

THE FAMOUS JUDGE OF ISRAEL

Forty years after the marvelous military victory of Deborah and Barak, Israel once again lapsed back into idolatry and the LORD permitted them to fall under the tyranny of the Midianites (6:1). The deplorable state of Israel's existence (6:2) and the severity of the oppression (6:3-5) finally caused Israel to repent (6:6). The LORD's call was met by a less than enthusiastic response by Gideon, but the LORD promised to be with him (6:12-16).

His first task was to destroy the altar of Baal on his father's property, which he did (6:25-28). For doing that, Gideon was almost killed by the Israelites of his city, but his father's wise counsel to them saved his life. In fact, it brought him great esteem (6:29-32), so much so that when he issued the call, 32,000 volunteer soldiers responded. However, that number must have seemed small to Gideon when he saw 135,000 Midianites in the Jezreel Valley (the eastern end of the Plain of Esdraelon; cf. 8:10), and he became apprehensive (6:33-40).

Then the LORD did an unusual thing to Gideon. In two steps He reduced Gideon's army from 32,000 to 300 (7:1-6), and still promised to save Israel by only those 300 men (7:7). The small size of Gideon's army and the unusual method of conquest (7:19-20) served to heighten the fact that the victory belonged to the LORD (7:2, 14). Complete victory over the Midianites made it possible for Israel to enjoy rest for the next forty years during the remaining days of Gideon.

I. Concern of Gideon — 6:1-24

6:1 — "Midian" - the Midianites were descendants of Abraham and Keturah (Gen 25:1-2). They were nomadic, but lived in the area near the Gulf of Agaba. They were the dominant group that ruled over Israel for seven years when Israel was being punished by the LORD for going back to Baal worship.

6:3 — "Amalekites" - this was a nomadic tribe often associated with the Midianites and always opposed to the Israelites (Ex 17:8-16).

"Children of the East" — this may be a reference to the Ammonites and Edomites, who lived to the east of Israel.

6:4 — "Destroyed the increase of the earth" - much food and livestock was taken or destroyed by the Midianites and their associates who came into the land once a year during the harvest-time of grain (cf. 6:11). Israel made no resistance for six years. They simply hid themselves and waited for their enemies to leave (6:2).

6:5 — "Camels" - these were important animals for the Midianites in warfare. Camels could travel long distances and were fierce in battle.

6:8 — "A prophet" - an unnamed prophet told the Israelites why they were suffering (6:10). It is interesting to note that prophets were ministering to Israel during this early period of Israel's history.

6:11 — "An angel of the LORD" - here again a theophany is introduced, that is, an appearance of God (cf. 2:1). That this angel (messenger) was no ordinary angel or prophet from among men, but was God Himself, is proved by His words (6:14, 16) and by His sign (6:21).

"Threshed wheat by the winepress" — wheat was normally threshed in the open where the wind could blow away the chaff, but such a practice was impossible with the Midianites around. They would be attracted and come to confiscate Gideon's small amount of precious grain. Therefore,

he went through the difficult process of threshing wheat in the sheltered area of a winepress, a place where the wind could not help him.

6:12 — "Mighty man of valor" - this was a title given to men in the upper level of Israel's society. They were the leaders of Israel.

6:13 — "Why... where?" - Gideon's questions are not so much a complaint, though it might sound like it, but rather a sincere search for answers from someone who could help him. Notice, no rebuke is directed at him, but instead a call is given to him to be the LORD's servant.

6:14 — "Thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites" - this was the LORD's call for Gideon to be the deliverer of Israel from her oppressors. This call revealed the LORD's will for Gideon.

"Have not I sent you?" — The LORD's commission to Gideon was as clear as the Great Commission is to believers today (Mt 28:19-20; Jn 15:16).

6:15 — "I am the least in my father's house" - Gideon was humble in spirit. That is why the LORD chose him to deliver Israel. He, no doubt, was despised by his own family for not worshipping Baal with them (cf. 6:25). He was a humble man and faithful to the LORD.

6:16 — "Surely I will be with thee" - though Gideon's family and neighbors stood apart from him, the LORD would stand with him. This is a precious promise that is still extended to believers (Mt 28:20; Heb 13:5).

"Thou shall smite the Midianites as one man" — the LORD repeated His call and promise to Gideon. When the LORD says the same thing twice, it is done for emphasis.

6:17 — "Show me a sign" - this sign would prove that it was the LORD talking to Gideon and not some man, or even an ordinary angel (cf. v. 21).

