

THE GRAND ESCAPE.

No. 16. Gideon Galvanised.

We know the pattern by now. Judges chapter 6 begins as we expect - "Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord." With the weakening of the Canaanites in the north through Barak, the land became subject to the raids of a loose collection of Bedouin peoples (Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples as in verse 3) better described as a horde than as an alliance. Instead of establishing permanent settlements, they carried out annual raids of plunder, destruction and slaughter. They camped on Israel's land, ruined the crops and seized sheep, cattle and donkeys. They came with their camels like swarms of locusts, impossible to count, and ravished the land. It is quite possible that the Canaanites also suffered from these Bedouin attacks.

After 7 years of this destruction, Israel – terrorised, impoverished and impotent - cried to the Lord for rescue. God's answer was to send a prophet who reminded them of His deliverance of the nation from Egypt and His command to worship only Him, which once again they had disobeyed.

And then God homed in on one man to be Israel's deliverer; the story starts in verse 11. He sent an angel to Ophrah, a sacred site, to Gideon, a young man who was threshing wheat – not outside where the wind could blow away the chaff, but inside a winepress to hide it from the Midianite raiders. The angel's greeting – "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior," could hardly have been more ironic. Gideon was certainly no mighty warrior and his reply to the angel was a complaint that it was God Who had let them down and sold them into Midian's hand.

Verse 14 gives God's amazing reply. "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand. Am I not sending you?" It was too much for Gideon and he made untrue excuses; his clan was not the weakest in Manasseh and his father Joash obviously had quite an influence there, while Gideon himself was able to command respect and loyalty. God counters his reluctance with another encouragement, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

Incredulous still, Gideon asks for a sign and receives the dramatic response of the angel consuming his offering with a flame out of the rock. Convinced at last that he had seen the angel of the Lord face to face, Gideon built an altar to the Lord and called it "The Lord is Peace." It was the turning point in his journey of faith.

Notice verse 14 – "Go in the strength you have." God knows our strength and will never give us a task beyond the strength we have. And as we commit ourselves to serve Him we will discover more strength than we ever knew we had anyway!

The next step was one of testing for Gideon, verses 25-32. Having sanctified himself by the burnt offering to God, Gideon must now go on to cleanse his father's house from idolatry. A bull of 7 years old would be very valuable as breeding stock, particularly with herds so depleted, and this would be a serious loss to his father. It must have taken tremendous courage to obey this order from God! Gideon enlisted 10 of the family's servants to help him carry this out under cover of darkness, but in the morning the work was discovered and the townspeople were baying for Gideon's blood. The extent of their apostasy is shown in their cry for the God-worshipping Gideon to die because *their* god had been insulted! And here we have a great cameo of Joash, Gideon's father. Although he had fallen into idolatry he was big enough to accept the rebuke from his son's action and to defend him loyally before the furious crowd.

It is unusual, but not unknown, for children to lead their parents to a knowledge of God. Perhaps we can add a verse to the well-known hymn:

***Just as I am, though youth is past,
And the leaves grow brown in the autumn blast,
Though few be the years I can give – at last,
Lord of all life, I come. (Author unknown)***

We move on to verses 33-40 and verse 34 significantly reveals the secret of Gideon's success – "The Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon." His influence spread from his own family to his own clan (the Abiezrites) then to his tribe (Manasseh) and to other endangered tribes in the north. They rallied to his leadership but then his spirit quailed at the mass of forces ranged against him, and in faltering faith - "if You will save Israel by my hand as you have promised..." he asked God for a sign. God was gracious enough to give him 2 signs.

Do we ever say "if" to God? "If You get me out of this mess I'll serve You forever" God is sovereign; we do not bargain with Him. "If You can, please grant my special request" There is nothing He cannot do, but there are many things which in His love and wisdom He will not do. Best to leave the decision with Him Who knows best.

