

5. God's mighty whiner

12/29/2005

Gideon is the next judge. He is one of the most interesting judges, although not the most outstanding. In reality none of the judges were great. They were little people like you and me, marked by mediocrity. Each one was insignificant, insufficient and inadequate. Each one had some short comings in his life. That was the very reason God chose them and used them.

About the time of the eighth Midianite invasion, God called a farmer in Manasseh named Gideon to become the deliverer of His people. Gideon started his career as somewhat of a coward, then became a conqueror, and ended his career as a compromiser. But more space is devoted to Gideon in the Book of Judges than to any other judge. Gideon is the only judge whose personal struggles with his faith are recorded. Gideon is a great encouragement to people who have a hard time accepting themselves and believing that God can make anything out of them or do anything with them.

But before the Lord could use Gideon in His service, He had to deal with four doubts that plagued him and were obstacles to his faith. These doubts can be expressed in four questions.

A. DOES GOD REALLY CARE ABOUT US?

Judges 6:1-6 Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years, 2 and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel. Because of the Midianites, the children of Israel made for themselves the dens, the caves, and the strongholds which are in the mountains. 3 So it was, whenever Israel had sown, Midianites would come up; also Amalekites and the people of the East would come up against them. 4 Then they would encamp against them and destroy the produce of the earth as far as Gaza, and leave no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep nor ox nor donkey. 5 For they would come up with their livestock and their tents, coming in as numerous as locusts; both they and their camels were without number; and they would enter the land to destroy it. 6 So Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites, and the children of Israel cried out to the Lord.

The Midianites devastated and demoralized the Israelites, degrading them to such an extent that they were forced to live like animals.

Israel's sin made all their hard work profitless. Like that, our sins rob us of what we work hard to gain.

The Lord does not permit His children to sin successfully. God is not a passive parent who allows His children to do as they please. Because His ultimate purpose is that they might be conformed to the image of His Son. The Father wants to be able to look at each member of His spiritual family and say, "This is My beloved child, in whom I am well pleased."

Chastening is evidence of God's hatred for sin and His love for His people. We can't conceive of a holy God wanting anything less than His very best for His children, and the best He can give us is a holy character like that of Jesus Christ.

Obedience to the Lord builds character, but sin destroys character. God cannot sit idly by and watch His children destroy themselves.

Judges 6:7-10 And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried out to the Lord because of the Midianites, 8 that the Lord sent a prophet to the children of Israel, who said to them, "Thus says the Lord God of Israel: 'I brought you up from Egypt and brought you out of the house of bondage; 9 and I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of all who oppressed you, and drove them out before you and gave you their land. 10 Also I said to you, "I am the Lord your God; do not fear the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell." But you have not obeyed My voice.'"

God sent this unnamed prophet to tell them where the real problem was. It wasn't that the Midianites were so strong, it was that Israel was so disobedient. It is human nature to blame others for problems that we cause.

Often in the Old Testament, when the Lord denounced His people for their disobedience, He reminded them of the wonderful way He had delivered them from Egypt. He also reminded them of His generosity in giving them the land and helping them overcome their enemies. If the Jews were suffering from Gentile bondage, it wasn't God's fault! He had given them everything they needed.

When we read the New Testament epistles, we can't help but notice that the apostles took the same approach when they admonished the believers. The apostles repeatedly reminded the Christians that God had saved them so that they might live obediently and serve the Lord faithfully. The motive for Christian living is not that we might gain something we don't have but that we might live up to what we already have in Christ.

Judges 6:11-13 Now the Angel of the Lord came and sat under the terebinth tree which was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezrite, while his son Gideon threshed wheat in the winepress, in order to hide it from the Midianites. 12 And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him, and said to him, "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor!" 13 Gideon said to Him, "O 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 forsaken us and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites."

This was both difficult and humiliating. Wheat was threshed in open spaces, typically on a hill-top so the breeze could blow away the chaff. Wheat was not normally threshed in a sunken place like a winepress. Gideon was doing this in the winepress, because he didn't want to be seen to the Midianites with his wheat.

When we consider the kind of man Gideon was at this time, we wonder why God selected him. But God often chooses the weak things of this world to accomplish great things for His glory.

When Gideon called himself "the least in my father's house", he may have been suggesting that his family treated him like an outcast because he didn't worship Baal while his family did. Gideon wasn't a man of strong faith or courage, and God had to patiently work with him to prepare him for leadership. God is always ready to make us what we ought to be if we're willing to submit to His will.

Ephesians 2:10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

B. DOES GOD KNOW WHAT HE IS DOING?

Judges 6:14-16 Then the Lord turned to him and said, "Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?" 15 So he said to Him, "O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." 16 And the Lord said to him, "Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man."

Gideon questioned God's wisdom in choosing him to be the nation's deliverer. The Lord's statements recorded in v2 & 14 should have given Gideon all the assurance he needed, but he wouldn't believe God's Word. In this, he was like Moses, whose story Gideon surely knew since he was acquainted with Hebrew history.

In our last study, we have learned that God's commandments are God's enablements. Once God has called and commissioned us, all we have to do is obey Him by faith, and He will do the rest. God cannot lie and God never fails. Faith means obeying God in spite of what we see, how we feel, or what the consequences might be.

God's assurance to Gideon was not to build up his self confidence, but to assure him that God was indeed with him. Gideon did not need more self-confidence, he needed more God-confidence.

