

Gideon 5

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[0 : 0 0] Let us turn now to the chapter we read in the Old Testament in the book of Judges, chapter 7, and we will take us out connecting link to well-known words at the end of verse 18, the sword of the Lord and of Gideon. But rather than give an exposition of these words themselves, I want to hang a few thoughts on these words in the light of the whole of the chapter, continuing our series in the book of Judges and continuing our look at the life of this man Gideon. This is, for those who have been following, this is the third such address, and I hope that people aren't finding these studies too tedious. There's just one left of Gideon, and then there'll be a short break before we resume our studies again and have a look finally at the life of Samson.

Now this man Gideon is the third of the heroes of faith referred to from the book of Judges in the epistle to the Hebrews. That letter refers to, chapter 11 refers to Barak, Jephthah, Gideon, and Samson. And they find their place in the heroes of faith just because they were men of faith. And as we study the life of Gideon, we must remember that, that this is what immortalizes Gideon. And then last week we saw how Gideon began his work as a judge or a deliverer. He began his work where it was always most difficult at home, destroying the idols that his father had set up in the garden, destroying the shrine that was there, and erecting an altar to the God of Israel. And he went out in God's power and gathered to him these 32,000 men, with which he thought he was going to face the 130-odd thousand of Midian. And then we saw how he asked for an assurance, something that would assure him in the exercise of his faith. He asked for the token of God's favor upon him, with the well-known incident of the fleece. He put out the fleece. Well, we find him now more or less ready, with his 32,000 ready to face the hosts of the Midianites. But God wasn't yet ready with Gideon, nor with his army. And the first thing we come across here in the first eight verses of chapter 7, is this sifting process that Gideon had to endure as his army was whittled down from 32,000, from 30,000 rather, to 3,000, 30-odd thousand to 300. And with these 300, he was ultimately to face the might of the Midianites. Now, the tests were twofold. The first test eliminated 20-odd thousand of his followers. And it was a test which was based really on the discovery of the spirit of cowardice the army. So that those who were afraid of the battle were given the opportunity to return home.

And we read that thousands of them took that opportunity. They remained, and they returned to the people 22,000, and they remained 10,000. Now, it's amazing that of an army of 32,000, that 22,000 should have accepted this opportunity of leaving.

I suppose that today it would be equivalent of giving the opportunity to buy themselves out. But it doesn't look as though they had to pay anything. They were just asked if they were afraid.

And if they were, well, they were given the opportunity to return. Now, some people may ask, why was the army reduced by this significant number because of the presence of fear in their midst?

[5 : 52] And I suppose the simple answer to that is that fear can be very contagious. Cowardice can be contagious. What causes fear is that certainly with reference to the cause of God is that people tend to look at things rather than look at God. Now, let us make no mistake of this. Some of the best men in history have found themselves at times slaves to fear. The classic example of the two classic examples in the Bible, in the Old Testament, Elijah, and in the New Testament, Peter. Now, you know that Elijah had won a famous victory at Carmel over the enemies of God and the followers of Baal. And shortly after that famous victory, we read that he fled, he fled from Jezebel, Ahab's wife, because she had threatened to kill him.

Now, if any man was able to withstand a threat to his life, you would think it was Elijah. But he succumbed to fear. And we read that when Elijah heard these things, he fled from the presence of the Lord. And there are people, there are times when the best of men are obsessed with things as they see them, obsessed with the thought of the impossibility of it all. And because they feel things so impossible, so difficult, so insurmountable, their fear gets the better of them.

