

THE TORCH BEARERS

by Steve Zeisler

The 142nd regiment of the United States Army was one of the most decorated of all during World War II. It was made up of Japanese Americans, some of whom were recruited from internment camps where Japanese citizens had been placed after Pearl Harbor. The 142nd served with extraordinary distinction fighting in Europe, and some of these soldiers helped liberate Dachau, the concentration camp where thousands of Jews had been executed. There was a meeting last week in San Francisco of the Holocaust Oral History Project, during which concentration camp survivors and the Japanese soldiers who liberated them were brought together for the first time since the end of World War II.

A spokesman for one of the units known as Charley Battery, an artillery unit in the 142nd, is George Oiye. George is an active member of this church. He was quoted in the paper as saying: "These soldiers were fighting for a country where they had been excluded from the democratic process, mistrusted and treated as second class citizens." And out of the maltreatment, they went on to serve their nation heroically.

A crisis illuminates the character of a person. This is true for George Oiye. He continues to reflect the character demonstrated during the liberation of Dachau. He knows firsthand what it is like to be treated badly, to suffer, and to be excluded. He has also consistently continued to be a liberator of people. Throughout his Christian life, he has looked for people who were in bondage or hurting. He has cared for these people, brought them to faith, or strengthened their faith. He has been hurt and knows how to minister to the hurting.

Hacker Or Hero?

Gideon is the figure whose life we are now studying in the book of Judges. He is at a point of crisis in his life amidst the warfare that surrounds him. He is to lead his people into battle. In chapters 6 and 7, we find Gideon discussing life with the Lord. He is honest about his struggle to believe God. And the Lord is tender and compassionate in his response to Gideon. We left the account having read in verse 33 of chapter 6 that the Midianites, the Amalekites, and the sons of the East had assembled themselves, crossed over, and camped in the Valley of Jezreel. The current enemies of the nation Israel were a coalition of forces---Bedouin tribes and people to the south and east of the land of Canaan---that came yearly to ruin the lives of the people of God. Once a year, they would come across the desert on camels and encamp after the harvest in Israel. They would take everything that had been grown for that year and bring the people into material and psychological ruin. Once again, the time has come for the Midianite raiders to arrive, and they have assembled in the Valley of Jezreel.

We saw earlier in chapter 6 that Gideon was willing to stand up against the faithless Israelites who worshiped Baal in his city, Abiezer. Baal did not protect the Israelites when the Midianite raiders came. With fear in his heart, Gideon, the man of God, tore down a shrine to Baal, and Baal couldn't defend himself against Gideon either. The people of the city said, "Let's see what Baal will do. Let's see if Baal will strike this upstart and bring him down." Nothing happened. So they called Gideon Jerubbaal, "the one who conquers Baal."

Judges 7:1 notes that our hero has two names---Gideon and Jerubbaal. The word Gideon means "hacker," or "cutter." It would be the name of an undistinguished person, an ordinary laborer or peasant. As we've seen, the word Jerubbaal means "the one who conquers Baal." Gideon has struggled throughout his life, going back and forth between who he was and who he is. Was he a hacker? Or was he a hero? Early in his interaction with God, he says to the angel of the Lord, "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." Later in his life, in chapter 8, we read, "The men of Israel said to Gideon, 'Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian.'" Is he Gideon or Jerubbaal? Gideon is a complex person---everyone is. We wonder about our identity, wrestle with what's true of us, and try to live our lives based on what God says we are,

rather than on what we fear we are when we look only at ourselves and our circumstances.

Faith is expressed by our unwillingness to displease the Lord

There are three issues that the Lord and Gideon discuss in the context of Gideon's need for faith. The end of chapter 6 and chapter 7 are about God helping Gideon to become a man of faith and to throw off the choking pressure of faithlessness which had brought his life low. First, in chapter 6, verse 36, Gideon asks for a sign that he is to be the deliverer of Israel as God had said he would be. He's probably much like you and me when we think at times about how God's promises apply to us-will they work for me? will they apply to my heart and my hurts? Second, in chapter 7, verse 10, God and Gideon are going to discuss the descent of terror that happens when we have to face something that seems utterly overwhelming to us. The Lord says to Gideon, "If you are afraid to go down and fight, I will act on your behalf to deal with your fear."

