

# The faithful of old— studied by the young

## Gideon: a mighty man of valour

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**G**IDEON is introduced in the Divine narrative as a son: the son of Joash, a man of Manasseh (Judg. 6:11,15) who had faithfully taught his children about God’s exploits in Egypt (v. 13). However, Joash, like many in Israel and in many ways embodying Israel, had slipped into idolatry (v. 25). Gideon was the youngest in the family (v. 15), yet by the time we meet him in the record he had already lost his brothers in battle to the Midianites (8:18,19).

### “And the children of Israel did evil”

We initially find Gideon and the nation of Israel in a dire situation under the hand of Midian, who had been oppressing the nation for seven years (6:1). Israel were terrified of their oppressors and had resorted to making dens in the mountainous regions of the land. In this tough terrain they were planting their crops, but these were being stolen by the Midianites, Amalekites and the children of the east. In Leviticus, God had explained to the people that this would happen if they did not hearken to His commands. He warned that “ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it . . . they that hate you shall reign over you . . . ye shall flee when none pursueth . . . I will punish you seven times more for your sins” (26:14-18).

As a result of this apostasy, God had delivered Israel into the hand of Midian, Amalek and the children of the east (Judg. 6:3). Two of these nations, Amalek and Midian, had been heavily defeated under the hand of Moses (Ex. 17; Num. 31), and Israel were supposed to war with Amalek from generation to generation (Ex. 17:16). By Gideon’s time the nation had stopped fighting the

war against sin altogether, and sin reigned over them (*cf.* Rom. 6:12).

Following on from this theme, the record says that the ravaging Midianite hordes “left no sustenance for Israel” (Judg. 6:4). In other words, Israel were planting seeds but they were not sustaining life. This principle is brought out in Romans: “when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins . . . did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death” (7:5). This connection is further established in the fact that the Hebrew word for “sustenance” is the same word translated “*preserve life*” in Genesis 45:5.

### The Midianites, Amalekites and the children of the east

In Judges 6 this group of nations, which were all based to the east of the Land of Promise, are described as being “as locusts for multitude” (v. 5, RV). An interesting parallel can be drawn here with the plague of locusts brought on Egypt in the time of Moses.

Plague of locusts (Ex. 10)	Midianite invasion (Judg. 6)
“an east wind” (v. 13)	“of the east” (v. 3)
“all the coasts of Egypt” (v. 14)	“till thou come unto Gaza” (v. 4)
“locusts . . . without number” (Ps. 105:34)	“without number” (v. 5)
“did eat every herb . . .” (v. 15)	“left no sustenance” (v. 4)

Ironically it was no longer Egypt but Israel that was now being ‘plagued’ by locusts (Lev. 26:21; Deut. 28:38). Israel had spiritually become like Egypt and needed deliverance, and so “the children of Israel cried unto the LORD [Yahweh]” (Judg. 6:6; *cf.* Ex. 2:23).

With this in mind, the prophet’s message in Judges 6:8-10 is brought sharply into focus. The unnamed prophet is sent by God to remind Israel of their deliverance from Egypt: “I brought you

*The ravaging Midianite hordes “left no sustenance for Israel”:*



*“. . . as locusts for multitude”*

up from Egypt . . . I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians”. God had wrought a great deliverance before and He could do it again. Yet it appears that apathetic Israel failed to act on the message, and it required a deliverer to galvanise them, a prophet like unto Moses (Deut. 18:18).

The man chosen by God was Gideon, whose life has many parallels with Moses. He was a man whom Yahweh had raised up to deliver Israel out of the hand of their enemies. Throughout the long period of the judges, God repeatedly raised up saviours to deliver Israel out of the hand of their enemies (Judg. 2:18). It is comforting to appreciate that these judges were a token to Israel of the Father’s longsuffering in repeatedly forgiving their sins.

As with many of the faithful of old, we initially find Gideon performing a simple act that would prepare him for his later work. As Moses and David shepherded their flocks, or as Peter fished the lake of Galilee, Gideon is found beating out wheat in a winepress in preparation for his judgement on the Midianites.

This brave action provides a fascinating insight both into Gideon’s character and the harsh life

under Midianite oppression. Threshing wheat was normally done on an open threshing floor (Ruth 3:2) so that the lighter chaff could be blown away, leaving the grain to fall to the floor; threshing is therefore an appropriate symbol of judgement (Mt. 3:12). Yet Gideon was bravely “beating out” (RV)<sup>1</sup> wheat in a secluded and restrictive winepress to hide his grain from the Midianites.

#### **“Some have entertained angels unawares”**

While he is undertaking this arduous work an angel appears to him, for “The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them” (Ps. 34:7). However, Gideon does not know that this is an angel until the angel departs in verse 21 of Judges 6. As with Abraham in Genesis 18, this angel presents himself as a normal man.

The angel of Yahweh informs Gideon that He is with him, and that Gideon will be the person God will use to bring about Israel’s salvation

1. The same Hebrew word used in Ruth 2:17, translated “beat out”.

(cf. Ex. 3:12). Despite his pleas, Yahweh promises that “thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man” (Judg. 6:16). Believing the angel to be a prophet, Gideon knew to “try the spirits whether they are of God” (1 Jno. 4:1) and so faithfully asked the angel for a sign (cf. Deut. 13). Before letting the angel leave him, Gideon ensured that he gave the angel a “present”. This seems to have been a custom in Israel when going to a prophet or one greater (for example, 1 Sam. 9:7; 1 Kgs. 14:3; 2 Kgs. 8:8).

