

In our last session, we learned about the background of Gideon and about some of the trials of being an Israelite under Midianite oppression. The canaanization of Israel was continuing as God allowed Midian, the Amalekites, and the Bedouins to cripple the Israelites by stealing their food and destroying their crops. Yahweh hears the cries of hunger and suffering of Israel and He raises up Gideon to be their deliverer. We left off with Gideon having built an altar to Yahweh in Judges 6.24 and naming it Yahweh-shalom.

In this session we will look at Gideon's destruction of the altar of Baal in Ophrah of the Abiezrites, Gideon's unusual method of selecting troops with which to attack the Midianites and the attack of Gideon's forces. Let's begin with Gideon's house cleaning, the removal of the presence of a pagan altar.

The altar built by Gideon in 6.24 represents a direct challenge to the religious rites being practiced by the people at Ophrah. Like much of Israel, the Abiezrites, by practicing pagan worship, as symbolized by this altar of Baal and the Asherah pole, demonstrated that they had become Baalists. Before Yahweh would allow Gideon to carry out his mission against the Midianites, Gideon must first deal with this abomination in his backyard. The God of Israel would not suffer a divided allegiance; He wanted all their love and loyalty. Ex 20.1-7 provides a basic understanding of the covenantal relationship between Israel and Yahweh; "You shall have no other gods before Me (Ex 20.3)." God would not allow Gideon to serve him while Gideon's family and clan were serving and worshipping Baal. As commentator Daniel Block suggests: "This is one dimension of bearing the name of Yahweh in vain." Ultimately, Yahweh is telling Gideon to deal with the most important issue first. The issue of importance to God is Israel's "bondage to the spiritual forces of the land," and not their physical oppression by the Midianites.

God wastes little time in challenging Gideon to act against the pagan worship of the Abiezrites. In verses 25-26, Gideon is commanded to destroy the altar and Asherah pole that is on his father's property. Gideon was commanded to use his father's prize bull to tear down the altar and cut down the Asherah pole. Some translations suggest that there were two bulls involved, however, many modern scholars believe that there was only a single bull involved and that the phrase that has been translated as a second bull actually meant "to be exalted, of high rank." To both be strong enough to tear down the altar and to be perfect enough to be a sacrifice the animal would be seven years old. The fact that it was seven years old may also connect it with the seven years of oppression, since, normally for sacrificial purposes; no animal was more than three years old. Thus, he was told to take a bull whose age was the same length of time as the oppression. If God was going to use Gideon to deliver Israel, Gideon must remove from his house the idolatry that brought on God's divine judgment.

After destroying the false altar, Gideon was to build an altar to the true God, take the bull along with wood from the Asherah pole and make a burnt offering to

Yahweh. Altogether there were four Gideon's actions commit several affronts against Baal. First, his altar was to be thrown down; second, an altar to the true God was to be built over the destroyed altar; third, a prime bull, the sacred animal in Baalism, was to be offered on this altar, being sacrificed, not to Baal, but to the God of Israel; and, fourth, the Asherah poles, which represent Baal's consort, were to be used as the firewood for the sacrifice.

Verse 27 tells us that Gideon did as Yahweh commanded him, fulfilling all the requirements of verses 25 to 26. If we stopped reading verse 27 at the half waypoint of the verse, we would likely be impressed with Gideon's immediate response to God's commands. Yet as we read the rest of the verse we find that the motivation for Gideon's immediate response was not his love of God, or even necessarily his sense of obedience to God but his fear of discovery of being the one to tear down the altar of Baal. He chose to do the deed by night because he feared his family, his father's household, and the men of the city. This would indicate to the reader that Gideon is still not the mighty man of valor predicted of him by the Angel of God, but that is coming.

The response to the discovery of Gideon's actions justifies his reasoning for committing the act under the cover of darkness 6.28-31. As the men of the city arose early in the morning, they were witnesses to Gideon's compliance with the commands of God. They discovered three things: first, the altar of Baal was broken down; second, and the Asherah was cut down that was by it; third, the remains of Joash's bull that was offered upon the altar that was built.