Third, Gideon will have to address an issue which he never thought he'd have to face-how do you deal with success? For years, this man has seen his people overwhelmed by the Midianites. He knows clearly his incapacities and weaknesses. This last concern, though completely unanticipated, will be the most significant of all tests of faith.

The Lesson Of The Fleece

The enemy is in the Valley of Jezreel. Gideon has called together an army of 32,000 men, and they are camped in the mountains looking down on the hordes that are arrayed before them. The famous story of Gideon and the fleece follows in chapter 6, verses 36-40:

Then Gideon said to God, "If Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou hast spoken, behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou has spoken." And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he drained the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water. Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let Thine anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground." And God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground.

Consider what Gideon is asking of God. In verse 17 of chapter 6, he said to the angel of the Lord, "Show me a sign that it is Thou who speakest with me." He needed a sign that the angel really was from God. And fire came out of the staff of the angel of the Lord and consumed the offering; he was convinced that God was speaking. Now he knows what God has said, but he doesn't know if it will work for him. Gideon wants help in his struggle to believe. He wants to know that God's promises apply to a hacker like him. The story of the fleece is often improperly used to teach a method for finding God's will. Some might say, "I'll put a fleece before the Lord to see if he wants me to take that new job." Depending on the result of this test, they believe that they'll have their answer concerning God's will for them.

This is a misreading of Gideon's interaction with the Lord. He twice uses the phrase, "as thou hast spoken" (v. 36, 37). He doesn't lack information about the will of God; he lacks confidence to trust the word of God. Our Lord is very condescending and kind to him. Gideon sets out the fleece the first night, and it comes back exactly as he's asked. But you can see Gideon's mind at work: "It would be more likely for the water to be absorbed by the wool than the ground. Maybe it's an accident. Maybe the fact that the wool is wet and the ground is dry would have happened anyway. It's not really a sign of anything." So he makes a second request of God: "Will you reverse the process-make the ground wet and the fleece dry?" Gideon's response suggests the inadequacy of the whole process. Every time that you ask God to prove something by these means, the results are always difficult to interpret.

Suppose that you asked the Lord to give you a job offer at a specified time and wage, as confirmation that you should take the job. If the offer comes a day late and just short of the amount, does that mean that God doesn't

want you to take the job? A Christian organization may feel that it should raise a specified amount of money as confirmation that it should start a new project. What is the message from God if the group only raises ninety-five percent of the specified amount? These litmus tests are always difficult to interpret. Gideon's real struggle is one of faith, not information. The most important note is Gideon's phrase in verse 39: "Do not let Thine anger burn against me that I may speak once more. . . ." God builds Gideon's faith by reminding him in his heart of hearts that the living God will not be pushed too far.

During his two days of struggling to believe, Gideon developed an increased fear of God. By the end of the process, he's more afraid to affront God one more time than he is to face the Midianites. And his faith has grown as a result. Faith is expressed by our unwillingness to displease the Lord. In asking for help, Gideon has learned to fear God, and it is this fear of God that makes him willing to act. His unwillingness to ask God another time made him realize that he really did trust, fear, and know God.

Will God Help Me?

With the fleece, Gideon questions whether God will do for him what he said he would do. We often think that God's promises work for other people, but we don't think they're true for us. My wife's best friend from her early childhood was her next door neighbor Lynn. They grew up together from a very young age and did everything together. There are pictures of Lynn and Leslie as little girls, junior highers, and high schoolers-best of friends. We discovered last week that Lynn has very serious breast cancer. She had to have a radical mastectomy, and she's facing a long process of treatment and therapy. Perhaps her life is in the balance. I thought of pictures of Lynn and Leslie-they grew up in the same town, they drank the same water, they were subject to the same toxins. It could easily have been my wife. If the assignment were for us to face cancer together, would I be able to walk by faith? I have preached to other people, visited folk in the hospital with cancer, and talked about the promises of God. I've urged others to believe. But I wondered if I would be able to say that God's promises apply to me. Would I be able to grasp the hand of God and trust him? My immediate answer is, "Perhaps not." The personal ministry of the Lord to Gideon at a time when he had sufficient information, but insufficient faith, is encouraging. God's promises apply to all of his children without exception. We need not fear that we would fail the test.

