



STORY

Gideon - Judges 6:1-8:28

TEACHER PRAYER

Dear Lord Jesus, You appeared unto Gideon and chose him to set the Israelites free from the Midianite oppression. The deliverance of Israel depended, not on Gideon's abilities, but upon Your blessing. In the same way, you have chosen me to present the Gospel to these students, which sets them free from a much greater and more dangerous oppressor. Bless the teaching of this story with the power of Your Holy Spirit so that Your Word may have free course and accomplish Your purposes in the hearts of these children. May my feeble efforts bring glory to Your precious name. Amen.

VOCABULARY

Jerubaal - Let Baal plead - name given to Gideon after he destroyed the altar to Baal. When Baal worshipers asked his father to turn Gideon over to them, he replied: Let Baal do this himself.

Judges -- Leaders God raised up to deliver His people

Midianites - Originally descended from Abraham and Keturah, this nomadic tribe lived east of the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula. Here the term includes more than one nationality (Amelekites and the People of the East). In this case, one could picture them as desert bandits.

Valley of Jezreel - Located south and west of the Sea of Galilee, the valley follows a small stream that empties into the Jordan River. It was a natural site for battles to be fought for two reasons: 1. Topography 2. An army needed to camp near water.

"The sword of the Lord and Gideon" - This battle cry meant that God was using Gideon to exact His justice upon the Midianite forces.

BACKGROUND

The period of the Judges was one of several very low points in the history of Israel. One problem was that the people failed to complete the task of driving the Canaanites out of the land. Also, after Joshua's death, the people had become spiritually careless in their prosperity, just as Moses had warned (Deut. 8:11ff).

To help His people, God used their enemies to chasten them. "Now these are the nations which the Lord left, that He might test Israel by them, that is, all who had not known any of the wars in Canaan." (Judges 3:1)

POINTS OF INTEREST

- < Gideon was threshing grain in the winepress. Conditions were so bad that one could not risk threshing in the normal manner.
- < Gideon destroyed the altar to Baal (his father's) at night, for fear of the reaction it would bring from the community.
- < Gideon didn't understand why the Lord was chastening His people.
- < God gave Gideon several special signs: He consumed Gideon's sacrifice, caused the dew to behave against the laws of nature, allowed Gideon to overhear a discussion in the Midianite camp.
- < God made use of military strategy in the defeat of the Midianites and the capture of their leaders.
- < The men of Succoth and Penuel were too selfish to lend their support to Gideon's cause.
- < The golden ephod which Gideon made from the spoils of war, became the object of idolatry.

Verses 6:1-10

- < For seven years the people of Israel lived in fear of the Midianites. Whenever the crops were ready for harvest, the Midianites would sweep through the land to plunder and destroy whatever they wanted. The country was thoroughly impoverished. People lived in caves and were forced to hide whatever they had from the Midianites. The scene is later used by Isaiah to depict a dark spiritual oppression into which the Light of the world would be born.
- < Isaiah 9:2-4: The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them a light has shined. You have multiplied the nation and increased its joy; they rejoice before You according to the joy of harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For you have broken the yoke of his burden and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.
- < The Lord sent a prophet to tell the people why this was happening. His purpose was to convict them of their sin and lead them to repentance.

Verses 6:11-27

- < The Angel of the LORD appeared to Gideon as he threshed grain in the winepress. Gideon did not understand how the Lord could be with His people and still allow the Midianites to oppress them. When the LORD commissioned Gideon to lead the army against the Midianites, Gideon does a very natural thing: he looks at himself and confesses his own inability. “Who am I to lead the nation into battle?”
- < God confirmed His promise to Gideon by consuming the sacrifice which Gideon had prepared. This special sign confirmed the word which the Lord had spoken. This is the primary purpose of God’s miracles, (cf. Mark 16:20) to confirm God’s Word. Miracles do not produce faith. (There are many examples of unbelievers who witnessed the miracles of God, yet remained unbelievers -- Pharaoh, the Jewish leaders, etc.) God’s Word produces and strengthens faith; miracles confirm that Word and are sometimes called, the visible Word.
- < Gideon’s response was to build an altar to Jehovah, naming it: The Lord-Shalom.
- < That night, at God’s direction, Gideon dismantled his father’s altar to Baal, which included an Asherah pole. With the wood from this symbol of Baal worship, Gideon would fire the sacrifice to the true God of Israel.

