the camp**, making clear through editorial comment about which sword was really being wielded in this battle! Undoubtedly, the Midianites’ camels joined in the confused flight, although they are not mentioned in the text. The Midianites naturally moved in the direction from which they had come, toward the Jordan River, but the precise locations of the places mentioned in verse 22, **Beth Acacia, toward Zererah, as far as the border of the Abel Meholah, by Tabbah**, are unknown.

Application

The high point of Gideon’s and Israel’s faith in that time period had been reached. The Midianites and the Amalekites had been routed from their camp, driven away towards the edges of Israelite territory. The sword of the LORD (and of Gideon) has been exercised well. God and His people have worked together to accomplish His

purposes in His covenant people. Faith in action is a powerful sword in the hands of the Almighty God and no more so than in the life of our blessed Redeemer.

DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN TOP. 7:23–8:32.

The ascent to Ben Nevis, Mount Washington, or the Matterhorn can be difficult, even life-threatening, but the descent is often even more treacherous. What is true in mountain-climbing is also true in our spiritual lives. Gideon had led the people of Israel through various difficulties and surprising providences to a most unexpected and wonderful victory over their enemies, the Midianites and their allies, the Amalekites. But no sooner had the sword of the LORD and of Gideon won that battle than Gideon and the Israelites began to come tumbling down the mountainside in a series of disasters for their faith.

I. FIGHTERS RECRUITED (7:23–8:3).

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

The battle was not over. The danger remained very real that the Midianite commanders could regroup their troops after the initial panic subsided and turn on the Israelites; the Midianites still had a numerical superiority, although they may not have known that. But how would Israel continue to fight against their enemies? Would it be through continuing faith in the sword of the LORD? No, they turned instead to their own swords. Their forces were augmented by the return of many of the men dismissed earlier, **gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh**, northern tribes whose soldiers could arrive promptly to enter the battle. And worse compromise with human self-sufficiency was to come quickly.

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.

It is possible to read verse 23 as an enthusiastic, unthinking desire on the part of three tribes to get involved in the rout of the enemy, leaving Gideon and his men as untouched by lack of faith. However, the next verse makes clear that Gideon himself sent messengers throughout all the mountains of Ephraim seeking recruits. Ephraim had not originally been invited to attack the Midianites (6:33–35), so the appeal shows Gideon breaking away from the successful formula God had developed and used. The message that the heralds brought to the Ephraimites was simple: join us and seize the Jordan River crossing as far as Beth Barah (its location unknown), in order to stop the Midianite retreat and bottle them up for final annihilation. The men of Ephraim responded positively to the appeal and did as they were requested. The Ephraimites captured two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb—bearers of appropriate names for military leaders, “Raven” and “Wolf” respectively—who were then executed at locations which came to bear their names, the rock of Oreb and **the winepress of Zeeb**, places of remembrance for a victory of God’s people over their enemies.

8:1 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.

The men of Ephraim were happy to have been able to join the fight—with its implicit promise of booty to come—but they were cross with Gideon. What he had done to the Midianites was not their concern; what he had done to them was. If they had been so zealous when all seemed headed towards disaster for the people of God, why did the Ephraimites volunteer to battle the enemy now? Instead of rejoicing in the great victory Israel had experienced by the sword of the Lord, they were grumpy and accusatory.

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.

Instead of defending the LORD’s way of defeating the Midianites, Gideon answered the Ephraimite complaints with a beguiling compliment, stated in four ways,

including three questions. He asked first, **What have I done in comparison with you?** Obviously much more, but phrasing it in this way flatters the men of Ephraim into thinking that they had, in fact, done more than, or at least as much as, Gideon. Then Gideon uses what may have been a proverb, querying, *Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?* Gideon came from Abiezer (6:11), and this clan was nothing compared with the important tribe of Ephraim; the size and quality of their respective grape harvests proved it. Third, Gideon observed to the Ephraimites that God had **delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb.** The Ephraimites had the real trophies, the Midianite princes **Oreb and Zeeb**, given them not by Gideon but by God Himself, which may have struck the Israelites more as a religious pleasantry than a firm affirmation. And finally, Gideon virtually repeated the first query, **What was I able to do in comparison with you?** This approach may be praised as diplomatic (“A soft answer turns away wrath,” Prov. 15:1) but it was disingenuous as well in this case.

