

March 19

Judges 6 and 7

Hello again, this is Alex Ehly, Bringing you the March 19th edition of Project 4:4. Today we read the sixth and seventh chapters of Judges.

Today we continued our tour through the Book of Judges and read the story of Gideon. Along with Samson, he is the most famous of the judges of this book and his story or at least parts of it are pretty familiar to most of us.

The oppressors this time are the Midianites, but the condition of Israel is not primarily related to the military strength of Midian. It is directly related to the spiritual weakness of Israel, to the backsliding of the nation. Already in the Book of Judges we have seen the Israelites in bondage to Aram, Moab, Philistia and Canaan, and now Midian. The lesson that Israel in the Book of Judges seemed incapable of learning was simply this: when we dishonor the Lord, we lose the right to claim His protection over us. That is what the message of the prophet at the beginning of chapter 6 is all about! We can't infer from this that every single national tragedy that comes upon a nation is solely and completely because of its sin against God. But it is certainly true that God can and does use both military and natural disasters to discipline those who rebel against God and His plan. Israel found itself in subservience to Midian because it refused to be in subservience to God. It goes without saying this today that these same general principles that apply to the affairs of nations apply to us as individuals as well. We shouldn't conclude that every misfortune, disease or adversity that happened to us is directly related to sin in our lives. (That kind of thinking will put us into another kind of bondage.) But it is certainly true that when we rebel against God and refuse to honor Him in our lives, we move ourselves out from under the umbrella of His protection and expose ourselves to adversities that we would not otherwise have to face. It is a stated principle that whenever Israel refused to serve the Lord they quickly found themselves serving someone else. Just as it is the case with them, it is the case with us.

In talking about Deborah, we have already noted that God has a remarkably consistent habit of choosing His own leaders and usually He makes what seems to us an unlikely choice. Deborah was an example of that. Gideon, if anything, is an even bigger one. The angel calls him a "mighty man of valor" but that is either irony or faith because at the point of his call, Gideon is trying to thrash grain secretly as he is afraid of the Midianites. He needs an extraordinary amount of reassurance before he is willing to act and when he finally does move to obey, he acts in secret, under the cover of darkness and then hides out and lets his father speak out to protect him from the angry mob!! There was nothing -- absolutely nothing, in Gideon's skill set that qualified him for the job God called him to do! As you move through the pages of scripture and the history of the church it is amazing how often God chose very average kinds of people to accomplish His mighty work! The secret of Deborah and of Gideon is the same -- they made themselves available to God. That's all!!

Now it might well be worth our while to "push" this subject just a little farther and ask why God so often chooses such unimpressive and unspectacular vessels. (We'll see this same principle in operation again when God sends Samuel to anoint one of Jesse's sons as king and the choice falls upon the youngest and least impressive -- the boy David.)

God chose Gideon then for exactly the same reason that He chose the battle plan that reduced the army to just 300 men before they engaged the enemy in conflict -- so that when the day was done and the victory won, everyone would know that it was God and God alone who had done it and the glory would be His alone. "I am the Lord" He says in another place, "and my glory I will not share with another."

I am sure you noticed Gideon's amazing question when confronted by the angel of the Lord. "If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us ...?" Where is God in the midst of all our troubles? Why doesn't He act to help us? That is the perennial question of people in trouble. Whenever I hear someone ask it I am tempted to answer their question with one of my own. "If in your trouble you look for evidence of the presence of God and can't find it, who moved -- you or God?" The answer most of the time of course is that you did -- God is right where He always was waiting for you to come back to Him. Here is how Isaiah says it in Isaiah 59:1-2, "Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save nor His ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God so that He will not hear." That was Israel's problem.

This passage is also famous, of course, because of Gideon's unique way of discerning the will of God. So famous, of course, that even today we talk about putting out fleeces to determine the will of God -- setting up a controlled situation and then saying, God if this happens (presumably something not likely to occur all by itself), then I'll know that your will is "A" but if that happens I'll know it's "B." There is a fair amount of debate about whether Gideon provides us here with a model of an acceptable way to solicit the will of God for our lives. Is it ever God's will for a Christian to "throw out a fleece?" Or is that the evidence of a lack of faith? On the negative side of that question it may be observed that before Gideon asked for a faith building sign, God had already clearly told him what he was to do. It may also be observed that Gideon on a later occasion (just before the battle) needed another injection of faith. This we are told is not a model to emulate. On the positive side of the coin, it can be observed that God gave Gideon the signs for which he asked and never rebuked him in any way. More than that Gideon is not the only fleece layer in Scripture. Eleazar of Damascus, Abraham's faithful servant, did the same thing as Gideon when seeking God's will regarding a wife for Isaac. King Hezekiah asked for and received a sign in 2 Kings 20, and in Isaiah chapter 7, God Himself invites King Ahaz to request a sign. Ahaz refuses, but God obliges him anyway. In some cases then we are told it is entirely appropriate to seek a sign. This much is certain. Laying out fleeces is a practice calculated to strengthen the discernment and faith of a weaker Christian. The better we know the Word of God

and the more mature our faith becomes, the less we will find ourselves in need of fleeces.

There was a pretty important phrase used in verse 34 of chapter 6. In describing what happened to Gideon we are told that the Spirit of the Lord "came upon Gideon" But the Hebrew language actually says that the Spirit of God clothed Himself with Gideon. One old poet has suggested that "Gideon was just a suit of working clothes that the Spirit put on that day." That revealing bit of language which is mirrored in two or three other places of the Old Testament helps us with a couple of important things. The first is that the ability to do the work of God -- the wisdom, the power, the understanding and even the faith - are not inherently part of Gideon's DNA or any other servant of the law for that matter. They are given - endowments that come from the Holy Spirit of God. This is a crucial point. We must understand it. Christianity is not a self-help religion. It is not a matter of coming to faith in Christ and thereby unlocking all of this talent and ability that was there all the time but being "blocked" by our lack of oneness with the Creator and ourselves. Being filled with the Spirit of God does enable us to use what was already there more effectively, but primarily it has the effect of "connecting us" to resources, gifts and power that are resident not in us, but in Christ who through His Holy Spirit has come to dwell in us.

That last expression I used, the one about Christ dwelling in us, points us to the other important concept emerging from the description of the Spirit of God clothing Himself with Gideon. In Old Testament times -- before the coming of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit to the church at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit did not indwell people - He did not come upon them in any permanent way at all, but only for limited periods of time and usually for specific tasks. When the task was completed, the Spirit was withdrawn. That accounts for the language of King David in the Psalm when he prays, "And take not thy Holy Spirit away from me ..." The amazing truth of the indwelling Holy Spirit who comes to live forever in the hearts of the people who have been joined by faith to Christ is unknown in the Old Testament. That is a privilege that we enjoy and sadly, most of the time -- something we take for granted.

Don't miss this -- The Spirit of the living God dwells inside of and empowers you.

May the Spirit bless and empower you today as you meditate on that amazing truth.