

'THE LORD IS WITH YOU, O VALIANT WARRIOR'

By Steve Zeisler

When I was in grade school, I used to dread the coming of spring because I had a bad asthma condition. I was one person during the fall and winter months when pollen was not in the air- active, outgoing, and involved- but quite another when the ragweed pollen began to fill the air, requiring me to stay indoors and reduce my level of activity. I not only had a physical problem, but also a psychological one. I withdrew from people and stayed to myself. The pollen was like an army that was abroad in the air; it had particular capacity to attack me.

I raise the subject of seasonal attack because it is exactly the problem that beset Israel in the sixth chapter of Judges where we've come in our study of this book. Verses 1-6:

Then the sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord; and the Lord gave them into the hands of Midian seven years. And the power of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of Midian the sons of Israel made for themselves the dens which were in the mountains and the caves and the strongholds. For it was when Israel had sown, that the Midianites would come up with the Amalekites and the sons of the east and go against them. So they would camp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance in Israel as well as no sheep, ox, or donkey. For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, they would come in like locusts for number, both they and their camels were innumerable; and they came into the land to devastate it. So Israel was brought very low because of Midian, and the sons of Israel cried to the Lord.

Intermittent Oppression

We are at the next example of the cycle of sin and loss that we see repeatedly in the book of Judges. "The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord," and the consequences descended upon them. The problem of Midianite oppression, however, is different from domination by neighboring Canaanites which we saw in the story of Deborah and Barak (Judges 4-5). The oppression of the Midianites is more like having asthma attacks in the spring. Raiders would arrive in Canaan at the time of harvest from some distance away and devastate the land. They stole everything that had been grown during the year and drove the Israelites into the mountains. The Israelites were forced to retreat to caves with only meager portions that they could carry with them. The Midianites and their allies would destroy everything in sight and leave, only to return at next year's harvest.

They were successful because, like the Canaanites of chapters 4 and 5, they had a weapon that was greater than any that Israel could muster against them. The iron chariots that served Jabin and Sisera have their counterpart in the camels of the Midianites. The invaders from the south could cross the desert regions very quickly on their camels, devastate the people, and leave. The text suggests not only the material problem of having their food stolen from them every year, but also the psychological debasement that took place each year. They were physically and psychologically living in caves. Even during the months of the year when no enemy could be seen, they knew that attack and defeat were coming, just as I knew the pollen would come each spring. Such vulnerability is frightening. Verse 6 says that "they were brought very low because of Midian."

It isn't difficult to draw an analogy to our lives. Many of us have areas of vulnerability that result in repeated episodes of being "brought very low." Even though the attack is not part of our daily experience, the constant threat of attack can cause a loss of personal identity, value, and strength.

God speaks to us when we need him

Verses 7-10 begin the process of God answering the cry of his people:

Now it came about when the sons of Israel cried to the Lord on account of Midian, that the Lord sent a prophet to the sons of Israel, and he said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'It was I who brought you up from Egypt, and brought you out from the house of slavery. And I delivered you from the hands of the Egyptians and from the hands of all your oppressors, and dispossessed them before you and gave you their land, and I said to you, "I am the Lord your God; you shall not fear the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But you have not obeyed Me.'"

The Prophet's Word

The first response of the Lord to the cry for help of his forlorn people is to send a prophet. We saw this pattern in chapters 4 and 5 as well. When Deborah is introduced as a person who would be a turning point in breaking the bondage of the Canaanite coalition, the first attribute that is mentioned about her is that she is a prophetess. We don't know much about this prophet in chapter 6. He delivers the message and leaves the stage of history. But it's critical to note the importance of the word of God in times of trial, loss, and debilitation. God speaks to us when we need him. There is truth in God's word that will strengthen us and set us upon a firm foundation. Hope is born from hearing the word of God.

The prophet makes a very critical point in speaking to those who have lost hope. He says to them: "The Lord your God is a deliverer. 'I brought you out of Egypt; I brought you out of the house of slavery; I delivered you from the Egyptians and all of your oppressors.'" This reminder of God's commitment and power is a direct challenge to the might of the Midianites. God required, however, one thing of them- that in the land of Canaan they should not worship the gods of the Amorites. They were to completely reject the despicable religion of the Canaanites. That's what he required, but they did not listen to him.

The prophet is making an essential point. Verse 7 says that the sons of Israel cried to the Lord on account of Midian, the yearly invaders from the desert to the south. They said their problem was Midian, but the prophet said their problem was their worship of Baal. The reason that they are weakened before their enemies and unable to deal with their problems is that they have chosen to worship and put their faith in something other than the true God. As a result, they have become hollow and ineffective and are easily overwhelmed.

The shortcomings of both our federal and state governments have been clearly displayed this week. We have to recognize that, as a nation and culture, we have put our faith in something other than God. We have chosen as a people to worship human capability, whether it is economic, technological, or political. We have put our faith in the ability of human beings to build up protections to give us hope for the future and to put limits on sinful behavior. We've trusted the governments and institutions of this culture to give meaning to life, and they cannot do it. And there is a widespread sense of confusion, powerlessness, and devastation.