And that fear can spread, it can be quite contagious. It can affect people who are beside them and near them and so on. And it was like that in the field of battle here. The Lord knew, and he told Gideon this, that these people were at heart afraid of the Midianites. They had no stomach for the fight. They didn't want to be engaged in the battle, and so they were given the opportunity to return. And we know from the teaching of Jesus, if there was nothing else in the Bible but the parable of the sword and the seed, that you have the same principle applied spiritually. There are people who seem to be, who take up arms at once on the side of Christ. No problems, no difficulties. But the moment the problems come and the moment the difficulties arise, fear gets the better of them and they turn back. And we have to acknowledge that the cause of Christ is better without people like that. You see, though there may be to us strength in number, and I think that in a congregation this size, it is always a danger that you look to the numerical strength of the congregation. But that is not the strength of a congregation or the strength of any organization, not its numbers, but the spirit that animates the people who belong to it, their attitude. And the Lord knew that this army of Gideon would be better off if they were rid of these 22,000 people who were at heart cowards.

And another, you remember that there was another incident in the New Testament we're going to come to later on, of a man who was a very great man, one of the heroes of faith, one of the real heroes of faith, the apostle Peter. And you remember that he, one night, with the courage of faith, walked on the water to come to the Lord.

But then when he looked at the waves around about him, when he looked at the elements, when he considered the situation which he found himself, he began to think, fear got the better of him. And we must be on our guard that fear doesn't get the better of us at any time in the battle which is, after all, the Lord's.

[10 : 19] And another thing that the Lord told Gideon was this, that one reason why he wanted to whittle down the army from 32,000 in one fell swoop by eliminating this, say, 22,000 was, as he puts it here, in case Israel want themselves against me, saying, mine own hand hath saved me.

The Lord is warning Gideon, as he warns every one of us, of the danger of self-glorification, self-exaltation, self-dependence, self-reliance.

The greatest danger to you tonight is yourself. The person you have to be on guard against most of all is yourself.

Because lurking air within your heart is the spirit of self-dependence and self-reliance.

And those of you who know anything at all about the life of grace will know that one of the greatest and one of the most difficult lessons of all to learn is the lesson not to rely upon yourself, not to depend upon yourself, not to lean upon your own understanding.

[11 : 54] Time and time again, the Word of God counsels you against the spirit of self-reliance, self-glory, self-dratification, self-dependence, self-righteousness.

And it is on one of these texts from the book of Jeremiah that the apostle Paul builds the very structure of the first letter to the Corinthians.

He hangs his thoughts on one verse. If any man will glory, let him glory in the Lord. And it is the work of a lifetime to learn.

And we have never learned the lesson completely. We have never passed the examination successfully till we throw our last breath in this world, this test, this examination, that we are to look not to ourselves, but to the Lord.

And that was why the Lord told Gideon to initiate this test by which he was to eliminate 22,000.

[13 : 10] There was, we're hearing the word often enough today, it's quite topical, there was this streaming process going on in the army of Gideon.

It must always take place in the Christian church. So, that was the first step by which they were whittled down. Then the Lord had a look at this army that was left, this army of 10,000, and he said to Gideon something that was quite astounding.

Here was Gideon waiting to face 130,000 men. He's now left with 10,000. 10,000. And so he says to Gideon, you can imagine how Gideon felt.

Look, he says, you've still got too many. Too many people here altogether. And I'm going to give them, he says, put them through another test.

And those whom I will choose out of the 10,000, these are the people who go with you to fight the Midianites.

[14 : 11] And you know the test is brought before you in these verses, verses say 4 on 2, 8. This interesting one, the Lord led them to a brook, to a river, 10,000.

And as far as they knew, they were on the way to engage the Midianites in battle. When they reached water, they needed a drink. And this was the test.

It depended how they drank the water. Now, let's not enter into the realm of conjecture or speculation and ask, well, why exactly was it that this sifting prostitute, why was it that only 300 passed this test, the 300 who didn't go down their hands and knees to drink water at the river, but they just scooped it up in their hands and they, as it were, wet their mouths on the way.

They didn't stop. They just stood there, gathered up what they could in the palms of their hands, and you can't gather too much water in your palms anyway, and, as it were, just wet their mouths and were prepared to carry on to bat.

Maybe that was why. These were men who were dedicated. Nothing was going to divert them from the path on which they were set.

[15 : 30] They were there to encounter the Midianites. And wetting the loops was sufficient for them, en route to the battleground. And the vast majority failed the test.