Consider the people's response to the violation of Baal's altar and the cutting down of the Asherah pole. Their first reaction to the crime was to ask who and not why. Daniel Block reflects on this "They have only one concern: to bring the 'criminal' to justice (when they are the real criminals)."

In 6.29b-30, after a brief investigation, Gideon was identified as the one responsible for the act. Note that Gideon had taken ten of his servants to help him in the act. But a secret known to ten men does not stay a secret very long. Verse 30 records the demand of the townsmen for Gideon to be put to death because he had broken down the altar of Baal, and second, and because he had cut down the Asherah that was by it. The fact that it was Jews who wanted to execute Gideon for tearing down the altar of Baal shows how far the Canaanization process of Israel had progressed. It is interesting that the report of his son's offenses that was given to Joash makes no mention of the altar to Yahweh that Gideon built or the sacrifice of Joash's best bull on it.

Verse 31 presents Joash's defense of Gideon. Like most fathers, Joash's concern is for his son. There is no indication of Joash's concern about losing his best bull or even the destruction of his altar to Baal. He begins his defense of his son by asking two rhetorical questions that he hopes will make clear to his son's accusers the illogicality of their demands for Gideon's death. First, he asked, Will

you contend for Baal? That is, are you going to plead Baal's cause? Does Baal need a defense attorney? Second, Joash continues, or will you save him? Will you save or shield Baal? Joash uses the same word that is used in the Book of Judges of the judges who saved Israel. Men could save Israel, but this god could not even save his altar. Instead of people needing deliverance from a hostile god, this god (Baal) requires deliverance by people.

Joash's concludes, saying to those that want to sentence his son to death, that anyone who defends Baal will be put to death before the night is done. If Baal is truly a god, then he needs no human defense; but for one to defend a false god is to bring the death penalty upon himself: If he were a god, let him contend for himself, because one has broken down his altar. Joash seems to have been won over by his son's actions.

We saw earlier that Gideon's call concluded with a confirming event, the construction and the naming of an altar to Yahweh (v24). In verse 32 we see this event also ends with a "naming ceremony." Gideon's new reputation leads to Gideon's new name, Jerubbaal. The new name was a combination of two Hebrew words, yariv and Baal, meaning "Let Baal fight" or "Let Baal argue." It carried the meaning of "The Baal Fighter," since he fought against Baal. From this point on in the narrative, the writer refers to Gideon by both names. The reason Joash gave his son this name, Jerubbaal, is to reinforce his defense of his son against the men of the city. Basically Joash is saying, Let Baal contend against him, because he has broken down his altar.

Yet before we leave thinking that all is well here and the Baal has been defeated, consider these words of Daniel Block: "Gideon's action here appears to have exposed the impotence of Baal irrefutably. But this account should be read with 8:27 in mind, according to which Gideon, himself, revives and expands the influence of the Baal cult at Ophrah, and 8:33, which seems to have the Israelites entering some sort of covenant with Baal. Did Baal contend for himself? Apparently, yes. In the end, he is vindicated. He has risen again in Israel, which makes the coming deliverance that Yahweh provides even more remarkable. Despite the nation's fundamental Canaanization, God still acts on their behalf."

The preparation for battle is described in v33-35. The writer resumes his primary plot in 6.33 by addressing the next raid of Midian and their allies' as they cross the Jordan River and encamp in the valley of Jezreel. This was the largest and the most fertile valley in Israel. Ophrah, the home of Gideon, was at the very edge of this valley.

Verse 34a describes the divine source of Gideon's power. The text says literally that the "Spirit of Yahweh 'clothed' Gideon." So Gideon was clothed with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit descended upon him and laid Himself around Gideon as if He were a coat of mail or armor, so Gideon became invulnerable and invincible in his might.