Most of us have been astonished at the events of the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings. Consider the simple observation that the issues before the Senate Judiciary Committee these past few days concerned a woman's claims of sexual harassment, while Ted Kennedy sat as the rightful representative of this society helping to decide this issue for the sake of the nation. We are turning to the Senate and saying, "Help us, please. Make sense of this, please. Lead us, please. Dispel the darkness, please." They cannot do it, and our hope that institutions of government- human strength- can give life is Baal worship.

The San Jose Mercury News reported that Tom Nolan, the openly gay supervisor of San Mateo County, said to governor Wilson in a luncheon conversation: "Do you know why the homosexual community is so furious over your veto of AB101? Why the anger is so visceral? Why the response is so incandescent? Because this is a community of people who have been rejected by their parents. They were rejected by their peers growing up. They've been rejected by their churches, and they were looking to the government-to you Governor Wilson-to affirm them." To hope that the state government of California will invent a civil right to answer a spiritual problem (healing broken hearts and bringing personal renewal) is Baal worship. Baal worshipers place their

faith in things other than God- governments, organizations, or ideas. But these things have no power to save. The only one who can meet these needs is the living God. And that's the word of the prophet: "You're not weak because your enemies are strong. You're weak because you have worshiped Baal and Asherah. You have loved the gods of the Amorites and have put your faith in something other than God. This is why your lives have been brought low."

The Call Of Gideon

How will our Lord deliver his people? First he sends a prophet to analyze the problem, but the prophet is not enough by himself. Verses 11-13:

Then the angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak that was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite as his son Gideon was beating out wheat in the wine press in order to save it from the Midianites. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him and said to him, "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior." Then Gideon said to him, "Oh my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, 'Did not the Lord bring us up from Egypt?' But now the Lord has abandoned us and given us into the hand of Midian."

The angel of the Lord is a figure that appears in various places in the Old Testament. In reality this is the Lord himself, before his incarnation, taking the form of an angel and visiting the earth. The angel of the Lord came to Gideon who was standing in the wine press, which was a small, circular stone enclosure. He may have been in a stronghold where he would hide from the Midianites. He was trying to tread on grain, as you would with grapes, and separate the wheat from the chaff to produce a little handful of wheat. Wheat was typically threshed by animals on a hilltop in the open. But no one in Israel worked in the open like this because of the threat of the Midianites. We have a picture of an individual hiding somewhere, near a cave perhaps, treading out the grain with his own feet. And he's undoubtedly thinking about what the prophet had said: "The God of Israel is a God of power, deliverance, and authority." We can see that, as he's in the midst of this effort, he's looking at himself and feeling degraded. The angel of the Lord arrives, sits under a tree, and says to him, "Hail valiant warrior. The Lord is with you." Gideon responds as a beleaguered victim, not as a valiant warrior: "Where is God? If the Lord is with us, where is he?" Verses 14-24:

And the Lord looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?" And he said to Him, "O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house." But the Lord said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man." So Gideon said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Thy sight, then show me a sign that it is Thou who speakest with me. Please do not depart from here, until I come back to Thee, and bring out my offering and lay it before Thee." And He said, "I will remain until you return."

Then Gideon went in and prepared a kid and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour; he put the meat in a basket and the broth in a pot, and brought them out to him under the oak, and presented them. And the angel of God said to him, "Take the meat and the unleavened bread and lay them on this rock, and pour out the broth." And he did so. Then the angel of the Lord put out the end of the staff that was in his hand and touched the meat and the unleavened bread; and fire sprang up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. Then the angel of the Lord vanished from his sight. When Gideon saw that he was the angel of the Lord, he said, "Alas, O Lord God! For now I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face." And the Lord said to him, "Peace to you, do not fear; you shall not die." Then Gideon built an altar there to the Lord and named it The Lord is Peace. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites."

God Begins With Individuals

The first thing God does for his needy people is to send them a prophet. The next thing he does is to remind the individual man, Gideon, of his personal love for him. It's hard to read these paragraphs without being

touched by the humility of God. We see him come to us where we are when we're hurting and care for us individually by name. He might have shouted from heaven or sent a legion of angels. He might have done something dramatic with an earthquake or the weather. But he brings hope to his people by reminding them that he knows them where they live in the midst of their hurt and that he loves them there. The Lord sits under a tree and talks to a man who doesn't believe in him. He is even willing to wait while Gideon rushes off to prepare the sacrifice. He wants us to understand his personal concern and love for each of us. Verse 14 shows this deep, personal love: "The Lord looked at him and said, 'Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian.'" The care communicated in the Lord's gaze is as important as the spoken command. God's love for Gideon is deeply personal.

Earlier this week, as I spoke with a friend, a woman came into the church looking for another address on this street. She looked around the room and asked if we did weddings here. I told her that we did, and she proceeded to tell us her story of how she fell in love with her fiance. Later, I shared with her that we didn't have weddings here without communicating our concern for the spiritual life of those getting married. I told her that God knew her, loved her, and cared about her marriage. Some of the news was arresting to her and some was attractive. Like Gideon, she has to decide how to respond to the news that the living God is not just an idea of ancient history or a matter of concern only for those who are peculiarly religious. It is good news that requires a response from each individual heart.

