

"EVERY MAN IN HIS PLACE"

"And they stood every man in his place round about the camp." Judges 7:21.

This interesting narrative carries us back to the period when the children of Israel found themselves in subjection to the Midianites and the Amalekites. These cruel peoples had invaded their land, seized their sustenance, stolen their property and forced them to dwell in the caves and the mountains. They were oppressed in an unparalleled manner. They experienced extreme poverty and real want. They were afraid to show their faces. The reason for their sad plight is recorded in the words: "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord: and the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years." Judges 6:1. Their impoverishment and suffering were due to their disobedience to God.

As people usually do when overtaken by afflictions, they cried unto the Lord for help. Out of the agony of their clamor God found something He could answer. He sent a prophet who stirred their memories by recounting the miracles of God's grace in former days. The prophet gave them God's stinging reproof: "But ye have not obeyed My voice." Thus He placed the responsibility for their sad plight squarely upon them. He impressed them with the fact that they had no one to blame but themselves.

When Israel was in deep despair and her enemies were in exultant triumph, God selected a suitable man to meet the emergency, as He always does. An emergency never arises but what God has a man equal to the occasion and ready to meet it. In this case, the brave and heroic Gideon was the man. It was in the midnight hour of Israel's hope when God called Gideon to the task of commanding the armies of Israel in delivering His people from their bitter bondage. The call came as a complete surprise to Gideon. It came when he was modestly threshing wheat with a flail in a winepress on his father's farm in order that he might remain in seclusion and at the same time conceal his little quantity of grain from the tyrants. While he was faithfully performing his humble duty, an angel of the Lord appeared unto him and said, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour."

In the light of the depressed state of his people, the angel's message seemed startling and ridiculous to Gideon. Their long and 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. To the angel's surprising words, Gideon made the significant reply, "Oh my Lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all His miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt? but now the Lord hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites." It is not difficult to understand why he spoke so despondently. It was simply the age-old question: "If God loves us, why does He permit these things?" To his query the Lord responded, "Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?"

Conscious of his insufficiency and limitations, Gideon sought to be excused on the grounds of poverty and inability. He cried out in protest against the assumption of such responsibilities saying, "O my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel?" Here we have the right mood for entering upon any high task, namely, the sense of distrust in one's own powers prompting the feeling of reliance upon a mightier form of help. However, his excuse was met with the promise of the Divine Presence. The assurance of reinforcement was immediately forthcoming. "The Lord said unto him, Surely I will be with thee and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man." The assurance that God would be with him was all that Gideon needed. He knew that meant he would be victorious.

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." When God's Spirit comes upon people, they are able to perform heroic deeds and to achieve sublime results.

Assured of the Lord's presence, Gideon dared to call the Lord's people together to fight the Midianites. When he first attempted to rally the people of Israel to fight against the enemy, thirty-two thousand men willingly left their homes and their families and came forward to endure hardship and to meet danger. 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.

The sight of such a magnificent army must have filled everyone with pride. But God was not pleased with it. He preferred to defeat the enemy by a few rather than by so many. So, God bade Gideon make 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.

Forthwith twenty-two thousand of those who had professed themselves ready to fight for their country, thinking of their unprotected homes, their numerous, dreadful and fierce enemies, left the camp and returned to their homes. The shame of deserting their comrades was not sufficient to restrain them. They were glad for a chance to go home. Twenty-two thousand quitters fell out of the ranks and returned to their homes. After their arrival home, they sank down into obscurity and oblivion. What a blessing it was that Gideon did not attempt to lead that bunch of cowards into battle!

Why did God thus reduce Gideon's army? He did it in order that His power might be recognized in the victory. God did not want the Israelites to take all the credit to themselves and to boast of what they had done. He was educating them to depend on Him and to cooperate with Him. He said, "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."