Gideon had tested God; now in chapter 7:1-8 God tested Gideon. It was good strategy to get rid of the morale-lowering fearful soldiers, and actually followed the command given through Moses in Deuteronomy 20:8 - "Is any man afraid or fainthearted? Let him go home so that his brothers will not become disheartened too," but how would Gideon feel as 22,000 left him and only 10,000 remained? The number of defectors point to the low calibre of the Israeli troops. But worse was to come. Going down to the water would be to risk exposing themselves to the enemy, and only the 300 who showed extreme caution were chosen to fight. God's ways are not our ways; it had to be God alone Who won the victory for them.

Verses 8-14 set the stage for the battle but God, with perfect understanding of Gideon's fear, gave him one more encouragement. It would have taken courage for Gideon and his servant to creep up to the enemy lines near enough to overhear the conversation of the 2 soldiers. And on hearing what they had to say, Gideon at last came to a position of complete faith. He was ready for battle.

Verses 15-25 tell the story. First of all, Gideon worshipped God - not a waste of precious time; rather, the first step to victory. Then he returned in the power of His Spirit to the camp with the rousing cry, "Get up! The Lord has given the Midianite camp into your hands." His strategy was brilliant; by dividing the troops into 3 groups they could surround the enemy. Usually only captains of 100 had trumpets, so by giving every soldier a trumpet, it would give the impression of a vast army instead of a small group. At the beginning of the middle watch most of the Midianites would be asleep, so the sudden noise of the pitchers being broken, the trumpets sounding and the flames all around them, would throw them into confusion. Note verse 20 - "Grasping the torches in their left hands and holding in their right hands the trumpets..." so where were their swords? Still sheathed? What lunacy - or what faith! God knew they wouldn't need them yet!

The Bedouins consisted of several different peoples, marked by mutual greed, mutual distrust and varying languages; these factors would all make for a thoroughly confused, destructive panic in which, in the darkness of night, they could end up fighting each other. What was left of the enemy forces began retreating, to be met by newly-summoned Israelite soldiers whose high morale gave them swift victory. Gideon called for the men of Ephraim, whose territory was south near the Jordan River, to come out and cut off the enemy's retreat across the Jordan. The Ephraimites succeeded in destroying 2 of the Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb.

Verse 21 is worthy of note here: "While each man held his position around the camp, all the Midianites ran, crying out as they fled." Two similar references serve to drive the point home. In Exodus 14:13, faced with the impassable Red Sea, Moses said, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the

deliverance the Lord will bring you today..... The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." And again in 2 Chronicles 20:17, with Jehoshaphat facing an impossible battle, the prophet Jahaziel said, "You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you." We often face a battle we feel we cannot overcome: our part is to stand firm in our absolute trust in our God; He will win the battle for us in His own amazing way.

Chapter 8:1-21 show that Gideon was not only a great warrior, but also a great statesman. Here he used tact and graciousness to defuse an inter-tribal quarrel. It seems strange that the people of Succoth and Peniel refused to help their fellow Israelites; perhaps Gideon's tiny army of 300 did not inspire confidence and they felt their security lay more in maintaining good relations with the Midianites than in giving supplies to their own countrymen. They paid dearly for their lack of faith. Verses 18-21 show again that Gideon came from a noble family, not the lowest family in his tribe!

In Chapter 8:22-35 Gideon showed his nobility by refusing to become king; God's rule over Israel is a central issue in Judges, and Gideon was not about to usurp God's authority for his own personal gain. But then, sadly, Gideon made a mistake. The ephod was a sacred garment, interwoven with gold, and to be worn only by the priests; it contained the Urim and Thummim which were used by them to determine the will of God. By making this priestly garment for himself, Gideon was invading the office of priesthood and, far from encouraging the worship of God, it led Israel back into idolatry.

Gideon himself led a life of prosperity, leading Israel in peace for 40 years and dying "at a good old age." But once he had gone, tragedy invaded his own family and the nation of Israel fell once more into sin. On the human side they failed to show kindness to Gideon's family for all the good things he had done for them, but more seriously, on the spiritual side they "did not remember the Lord their God, Who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side."

It is good to look back on one's life, to recount the victories we have won through the grace of God. It is better to keep looking forward even in very old age, and to trust Him alone to help us keep the faith until the day we die.