The first statement of the angel of the Lord is, "The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior." He doesn't start listing the sins of Gideon and itemizing his failures. He doesn't start with any negatives at all. Gideon, however, didn't believe either part of God's statement. He didn't believe that God was with the people anymore, and he certainly didn't believe that he was a valiant warrior. He protested by his actions and finally said, "Yeah, but I come from a small family, a small tribe. My father's a nobody. I'm the youngest in my family." And yet God saw him as both his friend and as one who could be raised to greatness.

Will we accept the responsibility to tear down altars of compromise in our lives?

Gideon said, "There are no miracles." The Lord said, "I'm with you." Gideon responded, "You're not with us." He changes the object of God's attention from singular to plural. Gideon's response demonstrates that he doesn't understand that God's attention is directed at him as an individual, not at the entire nation. Gideon wanted miracles to descend on the nation as a whole to overthrow the Midianites. But God begins with individuals.

We are too often like Gideon in this regard. Are we waiting for God to fix Washington, Sacramento, or San Francisco? The word of the Lord to Gideon is, "You go forth. It's your turn. You take on the Midianites." And Gideon protests. We're told in the story of the altar that Gideon eventually began to fear God more than he feared the Midianites. He realized that he had argued with the living God. And wonderfully, when the fear of God began to overtake Gideon, the peace of God began to surround his heart. As Gideon feared the living God, God said, "Peace be with you. I will take care of you. I mean you only good, not harm." And he named the place "The Lord is Peace."

The story continues in verses 25-32:

Now the same night it came about that the Lord said to him, "Take your father's bull and a second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal which belongs to your father, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it; and build an altar to the Lord your God on the top of this stronghold in an orderly manner, and take a second bull and offer a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down." Then Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the Lord had spoken to him; and it came about, because he was too afraid of his father's household and the men of the city to do it by day, that he did it by night.

When the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was torn down, and the Asherah which was beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar which had been built. And they said to one another, "Who did this thing?" And when

they searched about and inquired, they said, "Gideon the son of Joash did this thing." Then the men of the city said to Joash, "Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has torn down the altar of Baal, and indeed, he has cut down the Asherah which was beside it." But Joash said to all who stood against him, "Will you contend for Baal, or will you deliver him? Whoever will plead for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because someone has torn down his altar." Therefore on that day he named him Jerubbaal, that is to say, "Let Baal contend against him," because he had torn down his altar.

The same night that Gideon received the peace of God in his heart and appreciated the message of hope, the Lord said, "Now go to your father's house and tear down the altar to Baal and build an altar to me there." Gideon was not to begin by raising an army. He first had to deal with the compromise in his own home, with the worship of false gods, and with the loss of integrity that had overtaken his own family (evidently, Joash, his father, was the priest of Baal worship for Abiezer). Gideon obeyed the Lord, albeit fearfully. And the next morning there are angry threats issued against Gideon. Interestingly, it is Joash who says to the angry neighbors, "If Baal's a god, let Baal fight for himself." Nothing happens to Gideon because Baal is a false god; he can't defend himself. Gideon takes on the name Jerubbaal, meaning "one who contends with Baal." And eventually it comes to mean "the one who conquers Baal"---the Baal-buster. Having trusted God and found his courage to stand against false worship, Gideon becomes a man of character, authority, and strength in the eyes of the people around him.

Gideon is the leader of the movement away from Baal worship. It started with the prophet raising the hopes of people again that God was strong. Gideon, pondering the words of the prophet, met the living God and learned of God's love for him. He was then called on to deal with the compromise in his own life, and ultimately he became the one who led the rest of his nation to face the forces that had brought them low.

Let me conclude by setting the scene for the decisive battle which we will consider in the next message. Verses 33-34:

Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the sons of the east assembled themselves; and they crossed over and camped in the valley of Jezreel. So the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon; and he blew a trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called together to follow him. And he sent messengers through Manasseh, and they also were called together to follow him.

Pollen season has arrived; the enemy has come in. The first people that responded to Gideon's call were the Abiezrites, the people of the town who had been influenced by his obedience. Members of the other tribes joined him as well. Gideon's first steps of faith have begun a process of renewal in God's people. The stage is set for the decisive intervention of the Lord.

We live in times where there is more concern about the future of this nation than at any other time that I can remember in my lifetime. People wonder if the center will hold, for there is recognition everywhere that we have trusted agencies and ideas that have not produced strength and well-being, nor can they do so. We have hoped that Baal would save us from the Midianites, but Baal cannot save us from anything. Before us is an opportunity to have an influence on our world as Gideon had on his. Will we each accept the responsibility to tear down altars of compromise in our lives? Will we testify to an increasingly frightened and oppressed culture that there is only one God worthy of our worship and that he loves us? Will our actions indicate that we are Baal-conquerors and that our testimony is true? May God grant that it be so.

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