So now Gideon is left with 300 men. Well, there are lessons here I'm sure that we can learn as well.

The first lesson is this, and it's not easy to accept this one. The Lord can do without any one of us.

The Lord can do without any one of us. I know that I often wonder in the course of preaching if it is biblically correct for the likes of me to say this and applying the gospel to people who are unconverted but to appeal to them to come to Christ and to say this to them, the Lord needs you.

I think that's quite wrong. You need the Lord. The Lord can do without you and without me.

[16 : 49] His cause will go on whether you associate yourself with it or not. It will be to your benefit to be associated with the cause.

But his cause will prosper even if you're not part of it, but you won't. The first lesson to realize is the Lord can do without any one of us.

And secondly, and following on from that, it is very, very difficult to acknowledge and to accept that we can be too big for the Lord.

It's perfectly possible even the Christian church to become too big for your boots. Quite possible. To be so filled with a sense of your own importance in the battle and the cause of Christ that it never, if you're not there, nothing will ever happen.

We have to learn the lesson and we have to go through the mill very often in learning the lesson that the more, the less we think of ourselves, the more the Lord will accomplish through us.

[18 : 00] It is when we are weak, says Paul, that his strength is made perfect. It is when we are weak in the way, as the psalmist discovered, that the Lord's power comes to light, not only in our lives, but also through our lives.

When we are weak in ourselves, then we are strong in the Lord. And the other thing that Gideon was to learn was this. Remember last week we spoke about putting out the fleece.

Now Gideon was a man who had received great assurance from God. Time after time, the Lord had given him these wonderful signs. You remember I spoke to them last week as props to his faith.

He had seen a sacrifice consumed by a divine fire on a rock. He had seen the fleece wet with dew when the ground around was dry.

He had seen the following night the ground around the fleece wet and the fleece dry. These were assurances to his faith.

[19 : 06] Now I am sure, as I said last Sunday night, that if some of you here tonight, even myself, I last rose myself with you, if we received these miracles from the Lord, if we saw something wonderful tonight, saw a sign in heaven, saw our names written in the clouds on the way home, or heard a voice in this church, or saw a light in the room when you went home, if the Lord would speak to us in a miraculous way tonight, I am sure that you would probably feel on top of the world.

You would be on cloud nine. I have got the assurance that I wanted. Well, maybe you would. But you remember this, that when the Lord gives assurance of faith like that, very soon he will ask that faith to attest itself.

And here was Gideon, perhaps a day after, receiving that wonderful sign of the fleece. And here he is now, on the way to meet 130,000 enemies.

And the Lord quittles his army down to 300. That's all he's got left. No assurance now to his faith. The fleece was last night.

This is today. And so he had to learn, as we all have to learn, that when the Lord strengthens our faith, it is that we may exercise that faith.

[20 : 33] And he asks Gideon to attest it. And he says, right, off you go now. There's 300 men. That's the 300 men I want. Equipped for battle. You go and face the enemy with 300.

And the other thing to notice is this, that those 10,000 who failed this test of drinking the water, as we read in verse 8, did not return home.

They went to their tents. The first 22,000 looks as though they went home. But this 12,000, you had 12,000 men, they just went to their tent because they still had a part to play in the rout of the Midianites.

Gideon was going to destroy the Midianites with 300. But the Midians were going to, they were going to try and escape. And Gideon was to pursue them.

And eventually he was to call on these 12,000 men from the various tribes, come and help us pursue the Midianites and destroy them.

[21 : 44] And so it is that we learn here, as we learn in other parts of the Bible, that you and I may have a part to play in the cause of the Lord. The part you have to play may not be the part that I have to play.

As the New Testament tells us, there are some who sow, others reap. Some lay the foundations, others build on that foundation.

Some sow and reap. There are some who remain at home while others go out into the battlefield. There are some, whatever your position, whatever your niche, in the cause of the Lord, may be, the Lord will have something for you to do in that cause and in that battle.