Verses 6:28-35

- < The reaction which Gideon expected from the community became reality in the morning. When they learned that Gideon was to blame, they immediately went to Joash and ordered him to hand over his son. Joash had an interesting answer: If Baal is really a god - shouldn’t he be able to defend himself? From this, Gideon receives his second name: Jerubaal - Let Baal Plead for himself.
- < The combined Midianite forces gathered in the Valley of Jezreel. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and used him to call the troops together for battle. Soldiers were summoned from the northern tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. One should probably not envision soldiers in the sense of well armed and trained warriors. The picture of farmers coming with pitchforks, scythes, knives, homemade swords, and any other instruments that might be used for battle, is probably more accurate.

Verses 6:36-40

- < Who could blame Gideon for requesting a special sign from the Lord? We know how difficult it is to trust the Lord when what we see with our eyes is the opposite of what we are to believe. In Gideon's case, his own life was at stake.
- < God is merciful and understanding. He knows our frame. He answered Gideon's request not once, but twice. A full bowl of water was wrung from the fleece the first night; the fleece was absolutely dry the next.

Verses 7:1-25

- < The details leading up to battle seem quite straightforward. The emphasis is on the fact that the smaller the army, the more unlikely the victory would be. In the end, the odds were so stacked against Gideon, that it would take the Lord to grant them victory.
- < From 32,000 to 300 is a striking change when one works it out on paper - to see the difference in the number of actual people would have been staggering.
- < Why did the Lord sort the people by how they drank from the water? There are two answers; both are related. One suggests that those who lifted the water with their hands wouldn't take the time to kneel down; the second is that the most vigilant soldiers wouldn't put their faces down to the water, but would want to keep an eye open for the enemy.
- < Gideon and his servant are granted a final confirmation of the Lord's plan. This time, it comes from a conversation they overhear from the Midianite camp.
- < The choice of weapons seems odd to us in our day and age. Several historical factors may shed light on how brilliant this choice turned out to be. For one thing, it would seem that very few soldiers would actually carry torches and trumpets, just as only a handful of soldiers during the Civil War would carry a fife or a drum. Secondly, because it is nighttime (midnight - at the changing of guards), and because there are different nationalities camped together (and also, there are no uniforms), the Midianites would awake to the sound of hundreds of trumpets and the sight of hundreds of lights. Their first thought would not be: there are only 300 men. Seeing 300 torches and hearing the shouts and trumpets of 300 men, they would more likely think that there were hundreds of thousands of soldiers. In the confusion of darkness, stranger would have to turn against stranger; it would be kill or be killed.
- < In the same way, the Lord used military strategies throughout the history of His people - not because He needed strategy, but because His miracles often accompany ordinary means. (cf. The battles at Ai, Jericho, etc.)
- < The Midianite army would self-destruct. Those who survived the midnight massacre, headed east toward the Jordan River, hoping to get across before the pursuing Israelites caught them.
- < Gideon sent word ahead to the people of that area, telling them to draw arms and attack the fleeing Midianites. They captured two of the Midianite princes, Oreb and Zeeb. The locations at which these men were killed were named accordingly.

