

A MAN OF VALOR

Judges 6:1-8:35

With monotonous regularity the Israelites turned from the worship of Jehovah to the worship of idols. Within a comparatively short time after God delivered them out of the hands of their oppressors, repeatedly they would get into trouble again. It was the same old story, namely, after a period of peace and prosperity they again did evil in the sight of the Lord.

When the Israelites had slipped back into one of their periodic sprees of wickedness, in order that He might bring them to their senses and cause them to repent of their sins, God permitted the roving Midianites to overrun their land, to steal their flocks and their crops, and to bring them into captivity. They were oppressed by these vicious people in an unparalleled manner. Their sad plight of extreme poverty and terrible suffering was due to their disobedience of God as was indicated by the statement: "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord: and the Lord delivered them into the hands of Midian seven years" (Judges 6:1).

Like most people who are overtaken by afflictions, they cried unto the Lord for help. In response to their cry God sent a prophet to stir their memories by recounting the miracles of His grace in former days. Through His prophet God gave them a stinging rebuke: "But ye have not obeyed my voice." He frankly told them that they did not have anyone to blame for their departure, discipline, defeat, distress, devastation and despair except themselves.

When the fortunes of the Israelites were at their lowest ebb, God selected a suitable man to meet the emergency, as He does in every such case. An emergency never arises but what God has a man who is equal to the occasion. In this case God's man was the brave and heroic Gideon, the youngest and only surviving son of Joash of Ophrah. Little more than a village in the territory of Manasseh, Ophrah was not far from the Plain of Esdraelon. Joash, the head of the clan, was a prosperous farmer, whose flocks, herds and crops would attract the covetous eyes of the marauding Arabs.

It was in the midnight hour of Israel's hope when God called Gideon to the task of commanding the armies of Israel in driving out the invading Midianites and in delivering His people from their bitter bondage. This call came as a complete surprise to this great lover of his family, his country and his God. It came at a time when Gideon was faithfully performing his humble duty of threshing wheat with a flail by a winepress in a secluded spot on his father's farm. He had selected that unusual spot in which to do his threshing in order to conceal from the tyrants the small quantity of grain which he had harvested. Fearful of being spied upon, naturally Gideon's piercing eyes watched closely for the approach of an enemy while he worked.

Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared on the scene and sat down under an oak tree and watched Gideon as he worked. Before Gideon could speak,

the angel's voice rang out with the astonishing salutation: "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour." In the light of the depressed state of his people, the message of the angel seemed startling and ridiculous to Gideon. Seven years of bitter slavery had caused him to wonder if God actually cared. He wondered why God would succor a people whom He had subjected to such constant and grievous oppression. In touch with reality, Gideon challenged the surprising words of the angel with the significant question, "If the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us?" It is not difficult to understand why Gideon spoke so despondently. It was as if he were saying, "If failure and defeat and slavery are marks of the divine presence, then the Lord may be with us. But I have been taught that victory and freedom and abounding joy are indications of His nearness and help." It was simply the age-old question: "If God loves us, why does He permit these things?"

Gideon could see that something was wrong. He refused to shut his eyes to the fact that there was little indication at hand that the mighty God was present. His mistake was in failing to see that he and his people had made it impossible for God to do for them what He was able, willing and eager to do. They were simply refusing to give God an opportunity.

To Gideon's query the Lord responded in the words: "Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?" Aware of his limitations and insufficiency, Gideon did not have any inclination toward the assignment, but cried out in protest against assuming such tremendous responsibilities by saying, "Oh, my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." He honestly felt that he was utterly unqualified for so vast an undertaking, since he had come from a poor family and from an uninfluential tribe.

Gideon's modesty, humility and distrust of self were highly commendable. He has certainly provided us with a splendid example of the right spirit for entering upon any high task, namely, distrust in one's own powers and reliance upon a higher power. However, Gideon's excuse was met with the assurance of the Divine Presence: "The Lord said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man." That assurance from God was all that Gideon desired or needed. When we know that God has given us a definite task to perform, we may rest assured that He will also give us the strength which is necessary for doing it.

Like many other people, the Israelites called on God for help and at the same time refused to separate themselves from what they knew to be very displeasing to Him. However, if they were to enjoy His favor and to serve Him, it was necessary that the worship of Baal be eradicated. So, that night God commanded Gideon to destroy the altar of Baal which was near his father's house, and which was a symbol of the spiritual degradation of his people, and to erect in its place an altar of Jehovah. With the assistance of ten of the servants on the farm, Gideon proceeded, under cover of darkness, to demolish the altar of Baal and use the stones therefrom to erect an altar to Jehovah. Thereon he courageously and heroically offered a burnt sacrifice to Jehovah. As was to be expected, when it was discovered that the altar of Baal had been destroyed, Gideon was suspected of being responsible for it because he had previously repudiated all idolatrous practices.

There was a vital significance about that altar. In the Old Testament an altar is always considered to be the place where God and men meet. It is an outward symbol of an inward transaction between the human soul and God. When Gideon built that altar to Jehovah, he made a clean break with the past, turned his back upon false gods and worshipped the true and living God.

Moreover, Gideon gave that altar a significant name, namely, "Jehovah-shalom," meaning "Jehovah is my peace." For the first time in his life Gideon's heart was filled with wondrous peace. In like manner, when Christ saves us, we have the wonderful peace that comes through knowing that all our sins are forgiven by virtue of His atoning death, that we have been reconciled to God, that a living Saviour daily keeps us and that an eternal home is awaiting us in heaven.

Gideon is a splendid example of the action which every Christian should take in separating himself from worldliness and sin. Cherished sin in the life always limits one's usefulness in God's service. Before God can use one effectively in His service, it is absolutely necessary that he give the Lord His rightful place in his life. Having discovered the will of God for his life, Gideon dedicated himself unreservedly to the doing of that will in the strength and under the direction of the Lord. This same spirit should characterize all of God's children.

