

God Works Through Gideon

It is fascinating to look at characters who are mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments, and Gideon is a good example. In Hebrews 11 we have a list of people from the Old Testament who were considered to be full of faith, and towards the end of the chapter we read:

What more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah... who through faith... out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens (Hebrews 11:32–34).

Divine Punishment

Gideon lived in Israel during the time of the Judges, and life was very difficult. He belonged to one of the families in the tribe of Manasseh, and they were under attack from the Midianites, who were swarming over the border from the east (Judges 6:1–6). The invaders covered the land from Mount Tabor in the north (pictured),



down to Gaza on the southern Mediterranean coast. To give you some idea, it takes over an hour to drive the length of this area today.

The Midianites were well known to the people of Israel and they had a common ancestor, Abraham. The reason for this crisis was that Israel had been worshipping idols, mainly Baal, and so God caused the Midianites to plague Israel.

The people of Israel made homes in dens and caves, to hide. The Midianites would let the Jews sow their crops, wait until they were ready to be harvested, and then invade the land with their camels and flocks, destroying everything, so that the Jews were starving. They left no food for people or animals, and Judges 6:5 tells us that they destroyed the land. This went on for seven long years!

Divine Intervention

Eventually, “Israel cried out to the LORD because of the Midianites” (Judges 6:7). God responded by first sending a prophet to speak to Israel, explaining the reason for their predicament.

Then He sent an angel to Gideon, while he was threshing wheat near a winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. This tells us a lot about the serious conditions in Israel at this time. You would never normally thresh at a winepress. In order to thresh, you need a large open, flat rock,

where you can beat the grain with a flail, and the breeze can blow the remaining chaff away. A winepress however is built into a wall or a sheltered cliff, comprising two containers one above the other, often hollowed out of the rock itself.

The angel greeted Gideon with the words *“The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valour!”* (v12). This seems curious given that he discovered Gideon hiding his wheat from the Midianites, but shows that God has the full picture. Gideon even sounded rather timid, saying *“How can I save Israel?”* (v15).

Gideon prepared an offering of a young kid and presented it to the angel. Touching it with his staff, the angel caused fire to come up out of the rock and consume the offering, showing that God accepted it.

Divine Instructions

Through the angel, God told Gideon to destroy his father’s altar to Baal, to sacrifice one of his bullocks, and to cut down the grove of trees that housed the shrine. Gideon was terrified of his father and neighbours, so taking ten servants he destroyed the altar at night rather than in daylight. Then, as instructed, he offered the bullock to God, using the wood he had cut down as fuel.

In the morning there was an uproar: the altar to Baal was demolished, the grove of trees had been cut down, and the bullock had been offered on the altar to the true God. Who could have done such a thing?

The men went to Gideon’s father, and demanded that he send his son out to face the mob. He answered them: *“Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning! If*

he [Baal] is a god, let him plead for himself” (v31). That is how Gideon got his secondary name, Jerubbaal, which means, “Let Baal plead”.

Divine Signs

Maybe the Midianites and their confederates heard of this trouble, for now they came in force against Israel. Gideon blew a silver trumpet and assembled an army. Then he prayed to God, asking for a sign that He would really save the Jews through Gideon.

I shall 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 shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said (v37).

In the morning, Gideon wrung a bowl full of water out of the fleece. Was this just coincidence? Gideon asked God that on the following night the sign would be reversed, with dew on the ground only, and not on the fleece: this is exactly what happened.

So Gideon assembled his army, but God said:

The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me’ (Judges 7:2).

God wanted there to be no doubt that Israel were saved by His power. So 22,000 men went home, leaving just 10,000 to fight the battle.

But this was still far too many for God. Gideon must take the men to a stream to drink, separating the ones who bent down and lapped the water with their tongue like a dog, from those

who scooped the water out of the stream with their cupped hands to drink. Three hundred drank from their hands, and these were those who were to go into the battle.

We are given no reason why the choice was made in this way. Maybe God was choosing the men who were alert to the dangers of an ambush, or it may possibly have been a means of rejecting those who were used to bowing down to idols such as Baal. Either way, there were only three hundred men left. God was very clear:

“By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand” (v7).

In the end, Israel were outnumbered by 450:1, just as much later, when Elijah faced the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (see Judges 8:10 and 1 Kings 18:22).

Divine Deliverance

Gideon was still nervous, so God told him to take his servant and go down to the camp of the Midianites. There Gideon and his servant heard a Midianite soldier recounting a dream to his fellow-soldier: a round cake of barley bread rolled into the Midianite camp, and knocking into a tent, completely flattened it. The man attributed this to Gideon coming and destroying the whole camp. Thus encouraged, Gideon praised and thanked God and went back to the army. He explained that God had indeed given the Midianites into their hands, and they would succeed.

Gideon divided his army into three companies of one hundred men, telling them to watch him, and copy what he did. He gave each man a

trumpet, and a flaming torch, which they hid inside a clay pitcher until the vital moment.

They crept to the edge of the Midianite camp in the dark at about 10pm. Following Gideon’s example, they broke their pitchers so that the light blazed, blew furiously on their trumpets, and shouted at the top of their voices:

The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon! (v18).



In the panic and confusion that followed, every Midianite turned his weapon on his fellow, and there was a complete rout. The Midianite army just ran away, confused and disorientated by the power of God Himself.

The whole army ran and cried out and fled (v21).

God had worked through Gideon to save His people and to demonstrate His power beyond any doubt.

It is interesting to see that the prophet Ezekiel echoes this, saying that in a major battle when the Lord Jesus returns, “Every man’s sword will be against his brother” (Ezekiel 38:21). God will defend His people again, on that future day.

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