Verses 8:1-21

- < Once they become involved in chasing the Midianites (and had some success), the men of Ephraim are angry that Gideon has not called upon them sooner. (Their interest is probably due to gaining both the glory of victory and the spoils of war.) They take Gideon to task for neglecting to enlist their support. Gideon's answer is very diplomatic: he commends them for the glorious job of killing Zeeb and Oreb.
- < As his tiny army reached the Jordan river, the men were hungry and exhausted. Requesting food supplies from the locals, Gideon is surprised to see how selfish the people of Succoth really are. They aren't willing to risk their food on an army so small, especially when there is no guarantee of victory. The people at Penuel do the same thing. Therefore Gideon promises to teach them a lesson on his return trip.
- < Once again Gideon uses a bit of strategy in attacking what's left of the Midianite forces. When they feel secure, he attacks, not from the west where they would expect, but from the east. He routed the enemy and captured their kings, Zebah and Zalmunna.
- < On his way back to Israel, Gideon caught a young man from Succoth and interviewed him about his hometown people. He got a list of the city elders who were responsible for withholding food from him. No doubt, he kept the two Midianite kings alive, simply as proof to the people of Succoth that he was victorious as he said. Then, he chastened the leaders of Succoth, giving them a few lessons with briars and thorns. At Penuel, Gideon gave another lesson. There, he destroyed their tower and killed the men of the city.

Verses 8:22-28

The crescent-shaped ornaments taken from the Midianites were collected, melted and formed into an ephod, which was, no doubt, patterned after the ephod worn by the high priest. It would seem best to say that this was done in order to attribute this great victory to the Lord. As time passed, this became a matter of superstition and was a snare even to Gideon and his house.

STUDENT PRAYER

Dear Lord Jesus, help me to trust You at all times. When there is trouble in my life, help me to remember Gideon and grant me the kind of faith that You gave to him. Use me as You used Gideon, by giving me opportunities to share my faith with the people around me and by blessing my gifts for the work of the Church. Help me to remember that Your powerful Gospel is the weapon that sets people free from the oppression of sin, death, and hell. Thank You for being my Savior and for bringing me to faith. Amen.

PRESENTATION

With so much material in this story, the teacher will need to choose which items to present, based upon the age and attention span of the class. The focal point is obvious: the routing of the Midianites with a tiny army of 300 men. The primary purpose of this lesson is to show how the LORD delivers His people.

APPLICATIONS

God chastens His people because He loves them. He allowed the Israelites to suffer poverty from the hands of the Midianites because they had fallen into sin (evidenced by the altars to Baal, etc.). The consequences of their unbelief would be far worse than any temporal pain they might endure. Because He loves us, God chastens His people today. Scripture says, "We are chastened of the Lord, lest we perish with the world."

God sets a limit to the chastening and removes it when it has achieved His desired effect. Seven years was the time frame for the Midianite oppression, then God delivered His people.

God usually performs His deliverance through ordinary means, but also lets us see that the deliverance is His doing and not ours.

Faith is needed at all times in life, but especially in those times when what we see with our eyes is at odds with what we believe. Courage was required when the army was at 32,000. Greater courage was required as the numbers were reduced. Many times God leaves us with nothing but His promises to depend upon. This is really how it should be.

We should be ready to follow the Lord without fear, knowing that He is far greater than any enemy we could ever face.

We should be ready to support the work of preaching the Gospel, confident that His Word will achieve His purposes. Unlike the men of Succoth and Penuel, we should not put ourselves and our interests ahead of serving the Lord.

The parallel between Gideon's victory and the preaching of the Gospel is striking. Today, we engage in the work of God's kingdom with the unlikely weapon of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. By outward appearance, the Gospel hardly seems capable of the task and is considered foolishness by the world. Yet, the Gospel continues to conquer. Souls continue to be set free from spiritual oppression and are saved eternally. In this way, the children can do something that is similar to what Gideon had done, by sharing their faith and supporting the work of the Gospel.

PASSAGES

These passages can be assigned as memory work or simply discussed in class as to how they fit the lesson.

Lower

Luke 1:37 With God nothing will be impossible.

Hebrews 12:6 Whom the Lord loves, He chastens.

Psalms 118:8 It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man.

Middle

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Proverbs 3:5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.

Psalms 37:5 Commit your way unto the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass.

Upper

Hebrews 12:5-6 My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him. For whom the Lord loves He chastens.

Psalms 33:8 Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.

Psalms 46:1-2 God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.

HYMN CHOICES

“Oh, for a Faith that Will Not Shrink” TLH #396

“How Firm a Foundation, Ye Saints of the Lord” TLH #427