Striking is the language which describes Gideon's preparation for his patriotic and heroic service. We are told that "The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon." In other words, "The Spirit of Jehovah clothed Himself with Gideon," as with a garment. The Hebrew word used here means to put on so as to fill. When God's Spirit fills people, they are able to perform heroic deeds and to achieve sublime results.

Assured of the Lord's presence and power, Gideon dared to call the Lord's people together to fight the Midianites. It is a great tribute to him that thirty-two thousand men, with apparently much devotion to the cause which he espoused, responded to his call, left their families and their homes and came forward to meet the dangers and to endure the hardships which might ensue. They appeared to be animated by the same spirit and to be willing to die for their country and for their faith, if need be.

God was not pleased with the size of the army. He preferred to defeat the enemy by a few rather than by so many. He said to Gideon, "The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me." Not wanting the Israelites to take all the credit to themselves and to boast of what they had done, God commanded Gideon to issue a proclamation to his army that all who were faint-hearted and fearful should leave the ranks, quit the field and depart to their homes, in order that their fear might not create a panic as soon as the battle started. The self-interested and fearful are always a handicap to the Lord's work. It is better to have a few who are dependable than a large number who are fearful and vacillating.

Gideon's proclamation caused twenty-two thousand to fall out of the ranks and return to their homes. The shame of deserting their comrades did not restrain them. What a blessing that Gideon did not try to lead that bunch of cowards into battle!

Not yet satisfied with the size of the army, God ordered another test to be made, this time by the manner of drinking. They were taken down to the stream by the well of Harod. There nine thousand seven hundred laid aside their weapons, got down on their knees or laid flat on the ground, and drank greedily with their faces toward the water. The other three hundred scooped up the water with their hands and lapped it hurriedly with their tongues as they watched for the oncoming enemy. The majority thought chiefly of slaking their thirst, but the rest thought primarily of the foe in front. Their minds were on the battle more than on their comfort. While the twenty-two thousand, who went home first, welcomed the opportunity to leave, the nine thousand seven hundred wanted to have a part in defeating the Midianites, but were adjudged unworthy of doing so. Only three hundred had the rigid self-denial which was necessary for such a bold and hazardous undertaking.

Reducing an army of thirty-two thousand to one of three hundred was a very strange way to prepare for a battle. Having three hundred men to fight one hundred thirty-five thousand was a very unusual procedure. It proves that a few with God can be far more effective than a whole multitude without Him. What was even more strange, God took all of their weapons away from the three hundred before He let them go into battle. This shows that, while His way may be entirely different from the ways of men, it is always best.

To reassure Gideon, God sent him down to inspect the real situation among the Midianites. Under the cover of darkness, Gideon and his servant Phurah moved cautiously and noiselessly down to the camp of the enemy to reconnoiter, which was an unusual thing for a general to do. Listening intently, he heard one Midianite tell another about his dream of a cake of barley bread tumbling into the camp of Midian and striking a tent with such force that the tent was knocked down. To Gideon the most interesting part was the interpretation of the dream, which was to the effect that this incident was a sure sign that Gideon and his men would conquer the host of the Midianites. When he returned, he so thrilled his three hundred men with the courage of his own gallant heart that they were willing to go anywhere at his command.

Gideon's tactics were very unusual. To each of his men was given a trumpet in his right hand, a pitcher in his left hand and a lamp or torch inside the pitcher. All were instructed to follow the example of their leader. At a given signal, each man would be responsible for blowing his trumpet, smashing his pitcher on the rocky ground, holding high and swinging to and fro his torch and saying, "The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon."

Awaking from a sound sleep, hearing the blaring of the trumpets and the crashing of the crockery, and seeing the glare of the three hundred lights, the enemy quickly concluded that innumerable foes had surrounded them. No wonder there was such a widespread panic among those undisciplined hordes! In their confusion they rushed hither and thither in the darkness, mistaking friend for enemy and slaying multitudes of their own people. When the bloody tragedy was ended, many had been killed and the rest had fled, and that without a one of Gideon's men as much as receiving a wound. This complete and final victory was won within a few minutes and without Gideon's forces striking a single blow. Truly this victory was one of the military marvels of all time.

It is only natural for one to ask, "What was the secret of their great victory?" That secret is revealed in the verse which says, "And they stood every man in his place round about the camp." Gideon and his men were united in mind and purpose. All of them were willing to do all they could to win the victory. All of them were obedient. They followed the example of their leader and obeyed his orders to the letter. Not one of them became discouraged. They were courageous and brave all the way through. They were faithful. "They stood every man in his place." Each man did his part. Each one enthusiastically put everything he had into the battle for God and righteousness. Because they took their rightful places before God and did their part, He blessed them with a wonderful victory.

As certainly as God had a work for Gideon and his men in their day, He has a work for each of us today. Let us catch the spirit expressed by an outstanding Christian who had grown careless and negligent, but later learned an important lesson.

Every Saturday evening for forty odd years this servant of God stood on a certain street corner handing out gospel tracts and papers to the passersby. Then, discouraged because he saw such little fruit, he stopped his work and abandoned his post. Some years later he happened on the spot and a young man stood there and gave him a gospel paper. Addressing the young man, he asked: "How is it that you are here tonight?" "Well, sir, it is like this: an old man occupied this corner for years. I was saved by means of a tract which he gave me. Evidently the old man's in heaven now for I've missed him here, so I am seeking to fill his place." Tears filled the eyes of the older Christian as the young man spoke thus. Then, he said: "I am the man who gave you that tract, and by the grace of God I mean to stand in my place till Jesus comes." Are you willing to stand in your place?