Application

Gideon is stumbling down the proverbial mountainside, as are several other tribes of the people of God. We always face the danger of zealous activity without thoughtful reflection. Especially in times of danger or excitement or confusion, we can follow our hearts without listening to our heads. Israel could not bring itself to continue to fight by faith. We face the same temptation, even if we have begun well. Moreover, our Saviour shows how to speak winsomely to others without falling into falsehood at several points during His earthly ministry.

II. REQUESTS REBUFFED (4–9).

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

15. The hand was considered a symbol of power and might (in Joshua 8:20, “hand” is even translated “power”), and so it was considered appropriate to cut off the hands of conquered kings as a sign of their defeat. In this context, the unique finger rings of royalty would have identified the severed extremity and thus confirmed the accuracy of the claim to victory.

16. S. Merrill identifies Penuel with a site six kilometers east of Succoth on two hills named Tulul ed-Dahab. *East of the Jordan: a record of travel and observation in the countries of Moab, Gilead and Bashan during the years 1875–1877* (New-York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1881), pp. 390–392. It was where Jacob earlier had wrestled with the angel (Genesis 32:30,31).

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.”

Free from the distraction posed by the now-satisfied Ephraimites, Gideon **and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over** the Jordan River. They were **exhausted**, as was to be expected, **but still in pursuit** of their enemies. However, the Israelites were entering into increasingly hostile territory, with their supply lines (if any) stretched thin. Gideon hoped for help from the Israelites who lived scattered in certain parts of the Transjordan region, such as **Succoth**, a town of the tribe of Gad. His request was simple: **loaves of bread.** It appeared that Gideon thought that he was just about to catch up with **Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian**, which proved later to be true. If only his men’s strength could be restored through the generosity of their fellow Israelites!

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 briars!”

The leaders of Succoth knew that the Israelite victory was partial and, exposed as their town was to marauders from various directions, refused to help Gideon and his men until the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna had been chopped off and the Midianite threat eliminated.¹⁵ Gideon responds to their refusal with petulance: **When the LORD has delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will tear your flesh.** Gideon’s response was understandable, but not excusable. No useful purpose was served by turning on his fellow Israelites, when there remained so much of the Promised Land to be possessed. Gideon is acting now more like a pagan warlord than a godly judge.

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!”

Going on a little further, Gideon and his men came **to Penuel** (or Peniel), another Gadite settlement.¹⁶ A similar request to the one made in Succoth resulted in a similar rebuff. Gideon promised to bring calamity on

this town as well: **When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!**

Application

The men of Ephraim, Succoth, and Penuel are pragmatic men, rather than men of principle, unwilling to do the right no matter at what cost to themselves. But Gideon is no better, angrily promising revenge on those who do not immediately do what he requests. A godly leader would have behaved differently ... like Jesus Christ did when humans disappointed Him in His times of need.

III. VICTORY REACHED (10–12).

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.

No doubt some days had passed since the original rout of the Midianites related in chapter 7. Their two kings, **Zebah and Zalmunna**, had stopped their demoralized troops at **Karkor**; all that were left after the hasty retreat from Israelite territory were **fifteen thousand** soldiers. Perhaps they just could not go any further; we are told that they thought that they were far enough east to be beyond the reach of Gideon and his now-expanded forces. Gideon led his men on a caravan route beyond **Nobah and Jogbehah**, the latter a town of the tribe of Gad (Numb. 32:35), located above one thousand meters in altitude and today known as Jubeihāt, ten kilometers northwest of Amman. Both armies had descended into the Jordan River valley and climbed over a kilometer in altitude and were no doubt truly exhausted by this point.