It may not be what your friend has to do. It may not be what someone else has to do. It is for you and for me to discover what part the Lord wants each one of us to play in the cause that is, after all, his own.

So Gideon, with 300 men, is now ready to face the Midianites. And then secondly, we have here a strange incident that strengthened Gideon further.

[23 : 10] Now, Gideon was a man who was fond of looking for signs. It would almost say that he had a weakness for signs. He asked for miracle after miracle, for token after token.

And God knew his weakness, though he was a man of faith. So he tells Gideon, now he says, if you want further encouragement for this battle, take your servant and go down at night, go down into the, right to the borders of the enemy encampment.

You go there, take your servant with you, and you're going to hear something that will strengthen you. Now, Gideon had no clue what he was going to hear. So off he went with the servant, Fora, and it so happened that within earshot of two centuries of the Midianites, he heard one of them telling of a dream he had, telling the dream to the other.

You know the dream of the barley cake? Like a, just like a, like one of the scones that you know yourself, a barley cake, rolling down the hill, hitting the tent, probably, of the commander-in-chief of the Midianites, and destroying the tent.

It was quite, it was quite unusual, quite unnatural, that a barley cake would actually destroy a tent. So this sentry, who was obviously troubled by what he saw, told his, and told his friend, and his friend said, oh, I know what that is.

[24 : 47] That's just the Lord telling us that Gideon, the son of George, is going to destroy us. Now it's obvious in a minute that the Midianites knew all about Gideon, they knew all about his army, they knew all about what God had accomplished through him, and it's obvious that they were afraid of Gideon.

What is this to say to us? Various things, I think. First of all, it speaks to us of the wonder of God's providence. Forgive me, those of you who attend the prayer meetings, forgive me if I refer yet again to this subject, the wonder of the providence of God.

God. As I said, and as I frequently say to you, the longer I go on, the more wonderful I feel the providence of God becomes in my own eyes, and I'm sure in yours as well.

The little things, perhaps very insignificant. Look at the little things here. so wrapped up in the cause of the Lord and in the life of this man of God, Gideon, a Midianite has a dream.

He has what amounts to a very strange dream, an unusual thing. You know, you'd almost call it rubbish. Most of you people, at least I hope so, anyway, if the dreams that I have, I just sometimes, I can't make head or tails of them.

[26 : 16] Maybe yours are the same. To me, they seem so, so full of nonsense. And to be honest, I don't, I don't give them too much thought, thankfully.

But here, this Midianite, one night is a dream. He sees this strange dream. Then the next night when he's going on duty, he tells it to his fellow, and he hasn't a clue that within earshot is this man.

For whose sake, God gave him the dream in the first place. And God moved him to tell the dream. So that without his knowing it, there's this man needing this encouragement himself.

Oh, how gracious God is. How wonderfully compassionate in the way in which he leads us in his providence. The little things may be insignificant at the time, but if you look back on them, the little things that had such tremendous consequences for you in the providence of God.

Why should a man be in this church in a particular time, but so that the Lord would speak to him? Why would I have to meet so-and-so at this time?

[27 : 32] Well, I know now, as you look back. What I do now, said the Lord to Peter, you don't know, but you're going to know afterwards. And so it is with each one of us the wonder of the providence of God.

My friend, study your providence. Stop at the end of every day and look back over the links in that day's chain and see if you can discover the hand of the Lord in your life.

What has it all meant to you at that particular time? And when you see the hand of God in your life, thank him for remembering you.

Thank him. And then there is this also that Gideon received not just encouragement from this dream, but that he discovered that his enemies were thinking about him.

They were concerned about him. Now you know that the cause of Christ throughout the world has many enemies. It has many enemies in this island, it has many enemies in this town.

[28 : 45] There are people who would love to see, as I said earlier to you, to see every church in this town closed down, burnt to the ground. Many people would love to see the Bible destroyed, would love to see the Christian influence in society eliminated.