It is notable to see the level of Gideon’s hospitality in this time of hardship (Rom. 12:13). He provided the angel with “a kid, and unleavened cakes of an ephah of flour” (Judg. 6:19), both appropriately echoing the Passover and deliverance from Egypt (Ex. 12). From Exodus 16:16,36 we learn that an ephah (22 litres) of manna would feed a man for ten days, so Gideon provided the angel with a substantial meal!

After the angel’s miraculous sign and sudden departure, Gideon realises that he has entertained an angel unawares (Heb. 13:2), and prays to God in fear of his life (Judg. 6:22). Gideon builds an altar to commemorate the Father’s comforting words of reassurance to him: “Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die” (vv. 23,24). Gideon calls the altar Yahweh-Shalom, ‘Yahweh send peace’. Primarily Gideon had set up this altar as a witness (as Gen. 22:14; Josh. 22:34), which would be for the benefit of Israelites in subsequent generations, that Yahweh can bring peace in the most unlikely circumstances (Judg. 8:28). More fully, this was a prophecy of Christ, through whom “we have peace with God” (Rom. 5:1), for “he is our peace” (Eph. 2:14).

### **The cleansing of his father’s house**

That night Yahweh spoke to Gideon and instructed him to remove the idolatrous artefacts from his father’s house. Despite the scarcity of livestock in the land (Judg. 6:4), Gideon was specifically told to take two bullocks. He was to take his father’s young bullock, which subsequently vanishes from the record<sup>2</sup> (like the Mosaic covenant in Hebrews 8:13), and “the second bullock of seven years old”. This second bullock had survived the Midianite marauders for “seven years” (Judg. 6:1), and its offering signified the end, by the hand of Gideon, of the period of Midianite oppression, and the resulting freedom of Israel.

Before Gideon could offer acceptable sacrifice to God, he was required to “throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down

the grove that is by it” (v. 25). Gideon had to ensure that others turned from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:9). In this act of destruction Gideon was fulfilling the words of the Law (Deut. 7:5) and was embodying the meaning of his name: a ‘hewer’. Furthermore, as he was about to build a true altar, the words of the Law taught, “Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of any trees near unto the altar of the LORD [Yahweh] thy God, which thou shalt make thee” (16:21).

Likewise the Apostle John is inspired to exhort the believers, “keep yourselves from idols” (1 Jno. 5:21). This principle from the life of Gideon is illuminating for our life in Christ over three thousand years later. The inspired Apostle Paul said, “. . . the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds . . . casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4,5). Anything in our lives that exalts itself against the knowledge of God needs to be hewn down, with godliness taking its place.

At night, with his ten faithful servants, Gideon went about this work of destruction. Gideon clearly had a group of men whom he could trust with the things of the Truth. Corinthians teaches us that, conversely, “Bad company corrupts good morals” (1 Cor. 15:33, NASB). Our friendship choices should be based on spiritual principles.

### **Victory over Midian**

It becomes clear that, as well as Gideon’s work of beating out wheat, his destruction of idolatry in his own house was the Father’s way of preparing him for his work of destroying the Midianites. Both incidents were at night; both were preceded by a revelation from God; both involved the motivation of others in the Truth; and both involved the destruction of that which is opposed to the God of Israel. Undoubtedly the Father will work in our lives to prepare us for our work, both now and when Christ returns, if we show ourselves willing to work in His service.

After “many [32,000] are called, but few [300] are chosen” (Mt. 22:14), Gideon goes on to lead Israel to a huge victory over the Midianites in a great act of faith, an event typical of the deliverance Messiah will bring to Israel in the last days (cf. Isa. 9:4; 10:26).

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2. As supported textually and contextually (vv. 26,28).

## Final thoughts

We have deliberately focused on the earlier, less well-known, incidents in the life of Gideon, to illustrate the faith of the man early on in his life as an example for us. Gideon is mentioned both explicitly and implicitly in Hebrews 11 as a man of faith: "Gideon . . . who . . . turned to flight the armies of the aliens" (vv. 32,34).

Gideon was called to work out his own salvation with fear and trembling, yet at the same time motivated others in the work of the Truth. Gideon refused to let sin reign over him, and went out to destroy idolatry and set up righteous worship.

On the journey to Emmaus, Christ expounded to the two disciples "in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Lk. 24:27). In these aspects of Gideon's life we can see the work of the Lord prefigured. Gideon protested that "my thousand, is the poorest in Manasseh" (Judg. 6:15, Rotherham), just as Christ was born in Bethlehem, "little among the thousands of Judah" (Mic. 5:2). As the unnamed prophet went before Gideon, so John the Baptist was a man sent from God before Christ was openly revealed to Israel, a voice to call the people to repentance (Jno. 1:6; Lk. 1:76,77). Like Gideon, the Master came to save Israel with the knowledge that God was with him, and in so doing he saved himself (Acts 10:38; 13:23; Heb. 5:7). Like Gideon, Christ also cleansed his father's house before going on to make a sacrifice, not with the "second bullock" but as the "second man" to "establish the second" (1 Cor. 15:47; Heb. 10:9).

*"Throw down the altar of Baal . . . and cut down the grove that is by it"*



*Anything in our lives that exalts itself against the knowledge of God needs to be hewn down, with godliness taking its place.*

There is great comfort in this, that a man like Gideon could show the spirit of Christ. Likewise in our simple lives we aim to be "conformed to the image of [God's] Son" (Rom. 8:29).