Gideon attacked the army and **Zebah and Zalmunna fled**. Gideon pursued them ... **took the two kings ... and routed the whole army**. Now Gideon's victory was complete. He had not permitted himself to be deflected by criticism or opposition from fellow Israelites, but had doggedly pursued his mandate to defeat the Midianites and Amalekites. For the last time in the Book of Judges, Gideon appears in a favorable light.

Application

The Midianites had expected victory over the people of God, because they saw them as mere people, not as those favoured by the help of the Almighty God. Even after the enormous, initial Israelite victory, they came to the place where they felt secure. 'Let him who thinks he stands, take care lest he falls!' (1 Cor. 10:12) Satan saw the cross as his greatest victory, but it became the crux of his defeat.

IV. REVENGE REALIZED (13–17).

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.

Having defeated the enemy and chased him from Israelite territory, Gideon and his men begin the long trek home. They captured a young man of the town of Succoth, and, finding him to be literate at a time when reading and writing were not commonly-possessed skills, induced him to write down the names of the **seventy-seven men** who ruled it.¹⁷ Gideon convened this group and presented before them, not the hands of **Zebah and Zalmunna**, but the kings themselves. The moment must have been as delicious for Gideon as it was embarrassing to the elders. In an act of rough justice, they were whipped using **thorns of the wilderness and briers**, as promised in verse 7, but not, apparently, executed.¹⁸ **He taught them men of Succoth** quite a lesson!

Even worse awaited **the men of the town of Penuel**. They were killed—the method is not specified—and

17. We are not told the details of this writing, but it could have been accomplished using "a sharp-pointed instrument to scratch the words upon a fragment of pottery or a piece of shale, a method frequently employed for much of the Old Testament period" Arthur E. Cundall, *Judges: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1968), p. 118.

18. Some commentators have argued, from a perceived parallel to the sort of the men of Penuel, that the elders of Succoth were tortured and executed. See, for instance, George Bush, *Notes on Judges* (Minneapolis: James & Klock, 1976), pp. 110, 112.

Gideon **tore down the tower**, leaving Penuel very open to attack, without men to defend it or a tower to which to flee when attacked.¹⁹

Application

Gideon demonstrates a certain grim follow-through, meting out a form of justice in faithfulness to earlier promises. But as difficult as the situation was that the leaders of Succoth and Penuel exacerbated for Gideon, did the punishment fit the crime? Is Gideon not acting more like the leaders of the pagan nations than the leader of the people of God? It is not enough to win for the Lord; the means used to do so must be consistent with the ends. Our Lord could have responded in a similar way to those who crossed Him, but never did.

V. KINGS RUN THROUGH (18–21).

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.

The bloodletting continued, although no longer directed toward the people of God. Gideon confronted the Midianite kings **Zebah and Zalmunna** with a multiple killing at **Tabor** in which they had been implicated. Their frank response indicated to Gideon that they had killed his own **brothers**. If the kings had not done so, Gideon claimed that he would not execute them, even though they no doubt must have killed others in the course of the series of battles between the Midianites and the Israelites. He confirms his promise with an oath, **as the Lord lives**, whose sincerity can be questioned.

Gideon gave Jether his firstborn the opportunity to prove his manliness, but the young man could not steel himself sufficiently to thrust through the two Midianite royals. In a moment of surprising swagger, they urged

Gideon: Rise yourself, and kill us. Gideon was not the type to need much encouragement to act the role of military tough-guy, and executed the two with his sword. As a final symbol of his victory over them and all that they represented, Gideon **took the crescent ornaments that were on their camels’ backs**.

Application

Gideon seems to be zigging and zagging between mercy and judgement, with no great consistency nor bringing any moral clarity to the situation. Moreover, the mingling of the personal and the corporate does not help. A more deliberative process, with checks and balances on the exercise of the power of the sword, would have no doubt led to a more satisfactory course of events. Without an established government implementing a well-defined set of civil laws, Israel continued its sad experience of lawlessness and anarchy. Israel needs to recognize a king ... the LORD, and His anointed king. Similarly, all the nations today need to recognize this Messiah in Jesus of Nazareth, into whose hands ‘all authority in heaven and on earth has been given’ (Matthew 28:18).