Of course there are. we see evidence of this every week almost in our own local press. But the strange thing is this, they can't get rid of the cause of God and the cause of Christ and the church of Christ and the Bible and Christians.

And it's significant, the more progress the cause of Christ makes, the more the devil, as it was on his hind legs, trying to destroy it. In many places tonight in this island and other places, what are people talking about?

As they sit with their glasses of beer and their glasses of spirit, what are they talking about? The church, the gospel, this Christian, that Christian, that minister, what happened here, what happened there?

And at the heart of all that they're saying is fear, they're afraid. Oh, they seem to be full of courage. As they drown, drink after drink after drink, but why is it being drowned?

[30 : 10] To drown very often their fear. There was fear of Gideon in the camp of the Midianites. And you make no mistake, my friend, and I say this with the authority of the word of God, you make no mistake about this, let this encourage you.

At a time when the Christian church is being assailed, it is assailed by people who are dead scared of it. Scared of the Lord.

Scared of his word. Scared of the influence and of the power of his grace. Because if they look around them, they see men and women, they see boys and girls who used to be with them and were no longer there.

Where are they? Delivered from that life by the power of the grace of God that they themselves are petrified of.

Let that encourage you in the work of the gospel and in the cause of Christ. So as a result of this dream, this incident, Gideon returns and rallies his troops and now finally we see here the battle plan that succeeded so eminently.

[31 : 36] He split up a 300 into three bands of a 100. And all he had was this. Now you think of this. Here's a man going into battle. Now think of it and I'm going to ask you, how would you assess this man's strategy?

300. So he divides them up into three bands of a 100 each. Well, you would probably give him 10 out of 10 for that, wouldn't you? That's good strategy. Split them up. And then the next thing he does is this.

He gives each one of them an earthen jar. Like one of your own earthenware jars. And he puts inside it a lit, a flaming torch.

That's the meaning of the lamp, a lit lamp. A flaming torch in one hand and a trumpet in the other. And the strategy is this.

At a given signal, you'll break the earthen jar. That will display the flaming torch. Then you'll blow the trumpet at a given signal.

[32 : 46] That's all. What do you think of that strategy? Facing 130,000 men. Well, I suppose that the worldly wise would say, or the militarists would certainly say, absolute and utter nonsense.

There's no way in which that man with that army and with these tactics is going to engage and defeat an army of 130,000.

Well, my friend, that is always what people have said through the centuries about God's way of doing things. My thought was an Old Testament prophet Isaiah who learned that lesson, learned it thoroughly.

My ways are not your ways, neither are my thoughts, your thoughts, neither are your thoughts my thoughts, saith the Lord.

And you know we have to learn this. And certainly when it comes in its application to the cause of Christ and the preaching of the gospel, the New Testament, and Paul, particularly in Romans, in Corinthians, tells us this.

[34 : 00] Of course the world looks at the preaching of the gospel as the means of its deliverance, looks at it and says, utter folly.

We've never heard so much rubbish in all our born days. That can't possibly succeed. And Paul says, well, I say this to you. The preaching of the gospel may be foolishness to you, but it is the power and the wisdom of God.

It is through the preaching of the gospel we read our weapons, he says, are not carnally but spiritual. And these spiritual weapons in the hand of God are effective for the pulling down of the strongholds of sin and Satan.

You and I in the Christian church have a problem tonight. The problem is how do we make contact with the masses? What do we make contact with them? What do we go to them with?

What tactics are we going to employ? What is going to be our strategy? What is our plan of campaign? What means will we use? How do we get them?

[35 : 16] And I've yet to hear of any means that God has employed better than the ones that he has put in our hands himself.

The display of the light of truth as these men held up the burning torches. The breaking of the pitchers recognizing that we and you who display the truth are earthen vessels who must be broken that the excellency of the power may be of God.

The blowing of the trumpet signifying to my mind as well in its application the proclamation the application the presentation of the word.

