

THE STRATEGY OF GOD

Judges 6 and 7

When the children of Israel entered the land of Canaan, God told them how they should conduct themselves. He enumerated the blessings He would bestow upon them for their obedience, and the curses that He would place upon them for their disobedience. Deuteronomy 28:7 says, "The Lord shall cause thine enemies that rise up against thee to be smitten before thy face: they shall come out against thee one way, and flee before thee seven ways." Were the Israelites always as invincible as that? History testifies that they were not. How does one account for that? By reading the rest of what God says to them: "The Lord shall establish thee an holy people unto himself, as he hath sworn unto thee, if thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, and walk in his ways" (Deuteronomy 28:9).

The Israelites experienced unparalleled oppression, extreme poverty and dire need. The reason for their plight is stated in Judges 6:1, "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." Their impoverishment and sufferings were due to their disobedience to God. As people usually do in their afflictions, they cried unto the Lord for help. In response thereto God sent a prophet to stir their memories, and to place the responsibility for their sad plight squarely upon them. He told them plainly that they did not have anyone to blame but themselves.

An emergency never arises but what God has a man who is equal to the occasion and ready to meet it. In this case that man was the brave and heroic Gideon. All of us who were fortunate enough to be reared in Christian homes and listened to Bible stories can recall the childish thrill we experienced when we heard the one about Gideon and his brave band of strange warriors.

It was in the midnight hour of Israel's hope when God called Gideon to the task of commanding the army in driving out the invading Midianites and in delivering His people from their bondage. The call came to Gideon when he was faithfully performing his humble duty of threshing wheat with a flail by a winepress in a secluded spot on his father's farm. Gideon had selected that unusual spot in which to do his threshing in order to conceal from the tyrants the small quantity of grain which had been harvested. Fearful of being spied upon, Gideon's piercing eyes watched carefully 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 to the angel, 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, that message seemed startling and ridiculous to Gideon. Seven years of bitter slavery had caused him to wonder if God actually cared. 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. He was simply reiterating the age-old question: "If God loves us, why does He permit these things?" He had failed 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.

This call from God to step out from obscurity and lead the people to a new day of victory came as a complete surprise to this great lover of his family, his country, and his God. Aware of his limitations and insufficiency, Gideon did not have any inclination toward this assignment. He did not think that he was qualified for so vast an undertaking, especially in view of the fact that he had come from a poor family and an uninfluential tribe. Gideon's modesty, humility and distrust of self were highly commendable. He was a splendid example of the right spirit for entering upon any high task, namely, distrust in one's own powers and reliance upon the divine power. To Gideon the Lord said, "Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man." That assurance from God was all that Gideon needed or desired. 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 that is required to do it.

Like many others, the Israelites called on God for help, but refused to separate themselves from what they knew to be very displeasing to Him. However, if they were to enjoy His favor, it was necessary for them to eradicate the worship of Baal. With the assistance of ten servants, Gideon proceeded under cover of darkness, to demolish the altar of Baal and to use the stones therefrom to erect an altar to Jehovah, and offered a burnt sacrifice thereon. Every Christian should follow Gideon's example in separating himself from that which is sinful. Before God can use one effectively in His service, he must give the Lord His rightful place in his life.

Having discovered the will of God for his life, and having dedicated himself unreservedly to the doing of that will, and having been assured of the Lord's presence and power, Gideon called the Lord's people together to fight the Midianites. It is a great tribute to Gideon that thirty-two thousand men, with apparently much devotion to the cause which he espoused, responded to his call, left their families and homes and came forward to meet the dangers and to endure the hardships which might ensue. When God looked this army over He was not pleased with the size of it. 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 and to cut down its size. God was the one to whom the glory was to be given, rather than men.

The first test by which Gideon was directed to reduce his army was courage. God said, "Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return." It is better to have ten courageous and fearless men than to have a hundred if ninety of them are afraid. An army is better off with the cowards out of its ranks, no matter how numerous they are. Likewise, in the Lord's work, it is better to have a few who are dependable than a large number who are fearful and unstable. Gideon's proclamation caused twenty-two thousand to go back home. What a blessing that he did not try to lead that bunch of cowards into battle!

God then ordered the test of earnestness and zeal. He told Gideon to march the remaining ten thousand thirsty men across a stream, and to notice in what manner these men drink of the water. Those who laid aside their weapons, got down on their hands and knees or laid flat on the ground and drank leisurely were to be pronounced incompetent for the campaign. Those who scooped up the water with their hands and lapped it hurriedly with their tongues as they watched for the oncoming enemy were to be selected for the battle. This test revealed that nine thousand and seven hundred thought more about satisfying their immediate thirst than they did of meeting the foe. Only three hundred proved themselves to be qualified for such a hazardous undertaking.

When the test of earnestness and zeal is applied the army of the Lord is greatly reduced. Send back all who do not care whether their church is loyal to God's Word or not, those who do not attend worship services, those who spend Sunday just like the unsaved do, and those who do not do any work for their church, and you made a cut like the one which Gideon made in his, but the army will be stronger in the end. A few with God are more effective than a whole multitude without Him. What was even more strange, God took away all the weapons from the three hundred before He allowed them to go into battle. His way is so different from man's way, but it is always best.