Verses 34b to 35 presents Gideon's call to Israel, which came in two stages. The first stage was the sounding of the trumpet, the shofar or the ram's horn in verse 34b. The result was that Abiezer was gathered together after him. Abiezer was Gideon's own clan. The second stage, in verse 35, was the sending of the messengers, of which he sent out two groups. The first group went to Gideon's own tribe, Manasseh, and they gathered to him. The second group of messengers went to three more tribes of Israel: Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. The result, again, was that they came up to meet them.

Block raises a key question: "Why are Gideon's clansmen, tribesmen, and countrymen, so ready to respond to him? Are they impressed with his leadership ability or his courage? Do they recognize him as the 'valiant warrior,' whom the messenger of Yahweh had addressed in v.12?" The only answer must lie in v34a that this is the result of Gideon being clothed with the Spirit of God. Here we see that not only is God responsible for Gideon but He is also responsible for the response of His people.

Verses 6:36-40 continue to show us Gideon's human weaknesses. After having been clothed with the Holy Spirit, and calling out a vast army, Gideon's still worried about God's presence. He continues to test God with requests for signs of God assurance. Gideon requests two signs, with the first sign recorded in verses 36 to 38. He was still not the mighty man of valor he had been prophesied to be. The first sign was to be if the fleece of wool had dew on it while the ground around it was dry then Gideon would know the Yahweh would save Israel by Gideon's hand. The second sign is recorded in verses 39 to 40. Gideon asks God for only one more sign of confirmation. He is seeking further assurance from God in a moment of crisis. He asks that the fleece be dry and dew on the ground around it. The miracle here was that, under ordinary circumstances, the ground would dry more quickly than the saturated wool. This request was also fulfilled for it was dry on the fleece, and there was dew on the ground.

This passage is not intended to be an encouragement to use tests to determine the will of God. Believers often say that they "put out a fleece" for determining what the will of God is, but that is a faulty conclusion from this passage. Gideon did not put the fleece out to determine God's will, since he already knew it; God had already told him what He wanted him to do. Gideon's use of the fleece was not a sign of his spirituality, but a sign of his very weak faith. It was not the sign of a mature believer, but a mark of an immature believer who had trouble believing what God had already told him.

Chapter 7 opens with the arrangement of the opposing armies. The army of Israel was to the south of a long pass, and the Midianites were located due north by the Hill of Moreh. The army of Israel was located beside the spring of Harod, which bubbles out at the foot of Mount Gilboa. Block provides us with an interesting insight into this "spring." "Strategically, by camping at a spring Gideon

ensures that a refreshed force may be sent against the enemy. But since the name "Harod" derives from a verb, "to tremble," this is also "the spring of trembling." Whether or not Gideon still trembles at the sight of the Midianites despite Yahweh's repeated assurances, v. 3 indicates the majority of his troops did." The Beth Shean Pass runs between the Hill of Moreh on the north and Mount Gilboa on the south, connecting the Jezreel Valley to the Jordan Valley. The phrase in the valley refers to the Valley of Jezreel that had been won for Israel by Barak.

Gideon had tested God twice with the fleece and here in verses 7.2-6 we find Yahweh testing Gideon twice. Yahweh reduces the size of Gideon's army because God doesn't want there to be any misunderstanding about who is going to save Israel. He wants it clear that He, not Israel's own might, saved them. As I Samuel 14:6 teaches, it is no problem for God to save by the many or by the few. So, in keeping with the law of Deuteronomy 20:8, Gideon was to allow those soldiers who were "fearful and trembling" to depart. The result was that twenty and two thousand left and there remained ten thousand. We are not told what Gideon's reaction is to the loss of two-thirds of his force, we can only imagine.

If losing twenty thousand men raised Gideon's anxiety level, imagine what happens when God tells him that he still has too many men. This led to the second test at the waters of Ein Harod, where God brought a separation between those who would stay to fight and those who would leave.