And I challenge you you've got a new testament like I have. You read it and you tell me can you discover any other means that God employed to bring men and women boys and girls to the knowledge of salvation.

the challenge is a fair one. Do you know of any other means that God has employed? And I think that the church too often has panicked in the past in turning to things which were not approved by God and which did not have the seal of God's attestation upon them.

[36 : 57] Let us display the light. Let us sound the trumpet and let us remember this. You and I may sow the seed.

You and I may water and may plant. God gives the increase. But there was one other thing.

break the pitchers, display the torches, blow the trumpet, and when I shout, you shout, the sword of the Lord and of Gideon.

Now it may be that this ought to be translated for the Lord and for Gideon. You see that the first version of which the sword is used, it is in italics.

In other words, it is not an original. So it may well be that the best way to understand this cry is because it didn't have swords. The only swords that were present in that battle were the swords of the Midianites.

[37 : 56] And what happened was that when the Israelites, when they broke the pitchers, when they heard the sound, the noise, and saw the light, and heard the trumpets and the cry, panic and confusion set in amongst the Midianites, and they turned on each other, and they began to kill one another with their own swords.

There was total destruction, there was this terrible carnage. they destroyed themselves with their own weapons. You want an application of it? That's not too far-fetched.

You know that, well I don't need to say, the application isn't too far-fetched at all. The Bible tells us that in a battle with sin, in the light of eternity, men destroy themselves.

they have the weapons of their own destruction in their possession, and they use them against themselves, and they will have no one to blame at the end of the day for their destruction, but themselves, no one.

But this battle cry, for the Lord, and for Gideon, for the Lord, and for Gideon.

[39 : 16] Now Gideon was the deliverer, the redeemer, the saviour, obviously at this time appointed by God. We also have a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, and we are in this battle for God's sake and for Christ's sake.

It is there that we are engaged. Let this be our battle cry, for the Lord, and for his Christ, for the Lord, and for his anointed.

And secondly, remember this, that in this battle, as I said earlier, God has a plan and a place for you and for me if we are part of his cause.

I said earlier, he can do without any one of us, but for those who are his by faith, the wonder of grace is this, that God can use you in the battle which is his own, the Lord and Gideon.

Oh, what a privilege, what an honour, to be regarded as Paul regarded himself and all the believers in Corinth, as co-workers together with the Lord.

[40 : 36] The wonder of the wisdom that united omnipotence with impotence, that united wisdom with our folly, that united his strength with our weakness, that united his grace with our unworthiness, that brought us who are worms of the dust, into union with him who is the God of all the earth, that brought those of us who see only what is visible, into union with the invisible, the Lord and Gideon.

He has united his strength in all his glorious strength with us in all our felt weakness, for he will give power to the faint, and to them who have no mind, he will discover, he will give, and he will increase his own strength.

The Lord and Gideon. And in that union you discover the graciousness and the mercy and the faithfulness and the power of God.

And you will discover something else. The wonder of the grace of God conquering sin and Satan in this world.

The Lord alone will destroy that power power in your life and in the life of other people. As I said earlier, this is the power that strikes terror into the hearts of those who are enemies of Christ.

[42 : 33] Why is it that some people here tonight, for example, are afraid of one thing above all else in the world, and that is that they will be converted?

Why are you afraid of that? Why should that strike terror into your heart? I tell you, because you think that conversion is going to spoil everything on you.

Whereas, my friend, it would only make your life rather than mar it. let us go forth in the strength of the Lord.

Let us look to him who is invisible. In the face of all that discourages us tonight, in the face of all that may unhair you, in the face of all that may bother you, in connection with the cause of Christ, and the thought of you being identified with it, remember this, it is not your cause, it is his, what a privilege that you should have a part to play in it at all, the sword of the Lord and of Gideon, for the Lord and for Gideon.

The question is, are you a part of that cause tonight? Let us pray. have mercy upon us all, bless to us the word of thy grace, and to thou and thy mercy, apply it with the power and the conviction that comes alone from thee, part us with thy blessing, and forgive our sins and holy things, for Christ's sake.

[44 : 26] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.