Following God's instructions, Gideon and his servant under cover of darkness descended to the camp of the enemy to reconnoiter. There he heard a Midianite tell another about his dream and his interpretation of it. Out of the mouth of this enemy, Gideon heard the confirmation of what God had told him, that he would deliver the host into his hand. He returned and thrilled the three hundred with his report, and they were ready to go anywhere at his command.

Gideon divided his men into three companies. Each man was provided with a trumpet in his right hand, and an earthen-ware pitcher in the left hand with a lamp or torch burning inside of it. All took their assigned positions. When all were in readiness, the silence of the night was suddenly broken with a signal blast from Gideon's trumpet. Instantly the trumpet of each man pealed out, their pitchers were broken, their torches were ablaze, and the men shouted, from a sound sleep, hearing the blare of the trumpets, and seeing the three hundred lights, and instantly concluding that innumerable foes had surrounded them, inasmuch as it was the custom of battle in those days to have one torch to each company, a colossal panic spread among the Midianites. In their confusion they rushed hither and thither in the darkness, mistaking friend for enemy and slaying multitudes of their own people. When the wild stampede and bloody tragedy 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, or striking a single blow. Truly this victory was one of the military marvels of all time.

The secret of this unique and great victory is stated in Judges 7:21, "And they stood every man in his place round about the camp." Every man had his place, and he stood in it. Every man did his part. Every man contributed to the victory. And every man shared in the spoils.

As certainly as God had a work for Gideon and his men in their day, He has a plan, a place, and a purpose for every one of us. He has a work for each of us today. None among us is so youthful, so aged, or so meagerly equipped with talent that he cannot stand in his place and render some valuable service for the Lord, however humble. Do you have the conviction that your work is dear to God and cannot be spared? It is God's cause that is at stake, and God's power that is to be demonstrated, and God's glory that is to be revealed. You are an instrument of God's plan or will for your life.

There is an important lesson for us, and for all other workers in the Lord's vineyard, in the statement, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon." If Gideon had put his own name alone in that war cry, or if he had put it first and God's name second, the outcome would have been very different. Victory is won for the cause of our redeeming Lord when we are wise enough and humble enough to see that the battle is not ours, but His; and, when the victory is won, the glory is not ours, but it is His eternally.

One admires Gideon and his three hundred men because they were united in mind and purpose. They were willing to lay aside their weapons and do whatever was necessary to win the victory. The men followed the example of Gideon and obeyed his orders to the letter. They were courageous to the end. Every one was absolutely dependable. Each was faithful in standing in his place and doing his part. All of them were zealous for the cause of God and righteousness. When they went into battle, they put everything they had into it, and God gave them a wonderful victory. When people take their rightful places and do their part, He always does His part. Because God was with them, and blessed them, success came to them. Dedicated leadership and faithful followers plus God means victory in any day.

Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of every one standing in his place.

In World War I a brief paragraph in the news read: "Quick advance made in surprise attack by American troops. Great battle won, and only one man lost!"

Just one man killed, that was all -- only one. But that one was of much value to a little woman over yonder in a cottage home, with three small children tugging at her skirts, looking up wonderingly into her face, as she read a cablegram to which no answer was expected. That quick advance, when only one man was killed, took the sun out of the sky of her life. To the children who would listen in vain for his returning footsteps, to the wife who would now hear his voice only in dreams, he was "all the world."

Think of things of lesser value than a man -- and you will see how they emphasize the value of just one. One link in a chain means much, whether the chain be short or long. One brick in a wall is of value, whether the wall be high or low. One letter is essential to a complete alphabet. One figure is essential in the multiplication table. One note counts on a sheet of music. One key on an organ is indispensable.

Different Sunday School teachers have said, "I'm through. I had only one boy today in my class." But he is one. He is not everybody, but he is one somebody. He is none the less important because he is the only one.

Andrew brought Simon Peter to Christ. Simon Peter was just one, but there came a day when he was one among many. He preached a sermon at Pentecost under which three thousand passed from death unto life, adding greatly to the strength of the first church.

Joel Stratton, a waiter in a restaurant, brought John B. Gough to Christ. Gough was just one, but in a ministry of forty-four crowded and productive years he turned many from the foulness of drunkenness to the fragrance of sobriety.

Henry Kimball, a Sunday School teacher, led Dwight L. Moody to Christ. This bookstore clerk rocked two continents toward God.

The power of one plus God is illustrated in such Bible characters as Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Samuel, David, and Elijah.

Achievements of one plus God are recorded in history. England kept John Bunyan in jail for twelve years, but, instead of settling down to gloom, despondency, and complaining, he picked up a pen and with it wrote that immortal allegory which stands next to the Bible in circulation in the English language.

Do you realize that God calls you to be one? Do you hear? Will you hear? Will you answer? Will you give Him your bits or your best?