6:18 — "Bring forth my present" - Gideon was planning to give his special guest a gift of precious food. Food was scarce during this time (cf. 6:6).

6:19 — "Made ready a kid" - a young goat was boiled and unleavened cakes were baked. This preparation must have taken Gideon at least two hours to complete.

6:20 — Gideon was instructed by the "angel" what to do with his present. When he obeyed, his present became a meat offering.

6:21 — "Fire out of the rock" - the sign that Gideon sought was given when his present was supernaturally burned up before his very eyes. This sign was vividly impressed on Gideon's mind.

"Departed out of his sight" — the sign was dramatically concluded when the angel of the LORD suddenly disappeared from his sight. Gideon knew at that moment that he had been talking with the LORD (6:22, 23).

6:24 — "Gideon built an altar there" - the rock, where the sign was given, was immediately marked by an altar unto the LORD. This was the place where Gideon was called by the LORD and it was a precious, holy place to him. Here he worshipped the LORD. Humility and worship of the LORD are vital qualities of a godly leader.

II. Courage of Gideon — 6:25-32

6:25 — "Throw down the altar of Baal" - Gideon's first responsibility as a deliverer of Israel was to cleanse Israel of Baal worship. Notice, this altar of Baal was on his father's property.

Cut down the grove" — the "grove" was a wooden pole, or a series of poles, used in the fertility worship of Baal and Ashtaroah. It was repugnant to the LORD. These poles were used as fire wood for the burnt offering that was made unto the LORD (6:26).

6:27 — "He did it by night" - the men in his father's household and the men of the city were such fervent Baal worshippers, so Gideon had to destroy the Baal altar during the night. If he did it during the day, he would have been killed before he had finished his job. It took great courage for him to destroy this wicked altar. He had no one he could trust to protect him except the LORD.

6:30 — "Bring out thy son, that he may die" - the men of the city were incensed that anyone would dare to destroy the altar of Baal. When they discovered it was Gideon who had done it, they went to his father and demanded that he let them kill him for such a "crime." This episode shows how far these Israelites had departed from the LORD. If this were the reaction of Canaanites, it would not be surprising, but it was done by Israelites.

6:31 — "Joash said . . . Will you plead for Baal?" - Gideon's father unexpectedly came to Gideon's aid by not giving in to the demand of the men to have him killed. He told them that Baal could punish Gideon without their help if he were truly a god. Instead of letting them kill Gideon, he said the one who would try to plead for Baal was the one who should be killed.

6:32 — "Jerubbaal" - Gideon's new name meant, "Let Baal plead"(contend). Since Baal was unable to protect his own altar, Gideon's reputation was exalted in the eyes of his fellow Israelites. No longer was he despised, but he was honored by them. He had dared to cast down Baal's altar and was not punished by him. Therefore, he was greater than Baal.

III. Conditioning of Gideon— 6: 33-7:15

6:33 — "Valley of Jezreel" - this valley is the eastern end of the Plain of Esdraelon. It is located between the Hill of Moreh and Mt. Gilboa. The reason for their presence in this part of Israel was the abundance of grain that the Plain of Esdraelon produced.

6:34 — "Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon" - literally, "the Spirit of the LORD clothed Gideon." This was the source of his power enabling him to be Israel's deliverer and judge.

6:34-35 — "He blew a trumpet . . . he sent messengers" - Gideon gathered his volunteer army in three stages. First, he called for Abiezer to follow him. This was his family name. These were his relatives. When they responded, he took the second step and he called for the men of his tribe (Manasseh) to follow him. Finally, he asked the men of two tribes to respond to his call (Zebulun and Naphtali). From these two tribes, 32,000 men gathered unto him (cf. 7:3). This was a good number compared to the 10,000 that responded to Barak's call (4:10), but it was far less than the enemy which numbered 135,000.

6:36-40 — Gideon's well-known tests by fleece were not necessary to discover the LORD's will. That was already made known in 6:11-16 and was confirmed by a sign in 6:17-24. The tests by fleece were a means of strengthening Gideon's faith. After he had issued his call for volunteers and only 32,000 men had responded, he was concerned and not sure if he could do the job against 135,000. It is interesting to notice that the LORD granted the signs that Gideon wanted and then the LORD took away most of the troops that Gideon was depending on for the victory. The LORD was teaching Gideon to put his trust in Him and not in men.