It looked as if all were leaving, but even the ten thousand who remained were too many. God was not yet satisfied with the size of the army, so He ordered another test to be made. He told Gideon to march his army down to the stream in the valley, where the test would be applied. Gideon marched his men toward the enemy and directed his officers to keep watch. Testing their wisdom and self-restraint, Gideon decided that only those who lapped the water with their hands, as men do who are in haste, were to be retained in the army, while all those who lay down and drank leisurely were to be discharged.

In their eagerness to drink, most of the men stooped down, while the rest took up the water in their hands and lapped hurriedly as they watched for the oncoming enemy. The majority thought chiefly of slaking their thirst, while the rest thought primarily of the foe in front. Only three hundred were found whose rigid self-denial showed them to be qualified for such a bold and hazardous undertaking.

Reducing an army of thirty-two thousand to one of three hundred seemed to be a very strange way to prepare for a battle. Having three hundred men to fight one hundred thirty-five thousand men, or one against four hundred and fifty is an unusual and interesting procedure; an illustration of adding by subtracting, multiplying by dividing, and strengthening by weakening. This teaches us 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 us that while His way is often different from man's way, His way is always best.

Only heroes of the highest type could have survived the shock of such an appalling depletion of numbers. Think of the faith and fortitude that held them to their post in spite of the demoralizing example of such an overwhelming majority of their fellow-soldiers.

To reassure him, God sent Gideon down to inspect the real situation among the Midianites. Under cover of darkness Gideon slipped down near the camp of the enemy to reconnoiter. While there, he heard one Midianite tell another about his dream, so he listened intently

to the interpretation placed upon it. He considered it a sign that he and his brave three hundred would conquer the host of the Midianites. He also discovered that his name was a sound of terror among the enemy and that they were already trembling because of Gideon and his God. Upon his return, he thrilled the three hundred with the courage of his own gallant heart until they were willing to go anywhere at his command.

On three sides they surrounded the enemy. To each of Gideon's men was given a trumpet in the right hand and a pitcher in the left hand and a lamp inside the pitcher. At a given signal each man was to smash his earthen vessel on the rocky ground, blow his trumpet and hold up his lamp.

It was night. The great host of dull-witted Midianites were sound asleep in the valley of Jezreel. Secure in the consciousness of superior numbers, they had even neglected to post pickets. At the appointed time, Gideon and his three hundred picked men blew their trumpets, threw down their pitchers, held up their lamps and shouted, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon." That stirring war-cry broke the stillness of the midnight air. The cruel enemy, 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 lamps, concluded that some mighty host had fallen upon them. The custom of battle was one torch to each company, so they concluded that three hundred companies had come upon them. They rushed hither and thither in the darkness and their confusion, each man turning his sword upon his neighbor, mistaking friend for enemy, and when the bloody tragedy came to an end many of the enemy had been killed and the rest had fled. And all of that happened without a scar or a wound or a death among Gideon's men. His victory was gained in a few minutes and that without striking a blow. It may justly be regarded as one of the military marvels of antiquity.

What was the secret of this great victory? Wherein lies the power for such achievement? Here it is: "And they stood every man in his place round about the camp."

1. They were united.
They had one mind and purpose. There is strength in union when there is a spirit of unity.
2. They were willing.
By a sifting process all of the indifferent ones had been eliminated. The three hundred were willing to lay aside their weapons and do whatever was necessary to win the victory.
3. They were obedient.
They followed Gideon's example and obeyed his orders to the letter.
4. They were courageous.
Not one of them became discouraged. Each was brave to the end.
5. They were faithful.
"They stood every man in his place." Every one did his part. Every one was absolutely dependable.
6. They were enthusiastic.
All of them were zealous for the cause for they recognized it as the cause of God and righteousness. When they went into the battle, they put everything they had into it.
7. They were triumphant.
God gave them a wonderful victory. When we take our rightful places before God and do our part, He will always do His part. Success came to them because God was with them. Consecrated leadership plus God makes an invincible force in any day. May we, like Gideon and his gallant three hundred, ever stand "every man in his place round about the camp."