The second question comes in chapter 7, verse 10, when God asks Gideon if he's afraid. First verses 7:1-8:

Then Jerubbaal [that is, Gideon] and all the people who were with him, rose early and camped beside the spring of Harod; and the camp of Midian was on the north side of them by the hill of Moreh in the valley. And the Lord said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, lest Israel become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me.' Now therefore come, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, 'Whoever is afraid and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead.'" So 22,000 people returned, but 10,000 remained. Then the Lord said to Gideon, "The people are still too many; bring them down to the water and I will test them for you there. Therefore it shall be that he of whom I say to you, 'This one shall go with you,' he shall go with you; but everyone of whom I say to you, 'This one shall not go with you,' he shall not go."

So he brought the people down to the water. And the Lord said to Gideon, "You shall separate everyone who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, as well as everyone who kneels to drink." Now the number of those who lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, was 300 men; but all the rest of the people knelt to drink water. And the Lord said to Gideon, "I will deliver you with the 300 men who lapped and will give the Midianites into your hands; so let all the other people go, each man to his home." So the 300 men took the people's provisions and their trumpets into their hands. And Gideon sent all the other men of Israel, each to his tent, but retained the 300 men; and the camp of Midian was below him in the valley."

Lessons About Fear

God has taken an overwhelming situation and made it impossible. Thirty-two thousand men appeared to have no chance of winning a battle against the hordes of the Midianites and their superior weaponry. For 300, it's

laughable.

The criterion for choosing the 300 men seems peculiar. After 22,000 fearful soldiers leave, the rest are separated by how they drink water. The vast majority of them bent their faces down and drank water from the stream directly. But a small number stood up alertly, cupped the water in their hands, and lapped it from their hands. This suggests that the group that was chosen was not so terrified that it would leave with the original 22,000. But these individuals were still scared enough to look around for Midianites wherever they went, even when they got a drink of water. They weren't absolutely sure of themselves, and they were aware of the dangers. This is the right group of soldiers for the purposes of God. They are apt to be willing to trust him and also to have enough courage to follow through on the battle plan. Verses 9-15:

Now the same night it came about that the Lord said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hands. But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp, and you will hear what they say; and afterward your hands will be strengthened that you may go down against the camp." So he went with Purah his servant down to the outposts of the army that was in the camp. Now the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the sons of the east were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore.

When Gideon came, behold, a man was relating a dream to his friend. And he said, "Behold, I had a dream; a loaf of barley bread was tumbling into the camp of Midian, and it came to the tent and struck it so that it fell, and turned it upside down so that the tent lay flat." And his friend answered and said, "This is nothing less than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given Midian and all the camp into his hand." And it came about when Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, that he bowed in worship. He returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise, for the Lord has given the camp of Midian into your hands."

God says to Gideon, "If you are afraid to go down against the Midianites, let me help you." Even though God had assured Gideon that his promises did apply to him, he still knew the personal anguish that Gideon felt as he looked out on the Valley of Jezreel and saw the enemy arrayed before him as the sand of the sea. Despite everything he knew, he was immobilized by fear. At the Lord's initiative, Gideon and a young boy went down to hear Midianite sentries talking about the dream in which a barley loaf flattened a tent. The barley loaf is stale and useless. Barley was most often used as animal food, but it was all that the Israelites had left because all the better foodstuffs had been taken. The barley loaf clearly represents Israel at its depth. But the barley loaf brings low the invading army.

Gideon is known by name in the place of his enemies. In their interpretation, the enemies realize that Gideon, the servant of the Lord, is going to defeat them. Gideon sensed that the dream had been repeated throughout the whole army of the Amalekites and the Midianites. They had been terrorized inwardly by the mysterious working of God. This army was already defeated. However, you can't see demoralization from the mountain. The numbers are still visible and imposing; the weaponry is just as strong. What God does after he says to Gideon, "Are you afraid?" is to make him aware of invisible realities which he couldn't perceive through his five senses.