The test in verses 5 to 6 is not always understood correctly. Gideon was given instruction on how to select men for his special forces. Those who were kept bowed on their knees, but cupped their hands to bring up and drink the water from their hands, showing they were ready for any sudden attack. So Gideon was to divide the people by putting all those who lick the water with their tongues, as a dog licks, into one class, and all those who faced down to drink into another class. Those who knelt and lifted the water to their mouths with their hands numbered three hundred. The rest put their faces down to drink. Those who lifted the water to their mouths with their hands represented the good soldiers who, upon reaching a brook before the battle, did not allow themselves time to fall down and satisfy their thirst in the most convenient manner. These good soldiers simply knelt, took up some water with their hands, as they remained upright in their military armor to strengthen themselves for the battle, and proceeded without delay against the foe. They remained watchful and prepared for any emergency. The first test (of voluntary release) eliminated the fearful. The second test (of readiness at the stream) eliminated the careless.

In v7-8, God tells Gideon to send away the ninetyseven-hundred men who knelt to drink water like dogs and that He would deliver the Midianites into Gideon's hand with the remaining three-hundred men. However, they were not sent home, but back to their tents. They will be called in later to join the fighting, but they will not be used in the initial attack.

Verses 9 to 15 provide additional insight into Gideon and Yahweh, as Yahweh address Gideon's lack of faith. Here we will read about the sign to Gideon that finally convinces him that he will defeat the Midianites. In verse 9, God gives Gideon both a command and a promise. The command was to attack the Midianites and the promise was that Yahweh had already delivered the enemy into Gideon's hands. In v10-11 we find God, not waiting on Gideon to protest another reduction in force, raising the issue for Gideon. Yahweh says to Gideon "If you are afraid to attack," then you can take your servant and go down to the camp and you can hear what the Midianites are saying and you will know that I have given them into your hands. The fact that Gideon was fearful again shows that he was still not a mighty man of valor. He is told to take his servant into the Midianite camp, and what he will hear will finally encourage him. Since he was afraid, this was exactly what Gideon did.

Verse 12 records two reasons Gideon might feel discouraged. The first was the sheer number of his enemy, they were as numerous as a plague of locusts, and second the resources and provisions of his enemy were numberless.

Verses 13 to 14 records what Gideon heard in the Midian camp that as a dream. Generally speaking, when God communicated with or through pagans, He would do so with a dream. Only with Balaam did He use direct speech. But for people like Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and Abimelech, He used dreams. "In keeping with common human experience, the content of this dream was quite absurd: a cake of barley bread tumbled into the Midianites' camp, smashing into the tent with such force that it overturned and collapsed it."

This symbolized the defeat of the Midianites by Gideon. Then came the interpretation, this was the sword of Gideon, and into his hand God has delivered Midian, and the Amalekites and the Children of the East.

Verse 15 describes the immediate change in Gideon brought about by hearing the dream of the Midianite. Gideon prostrated himself in worship before Yahweh because he was convinced that he would have victory over the Midianites. Only now does he finally become the mighty man of valor. So, after he returned into the camp of Israel, he issues the command to "Get up! The LORD has given the Midianite camp into your hands." Gideon is now prepared to follow God's command.

Verses 16-25 records Israel's victory over Midian. Gideon begins the preparation for the attack in v16-18. Gideon's preparations reminds us of those of Joshua before the battle of Jericho, they seem absurd to us. First, Gideon divides his small force in three groups of one hundred men each. Now things become a bit ridiculous. Second, the Israelite forces are to face the swarm of Midianites with just three things: trumpets, and empty pitchers, and torches. The trumpets were made of animal horns, which could be worn on the body, while the pitchers and

torches had to be carried. At the time the trumpets were blown, the pitcher and the torch could be held temporarily in one hand. The empty pitchers would be used to hide the light of the torches. Finally, the men were to go with torches within the pitchers. The strategy was the sleeping enemy was to be covered on three sides, and the sudden exposure of light out of the darkness of the night, together with the loud sounds of three hundred trumpets, would spread consternation and panic in the camp. This does not qualify as fitting the conventional standards of war.