7:1 — "Well of Harod" - it was located at the foot of Mt. Gilboa, near the encampment of the Midianites. It is a large, bubbling spring that formed a stream that winds its way eastward down the Jezreel Valley to the Jordan River.

7:3 — "Whoever is fearful and afraid" - the first reduction of Gideon's army was significant - 22,000 men left because they were afraid (cf. Prov 29:25). Fearful men are hazardous to an army.

7:5-6 — "As a dog laps" - the second reduction of Gideon's army was determined by the way they drank water from the spring of Harod. Since they were near the camp of the Midianites, it was necessary that they be alert at all times, lest they be caught off-guard by a sudden attack. Those men, who knelt down and put their faces to the water and sucked it up to quench their thirst, were disqualified. They were more interested in satisfying their immediate thirst than they were in being alert. On the other hand, those men, who scooped the water from the stream and brought it to their mouths, were chosen. They drank the water like a dog, which is always alert when it drinks. It never puts its eyes down. The process of bringing water to the mouth by the hand was likened to a dog that brings water to its mouth by its tongue.

7:7 — "Three hundred men" - the drinking test reduced Gideon's army down to only 300 men, but the LORD promised to save him from the Midianites by this small number (a ratio of 1 to 450). When this victory would be accomplished, no one would be able to take the credit to himself. All glory would have to go to the LORD.

7:8 — Gideon sent all the rest of the soldiers home (9,700) and kept the 300. It must have looked like he was committing suicide, but he was simply obeying divine orders and doing it by faith (Heb 11:32).

7:9-15 — at this time the LORD did a strange thing. He used a Midianite's dream and his friend's interpretation to strengthen Gideon's faith. Gideon used fleece to build up his faith, but that approach was totally unrelated to the upcoming battle. It was Gideon's desperate attempt to find some assurance. Contrariwise, The LORD's method of encouraging Gideon's faith made good sense. He used a dream and its interpretation that was directly related to Gideon's current need to gain victory over the Midianites. Furthermore, it was spoken by the Midianites themselves.

7:10-11 — The LORD invited Gideon to go down to the Midianite camp to hear what they were saying among themselves. What they were saying would encourage him. It was a dangerous thing to do, but the LORD protected him, since it was His plan.

7:13 — "Cake of barley bread . . . host of Midian" - barley bread was the food of the poorest of men. It represented the poverty of Israel at that time. A cake is small. It represented the smallness of Gideon's army; however, the Midianites did not know it was down to 300 men. This little barley cake (in the dream) rolled into the encampment of Midian and flattened one of their tents.

7:14 — "His fellow answered" - the amazing thing in this story is the immediate and accurate interpretation of the dream by a fellow Midianite, and it was spoken close enough to Gideon so he could overhear it.

7:15 — "He worshipped" - when Gideon heard the dream and the interpretation, his faith was restored. He did two things: (1) he worshipped the LORD, and (2) he told his 300 men that the LORD would give them the victory. He had no more doubts (Heb 11:6; James 1:6-8).

IV. Conquest of Gideon — 7:16-8:21

7:16 — "Divided . . . into three companies of 100 men each" (cf. 6:19). They were strategically located on the mountain sides (Mt. Gilboa and Hill of Moreh) with the Midianites in the Jezreel Valley below.

"Trumpet . . . empty pitchers . . . lamps" — each of the 300 men was given these strange items to use in their fight against the Midianites. The "trumpets" apparently were ram's horns. The earthenware "pitchers" probably had been used to carry their victuals (6:8). The "lamps" must have been sticks of wood dipped in tar and ignited to make a torch. While they were in the pitchers, they would smolder, but when they were exposed to the air and waved, they would burst into a brilliant flame.

7:17, 18 — Gideon instructed his men to follow his example so that the timing of their mock attack would be synchronized. Gideon and his company of 100 men would sound their trumpets first and the others would follow. Their shout in 7:18 leaves out the words, "the sword," but they are included in 7:20; therefore, it is correct to assume "the sword" was implied in the original instruction.

7:19 — "Middle watch" - there were three watches of four hours each. The middle watch began at 10:00 p.m. and ended at 2:00 a.m. Gideon timed his simulated attack shortly after 10:00 p.m. when the new watch began.

7:21 — "They stood every man in his place" - the 300 men stood in their places blowing their trumpets and waving their torches ("lamps"). The torches gave the appearance that each man was the head of a company of soldiers that was attacking the Midianites in the dark. The trumpets gave off an eerie sound as it echoed off the hills and it struck fear into the hearts of the Midianites who were suddenly awakened from their sleep.