God's promises apply to all of his children without exception

Tennessee Ernie Ford died last week. I heard his most famous song, "Sixteen Tons," being played in his memory on the radio. The refrain from this song about a coal miner who's been defeated by life goes: "Sixteen tons, what do you get? Another day older and deeper in debt. St. Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't go. I owe my soul to the company store." This song, sung in Ernie Ford's deep bass voice, is the song of someone who's terrified, beaten, and without hope. It's the story of someone with limited vision who only sees the company store, his own productiveness, and finally his failure and loss. Gideon could have sung this song on the mountain looking down on Jezreel, but God said, "There are things you cannot see, invisible realities that are greater than the things you can see."

Torches And Trumpets

The battle account continues in verses 16-23:

And he divided the 300 men into three companies, and he put trumpets and empty pitchers into the hands of all of them, with torches inside the pitchers. And he said to them, "Look at me, and do likewise. And behold, when I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. When I and all who are with me blow the trumpet, then you also blow the trumpets all around the camp, and say, 'For the Lord and for Gideon.'" So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and smashed the pitchers that were in their hands.

When the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers, they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing, and cried, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!" And each stood in his place around the camp; and all the army ran, crying out as they fled. And when they blew 300 trumpets, the Lord set the sword of one against another even throughout the whole army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the edge of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. And the men of Israel were summoned from Naphtali and Asher and all Manasseh, and they pursued Midian.

Their weapons are torches covered by pottery and horns slung over their shoulders. At the right instant, the pottery comes off and is crashed against the rock with a loud noise. The torches flame up and are held high, and the trumpets are sounded. And the already unnerved Midianite warriors, terrified by what God would do, are jolted and confused by the great noise. Many are awakened in the middle of the night. The Amalekites, who don't speak the same language as the Midianites, begin to fight their allies. There are stampedes and slashings one of another, and the enemy destroys itself through a miracle of God.

There is a last point to make that is even subtly hinted at in the section that I've just read. Gideon told his men, "When you go forward, yell out the phrase 'For Yahweh and for Gideon.'" He knew that the enemy recognized his name—the remarkable Gideon. But when the fighters actually yell the phrase out, they say, "A sword for the Lord and for Gideon." These fighters, as they began to realize the effectiveness of the strategy and as they saw their enemy crumbling before them, began to think of themselves with a sword in their hand, as if the human contribution in defeating the enemy would play some part in the battle. They began to imagine that their valor as warriors was doing something more than just bearing testimony to the power of God—yelling his name and holding his torch high. This is exactly why the warning in chapter 7, verse 2, is so important. The power of God brought deliverance, not the power of the Israelites. We face this danger when we see God conquer our fears and liberate us from our hurts. When we're safe and the healing is done, we may want to take credit for what God has accomplished. The 300 fighters who stayed with Gideon began to imagine a sword in their hand instead of a trumpet. These are the very ones in chapter 8, verse 22, who ask Gideon to be their king. Chapter 8, verse 22:

Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian."

This was the most dangerous moment in Gideon's life—being faced with taking credit for God's work and becoming the acclaim of the people. By the grace of God, Gideon answers, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord will rule over you." Gideon's faith had grown through the process of war, allowing him to see that the victory was won by the power of God, not by the genius of the general.

Jesus met a father whose son was epileptic, as recorded in Mark 9. The man was terrified for his son because he realized that the epilepsy endangered his son's life; he loved him very much. Jesus asked him if he had faith: "Do you believe that I can do what you're asking?" The man answered, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." This is Gideon's cry, and it is ours as well. We do believe, but there is so much that we don't believe. There are so many times when we hear the promises of God as applying to everyone else, but not to

us.

There are times when we are immobilized because we are afraid. God will help us to see the invisible realities that are greater than the things that cause us to fear. Lastly our Lord is wise enough to realize that, when he finally brings us release and victory, we will want to take credit for his work. We long to maximize our contribution to the process and diminish his miracle. We love to pat ourselves on the back for having made it through the tough times. And someone will want to make us king, and we'll want to be king. But by the grace of God, faith will hold us on that day as well. The faith that we've learned in the war will allow us the strength to say, "It is my Lord who deserves the credit. He shall rule over us."

Catalog No. 4306
Judges 7
Sixth Message
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October 20, 1991

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