Gideon's newfound confidence is visible in his instructions to the troops. Block comments: "the confidence exuded in Gideon's words reflects an amazing personal transformation. He instructed his forces to keep their eyes on him and to do as he would do. When he would arrive at the edge of the Midianite camp, he and his group would blow their horns and cry out, "Belonging to the Lord and to Gideon!" This declaration recognized that the battle belonged to Yahweh, the Commander-in-Chief, and that Gideon was his deputy. Gideon's addition of his own name seems innocent enough, but because of what follows in chap. 8 one wonders if the narrator does not intend some ambiguity here.

The summary of the battle are given in verses 19-22a, with v19-21 a summary human actions and v22a "a summary theological interpretation."

Verse 19a describes the Israelite approach on the enemy, while verses 19b to 20 record the attack on the enemy, with verse 19b giving the basics that they blew the trumpets, and broke in pieces the pitchers that were in their hands, followed by the five details of the attack in verse 20. First, the three companies blew the trumpets; second, and broke the pitchers; and third, they held the torches in their left hands. Up to now, the pitchers had hid these torches, but the torches are now revealed. Fourth, they held the trumpets in their right hands wherewith to blow. And, fifth, they cried, the sword of the Lord and of Gideon. Sword here was used figuratively for the battle because Israel, at this point, did not have swords. Only the Midianites had swords, which they would now use against themselves. In this manner, when Israel comes upon the dead, they could take the swords from those who were slain. Adding his name to God's Name, the sword of Jehovah and of Gideon, may have been the first step toward Gideon's own downfall.

Verse 21 contains the general description that Israel stood still and did not enter the camp itself. There was no need because the confusion already caused was sufficient to win the battle. The text tells us the "Midianites ran, crying out as the fled."

Verse 22 then gives the detailed description of Israel's action that while Israel blew the three hundred trumpets, Yahweh set every Midianite's sword against his fellow soldier, and against all the host. The confusion and panic created by the surprise commotion from Gideon's men was divinely used to turn the Midianites on each other. This self-destruction was followed by the panicked flight of the

survivors. They fled toward the southeast, down the Jordan Valley through the Beth Shean Pass, and eventually crossed to the east side of the Jordan River, as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath. This incident was a biblical use of psychological warfare, and it resulted in bedlam. In this bedlam the Midianites and their allies killed each other, ran, cried out, and fled.

In verse 23, the flight of the enemy led Gideon issue a call to arms that included the three tribes of the original call, Naphtali, Asher, and Manasseh, and they pursued Midian. There was another call to arms that may have included the thousands who had left Gideon originally because they were fearful. Since the battle had turned into pursuing Midianite survivors, the fear of those some twenty-two thousand fighters was gone. Furthermore, the call would also include those who had recently been sent back to the camp-those who, while not fearful, were not watchful.

It is worth considering here whether Gideon disobeyed Yahweh by his mobilizing the forces at his command. Did not Yahweh intentionally reduce his effective fighting force from thirty thousand plus to three hundred men? L.R. Klein, quoted by Daniel Block, implies a similar but more far-reaching question. "The coward has become confident; he directs far-flung mopping up operations which are effectively carried out. But the voice of the Lord is stilled, not to be heard for the balance of Gideon's narrative. And the spirit of the Lord, which brought the courage to fight a far greater military force, seems to slip from Gideon's shoulders in the process."

Verse 24-25 records another call, where Gideon calls on the tribe of Ephraim, to now join the fight against Midian. The men of Ephraim seize the Jordan crossings, capture and slaughter two Midianite princes. The first was named Oreb, which means, "raven." The second was Zeeb, which means, "wolf." They were executed in different places: they slew Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they slew at the winepress of Zeeb. The place names were obviously given after the execution to commemorate the fate of the two Midianite leaders. This was still remembered many centuries later and mentioned in Psalm 83:11 and Isaiah 10:26. The Ephraimites then delivered the heads to Gideon in the Trans-Jordan.