Judges 6:17-24 Then he said to Him, "If now I have found favor in Your sight, then show me a sign that it is You who talk with me. 18 Do not depart from here, I pray, until I come to You and bring out my offering and set it before You." And He said, "I will wait until you come back." 19 So Gideon went in and prepared a young goat, and unleavened bread from an ephah of flour. The meat he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot; and he brought them out to Him under the terebinth tree and presented them. 20 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. 21 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 rose out of the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. And the Angel of the Lord departed out of his sight. 22 Now Gideon perceived that He was the Angel of the Lord. So Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord God! For I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face." 23 Then the Lord said to him, "Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die." 24 So Gideon built an altar there to the Lord, and called it The-Lord-Is-Peace. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

God had to give Gideon a message of peace to prepare him for fighting a war. Unless we're at peace with God, we can't face the enemy with confidence and fight the Lord's battles. Gideon now believed the Lord was able to use him, not because of who he was but because of who God was.

Whenever God calls us to a task that we think is beyond us, we must be careful to look to God and not to ourselves.

Luke 1:37 For with God nothing will be impossible.

C. WILL GOD TAKE CARE OF ME?

Judges 6:25-27 Now it came to pass the same night that the Lord said to him, "Take your father's young bull, the second bull of seven years old, and tear down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the wooden image that is beside it; 26 and build an altar to the Lord your God on top of this rock in the proper arrangement, and take the second bull and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the image which you shall cut down." 27 So Gideon took ten men from among his servants and did as the Lord had said to him. But because he feared his father's household and the men of the city too much to do it by day, he did it by night.

God called Gideon to get his own house in order first. Gideon lacked the courage to do this in the daytime. Yet it is better to timidly obey the Lord than to not obey Him at all.

Judges 6:28-32 And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, there was the altar of Baal, torn down; and the wooden image that was beside it was cut down, and the second bull was being offered on the altar which had been built. 29 So they said to one another, "Who has done this thing?" And when they had inquired and asked, they said, "Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing." 30 Then the men of the city said to Joash, "Bring out your son, that he may die, because he has torn down the altar of Baal, and because he has cut down the wooden image that was beside it." 31 But Joash said to all who stood against him, "Would you plead for Baal? Would you save him? Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning! If he is a god, let him plead for himself, because his altar has been torn down!" 32 Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, "Let Baal plead against him, because he has torn down his altar."

Gideon's father made a very logical argument for preserving his son's life. Since Baal is the offended party, he can defend himself.

This is similar to what happened during a great move of God in the South Seas in the 19th Century. One tribal chief was converted to Christianity and he gathered up all the idols of his people. He told the idols he was going to destroy them, and then he gave them the chance to run away. He destroyed all the ones that sat there like dumb statues.

It's worth noting that true believers can't build an altar to the Lord unless first they tear down the altars they've built to the false gods they worship. Our God is a jealous God and will not share His glory or our love with another.

D. DOES GOD KEEP HIS PROMISES?

Judges 6:33-35 Then all the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. 34 But the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him. 35 And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, who also gathered behind him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.

This follows the familiar pattern of the Spirit's work upon men under the Old Covenant. The Holy Spirit comes upon specific people for specific reasons, usually for divinely empowered leadership. Under the New Covenant, a broad and generous outpouring of the Holy Spirit is promised upon all flesh.

Judges 6:36-40 So Gideon said to God, "(1) If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said-- 37 look, 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 (2) You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said." 38 And it was so. When he rose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water. 39 Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew." 40 And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground.

The Midianites and their allies made their annual invasion about that time as more than 135,000 men moved into the Valley of Jezreel. It was time for Gideon to act, and the Spirit of God gave him the wisdom and power that he needed.

Gideon's reformation in the town had actually accomplished something! At Gideon's call, 32,000 men responded.

This is the first mention in the Bible of camels being used in warfare, and certainly they would have given their riders speed and mobility on the battlefield. The Jews were outnumbered and would certainly be outmaneuvered, except for one thing: Jehovah God was on their side, and He had promised them victory.

Nevertheless, Gideon doubted God's promise again. Did God really want him to lead the Jewish army? After all, he was only an ordinary farmer. So, before he led the attack, he asked God to give him two more signs.

The phrase "putting out the fleece" is a familiar one in Christian circles. It means asking God to guide us in a decision by fulfilling some condition that we lay down.

"Putting out the fleece" is not a biblical method for determining the will of God. Rather, it's an approach used by people like Gideon who lack the faith to trust God to do what He said He would do. Twice Gideon reminded God of what He had said, and twice Gideon asked God to reaffirm His promises with a miracle.

The fact that God stooped to Gideon's weakness only proves that He's a gracious God who understands how we're made. Who are we to tell God what conditions He must meet, especially when He has already spoken to us in His Word? "Putting out the fleece" is not only an evidence of our unbelief, but it's also an evidence of our pride. God has to do what I tell Him to do before I'll do what He tells me to do!

E. APPLICATIONS

1) The motive for Christian living is not that we might gain something we don't have but that we might live up to what we already have in Christ.

2) Faith means obeying God in spite of what we see, how we feel, or what the consequences might be.

Once God has called and commissioned us, all we have to do is obey Him by faith, and He will do the rest. God cannot lie and God never fails.

3) It's worth noting that true believers can't build an altar to the Lord unless first they tear down the altars they've built to the false gods they worship.

Our God is a jealous God and will not share His glory or our love with another.