VI. GREED REVEALED (22–32).

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 camel’s necks.

It was almost inevitable: after Gideon had led the Israelites to such a great victory over their enemies, the people of God asked him to rule over them as the beginning of a dynasty: **Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also**. Gideon refused the offer, for **the LORD shall rule over you**. This pious phrase—true as far as it goes—actually hid a serious misunderstanding

19. Because Penuel controlled an important pass, Jeroboam rebuilt the town in the 10th century BC (1 Kings 12:25).

on Gideon's part. He had forgotten that the LORD usually uses means to exercise His authority, specifically, men in positions of authority in family, church, and state, the three institutions which He has established as universally-necessary for the good of human society. Perhaps Gideon's refusal was more mundane: were those offering him the kingship truly in the position to do so? Only some of the tribes were involved in the battles against the Midianites and so it is unlikely. Perhaps Gideon did not wish to create a situation which would have significantly divided the Israelites, perhaps even provoked a civil war. It is fascinating to read later in verse 31 that he named one of his sons Abimelech, which means "my father a king", suggesting that Gideon may have eventually rued the day he turned down the offer of royalty.

But Gideon was not above trying to benefit from the success of his leadership in another way. He did not need a kingship, but cold cash would do very well instead, so he requested each victorious soldier to give me the earrings from his plunder. It seems that the Ishmaelites, an alternative way of describing the Midianites, had golden earrings. And so some of the plunder of the battles was these earrings. The soldiers spread out a garment, and each man threw into it the earrings from his plunder. So extensive had been the victory that they weighed one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold, a very considerable sum. And that was not counting the crescent ornaments, pendants, and ... chains which also were of value, and the purple robes, which were on the kings of Midian.

Application

Gideon may have been modest, but he was certainly greedy. He was more than willing to take advantage of the victory the LORD had given as if it were his own. And the Israelites' attitude toward him was just as false and dangerous. Gideon's faith was real, but shallow and uninformed, a potentially dangerous combination which the LORD nonetheless is pleased to overlook in sending peace for a time to His people. But the seeds of later disaster have been sown in this unstable environment. What a contrast Gideon has become to the Judge Who gave up everything for the sake of His people: all the pleasures of heaven, the praise of the crowds of angels and glorified saints, and the freedom from temptation, suffering, and death.

VII. WORSHIP REPLACED (27–32).

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 quality of Gideon's leadership continued to decline, as he fabricated **an ephod and set it up in his city, Ophrah**. The ephod had an important place in the religious ceremonies of the ancient Jews, being worn by the priests over their clothes when in the service of the house of God (Exodus 39:2–7). But Gideon had no good reason for making and wearing such a garment; the LORD had specifically forbidden any form of worship of Himself apart from His express command (Ex. 20:4–6).²⁰ Such worship always has a downward tendency, and so we are not surprised to read that the ephod **became a snare to Gideon and 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 Ephrah of the Abiezrites.

The Midianites were not destroyed, of course, but they were **subdued before the children of Israel**. They did not again attack Israel, but they were certainly known to the people of God centuries later (see Is. 60:6 in the late eighth century and Hab. 3:7 about a century later). And so **the country was quiet for forty years in the days of Gideon**.

