

EVERY MAN IN HIS PLACE

"And they stood every man in his place round about the camp: and all the host ran, and cried, and fled." Judges 7:21.

This is the story of the strangest combat this world has ever seen. Israel had been oppressed by the Midianites. The Israelites carried on their work behind closed doors because they were afraid of their foes.

But, as is always the case, God had a man for the emergency. The brave and heroic Gideon was that man. Gideon was threshing wheat on his father's farm when God called him to command the armies of Israel in driving out the invading Midianites. The angel or messenger of Jehovah appeared to Gideon and said, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour." In the light of the depressed state of his people, Gideon considered that message not only startling but ridiculous. He therefore replied, "O 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 was as if Gideon had said, "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."

We can well understand how Gideon came to speak so despondently. We cannot blame him for being perplexed. He could see plainly enough 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. He made his mistake by failing to see that the fault was not with God, but rather with him and his people. He failed to see that they were making it impossible for God to do what He was able and willing and eager to do. They were failing to give God a chance.

God commissioned him for the great task of national deliverance. He said, "Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?" Conscious of his limitations Gideon cried out in protest against the assumption of such responsibilities by 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. The assurance of reinforcement was immediately forthcoming. "The Lord said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianite as one man." The assurance that God was with him was all that He needed.

When Gideon was assured of God's presence, he dared to call the hosts of the Lord together to fight the Midianites. At the call of Gideon 32,000 men with much apparent devotion flocked to his standard leaving their homes and their families, and their substance, they came forward willingly to meet dangers and to endure hardships. To all outward appearances they were animated by the same spirit, and might alike be credited with a resolution to die for their country and for their faith. Strange to say, there were too many in Gideon's army. The Lord preferred to win with a few rather than with many lest the Israelites should boast. He was educating them in the sense of dependence upon Him and of cooperation with Him. Perhaps there is also a human side of the matter. Upon observing his troops Gideon saw that they were undisciplined. He felt uncertain as to what they would do under fire. Therefore, he said, "Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return home." Immediately the vast majority of them were fearful. They thought of their homes left unprotected, and of the dreadful foes, so numerous, so fierce, and so irresistible; their faith in God was a dead letter; the shame of deserting their comrades was not sufficient to restrain them; so 22,000 quitters fell out of the ranks and returned to their homes. But 10,000 remained true to the cause and stood firm.

Gideon subjected this group to another test. He marched them across a brook toward the camp of the enemy and directed his officers to keep watch. Testing their wisdom and self-restraint, he decided that only those who lapped the water with their hands, as men do who are in haste were to be considered worthy of retainment in the army, and all those who sprawled out upon all-fours to drink from the brook were to be dismissed. Gideon would have in his command only those soldierly men who showed themselves alert and watchful while on duty, catching up handfulls of water as they passed the brook.

This test still further reduced the number of his men to 300. But they were picked men! Only 300 were found of that type which was necessary for a hazardous undertaking requiring boldness, endurance, watchfulness, and perseverance to insure success.

Reducing an army of 32,000 to one of 300 seems to us a very strange way to prepare for a battle. This left 300 men to fight against 135,000 or one against 450. If we had planned for that battle we would have drilled and trained the 32,000. But God depleted the army and took all of their weapons away from them before He let them go into battle. This shows us that His way is often different from man's way but His way is always best.

Gideon then slipped down near the enemy's camp under cover of darkness to reconnoiter. He heard one Midianite tell another of his dream. He instantly accepted this dream of the soldier as a sign that he and his picked men would conquer the host of Midian.

His tactics were unusual but they justified themselves. He directed each man to hide a lighted torch in an earthen vessel and with sword and trumpet girt on to steal into the camp of the enemy at midnight. At a given signal each man was to smash his earthen vessel on the rocky ground, the torches were to flash out, the trumpets were to sound forth a loud blast, and with the battle cry, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon," shouted from every sturdy throat, they were to fall upon the Midianites.

The plan was carried out with notable success. The dull-witted Midianites, secure in the consciousness of superior numbers, had neglected to post pickets. Suddenly awakened from sound sleep, seeing the flash of torches, and hearing the sound of many trumpets, they felt that some mighty host had fallen upon them. In their half-dazed condition, catching glimpses here and there of sturdy Israelites with broadswords, they were intimidated and overborne. They were put to flight by the men of Gideon and a notable victory was won for the higher, cleaner, and more inspiring type of life represented by the men of Israel.

Naturally, we ask, What was the secret of their 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 were as one man with one sword. 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 he had eliminated all the indifferent ones. The three hundred were willing to lay aside their weapons and to do whatever was necessary to win the victory.

3. They were obedient.

They followed Gideon's example. They 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.

They were all zealous for the cause because 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 the victory. When we take our rightful places before God and do our part God will always take His place and do His part. Success came because God was with them. God plus consecrated leadership and loyal fellowship always make an invincible force in any day.

Just as He had a work for Gideon in his day, so God has a work for us to do today. The example of the three hundred presents a call for every member of our church to hold himself or herself in readiness for service. Cooperation is sorely needed in church work. Our success does not depend on numbers but in loyalty to Christ and cooperation with Him. Let each of us stand in his or her place and do his or her best for Christ and His church.