7:22 — "The LORD set every man's sword against his fellow" - The Midianites, the Amalekites and the people from the east began to attack each other in the dark, supposing that they were attacking the Israelites who they thought were in their midst.

"The host fled" — since the host was composed of different nationalities, they gathered around their leaders and fled in different directions.

7:23 — "Naphtali . . . Asher . . . Manasseh" - apparently the men, who had been dismissed for drinking water carelessly, were still in the area and Gideon called on them to help pursue after the Midianites. Only Zebulun was missing of the original four tribes that had responded to Gideon's call. Maybe all of these men left earlier with the 22,000 men that were afraid.

7:24 — "Ephraim" - some of the Midianites were fleeing toward the Jordan River to cross at the fords in Ephraim's territory. Gideon called upon Ephraim to control the fords and kill those who tried to cross in that area. Ephraim responded immediately and did their job well.

7:25 — "Oreb and Zeeb" - Ephraim captured two princes or captains and killed them. It appears from the 120,000 Midianites that were destroyed that Ephraim must have killed many of them.

8:1 — "Ephraim . . . did chide with him sharply" - the Ephraimites felt slighted that they were not included in the original plans of the battle. They felt they were the leading tribe and should be consulted concerning any major decision in Israel. After all, they were the tribe of Joshua and the tabernacle was located within its borders at Shiloh. Furthermore, Ephraim had been honored by Jacob over Manasseh when he

blessed these two sons in Egypt (Gen 48:8-20), and so Gideon, who was of Manasseh, should not have taken a superior role in fighting against the Midianites.

8:2-3 — Instead of defending himself by claiming the LORD's call, or rebuking them for their pride, Gideon simply soothed them by a sincere compliment for killing two of the mighty princes of Midian. It worked wonders and they were satisfied (Prov 15:1).

8:4-9 — Gideon was not ready to quit simply because he had a great victory. He was determined to kill the two kings of the Midianites that had escaped. He pursued after them with his dedicated band of 300 men. Since they were hungry, Gideon asked for food from two cities, Succoth and Penuel, but they refused. They were afraid they would suffer a reprisal from the Midianite kings if Gideon failed to kill them. Their refusal to feed Gideon's men indicated they expected Gideon to fail. Gideon promised to punish them when he returned with the kings and he was right in issuing this warning. These Israelites were more willing to help the enemy than the man whom the LORD had called.

8:10-12 — "Fifteen thousand men" - Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of the Midianites, fled with 15,000 men, a sizable number for 300 to attack, but even so, 120,000 had already fallen through their trust in the LORD. When Gideon and his men attacked, the two kings fled, making it easier for Gideon to capture them. Once that was done, the 15,000 were terrified ("discomfited") and were quickly defeated.

8:13-21 — Gideon then returned to Succoth and Penuel to show them the two kings of Midian, which he had kept alive. Then he punished them for their unbelief and refusal to help him in his time of need. When that was completed, he killed the two kings.

V. Conduct of Gideon — 8:22 - 35

8:22 — "Rule over us" - the men of Israel wanted Gideon to be their king and begin a dynasty with his sons ruling after his death.

8:23 — "The LORD shall rule over you" - Gideon refused to be their king, but told them that the LORD was their ruler. Nevertheless, Gideon later acted more like a king than a judge. He had many wives and 70 sons (8:30). He named a son Abimelech which means, "My father is king" (8:31).

8:27 — "Gideon made an ephod thereof" - although Gideon refused to be king, he apparently desired to be some kind of a priest when he made an ephod. The ephod was a vestment that covered the front and back of the priest. This must have been an extravagant ephod because in it and on it was used all the gold from the earrings of the Ishmaelites (8:24, 25). This amounted to 1,700 shekels which weighed anywhere from 22 pounds to 42 pounds depending on the weight of this shekel (8:26).

"Became a snare unto Gideon and to his house" - how this became a snare is not known, but it may have caused a defection from the God-ordained worship at Shiloh and attracted Israelites to worship at Ophrah where Gideon's altar was erected.

8:28 — Israel had rest for forty years. It appears that Gideon presided as Israel's judge for all of those years because Abimelech did not rebel against the LORD until his father died.

The map shows the route of the battle Gideon took to defeat the Midianites.