Victory over enemies accomplished, the elder statesman returned to his home, where he acted like an ancient potentate, **for he had many wives** and, inevitably in such a household, **seventy sons who were his own offspring**. But it was the son of a **concubine who was in Shechem** who is alone mentioned; why that was will become obvious in the next chapter. It is sometimes

20. It is often argued that, as long as there is no command against a certain form of worship in the Scriptures, it is permitted. But there is no command against making an ephod for use in worship by any believer and yet such an activity is obviously being condemned here. Only a blanket command not to worship in any way not commanded by God in His Word is a sufficient explanation of what we find here.

argued that polygamy was permitted in the Old Testament, since so many of Israel's leaders had multiple wives. However, God had created one man and one woman for each other (Genesis 2:21–25), a pattern to be followed throughout all generations as a creation ordinance. The Old Testament laws about marriage were solely concerned with such exclusive marriage relationships. Polygamy was expressly forbidden even (especially?) to kings in Deut. 17:14–17.

Then **Gideon the son of Joash died at a good old age**. Out of respect for his body, it was **buried in the tomb of Joash his father, in Ephrah of the Abiezrites**.

Application

Worship that God has not commanded always has a downward tendency, no matter how movingly it is advocated by its supporters, as what is still forbidden today becomes acceptable tomorrow. Jesus told us in our own age to observe all that He had commanded us (Matthew

28:20), which means nothing if is not understood to forbid observing anything He has not commanded us.

And once believers feel free to worship in ways God has not commanded in His Word, they become more ready to accept immoral practices in other aspects of life, as the narrative seeks to demonstrate by mentioning Gideon's polygamy for the first time at this point. And no wonder, for the social implications of polygamy are great: a scarcity of marriageable women, leading to an increase in crime and prostitution; and the glorifying of sensuality.

Gideon had found it easier to serve God in a crisis than in day-to-day life. Only the Word of God would be honest enough to describe a hero of faith in the way that the Book of Judges does here. Gideon began well but finished poorly. And, as a later king was to say, "Après moi, le déluge!" So it was with Gideon, but it could have been so much different, if his faith had informed all of his life rather than just his desire to protect the people of God from their enemies.■

In Brief: The following appeared in *The Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, New Series, No. XLVII, Vol. IV, No. XI (Nov. 1835), pp. 758–759. Thomas M'Crie (1772–1835) was a minister of what became the Original Secession Church. See the previous obituary in this issue. This, the obituary, and the material by M'Crie on the Marrow Controversy all come from rare and still generally unavailable issues of *The Edinburgh Christian Instructor*.

For *The Christian Instructor*
Lines on the Death of Dr. McCrie

Weep Zion, weep, a faithful watchman falls,
Skilful, in troublous times, to build they walls,
And tell they tow'rs, repelling every foe,
Within, without, that seeks thine overthrow.
Learned in sacred, and in classic lore,
McCrie the great, and good, is now no more.
With his own Knox, and Melville shall his name,
Be ever dear to Scotia, and to fame.
Foremost in battle, 'gainst the insidious foe,
He stood with Thomson, now alas! laid low.
O tell it not in Gath, nor Ashkelon,
Lest haughty foes should boast of vict'ry won.

That hand that guided oft the classic pen,
In cold in death, nor e'er shall write again;
That tongue so eloquent of late to tell
The Church's triumphs o'er the pow'rs of Hell,
Is mute for ever,—that benignant eye
Has felt the sentence, "Thou shalt surely die."
But he shall live in each illustrious page,
Proclaiming heavenly truth, to every age

Of man, from worse than Egypt's bondage free,
The Reformation's glorious light and liberty.
And what fell mortal, shall immortal rise,
To live in yonder realms above the skies,
To tell of wisdom manifold, divine,
Th' incarnate God, in whom all glories shine;
While principalities within the vail,
In deep amazement listen to the tale,
And all the heavenly hosts, with loud acclaim,
Sing Hallelujahs to His honoured name.

Weep then, O Zion weep, with downcast eye,
And hear, with contrite heart, the deep drawn sigh,
Iniquity abounds, love waxes cold,
The faithful fails, the enemy is bold.
But He who holds the stars in His right hand,
Has sworn that all his purposes shall stand;
And while he calls from earth each chosen one,
A Hamilton, M'Gillivray, and Patterson,
Ay, and McCrie, He'll other shepherds raise,
To feed his flock, and sing their Maker's praise.■