

FOR THE LORD AND FOR GIDEON

Judges 7 and 8

Insurance is a funny thing. You can pay into an insurance scheme for years and never make a claim. But the day you commit yourself to that insurance company they commit themselves to you. So if you make a massive claim and it's valid, even if it's only the next day after the policy has been agreed, they will honour their commitment. Although what you have put in is a relatively small amount, all their resources become available for you.

It's a bit like that with the Lord. As soon as we commit ourselves to him he commits himself to us. There's no finer example of that than the life of Gideon. Last week we looked at chapter 6 which was very personal, Gideon's struggle to take the step of trust and overcome his doubts. But the moment he did so he found that the LORD was on his side. When Gideon committed himself to the LORD the LORD committed himself to him.

Judges chapter 6 is all about Gideon's inner struggles and journey to faith. Judges chapters 7 and 8 are all about the way that faith worked out in public, in his leadership of the Israelites and his encounter with their enemies. Our relationship with God always has these two elements: the inner life and the outer sphere, the secret place and the public space, that which is known only to us, and that which can be observed by everyone around.

Paul reminds us of these two aspects of our faith in Colossians chapter 2 verses 6 and 7. 'So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.'

Do you see the two aspects there? Rooted in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught. Those roots remind us of the hidden part of our lives, the area where hypocrisy is so easy to hide – but not for ever. Our thoughts, our motives, our feelings. Rooted and strengthened. But Paul goes on.

Built up in him and overflowing with thankfulness. That reminds us of the public part of our lives, open for all to see. Our words, our actions, our reactions. Built up and overflowing.

Coming back to Judges chapter 7 there's a refrain that runs through the earlier part of the chapter. Verse 2: 'the LORD' said to Gideon,' verse 4: 'the LORD said to Gideon,' verse 5: 'the LORD told him,' verse 7: 'the LORD said to Gideon,' verse 9: 'the LORD said to Gideon.'

It could not be clearer that the LORD was there for Gideon, giving instructions, dictating tactics, setting out strategy.

When the soldiers had to give a shout their battle cry was 'For the LORD and for Gideon'. The two names were linked together. The LORD and Gideon. Gideon discovered the truth that God was to reiterate later: 'Those who honour me I will honour' (1 Samuel 2:30).

Have you grasped this amazing truth yet, that when you commit yourself to the Lord he commits himself to you? All the resources of the living God are available to you. It's not that you can dictate to God. His resources can't be turned on and off like a tap by us. God is in control. He calls the shots. He gives the instructions. But when our lives are linked to his they are lifted above the level of the commonplace and insignificant. Our names are linked to his. 'For the LORD and for Gideon.'

This is what Jesus meant in the New Testament when he talked about his name. Matthew 18 verse 20: 'For where two or three come together in my name, there am I

with them.' Mark 9 verse 41: 'I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward.' John 14 verses 13 and 14: 'And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it.' John 15 verse 16 'You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.'

The book of Acts is full of what the apostles did in the name of Jesus. To the crippled beggar at the temple gates Peter said, 'Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk' (Acts 3:6). When the Jewish leaders called Peter and John to account for the miracle they said, 'Know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. ... Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:10, 12).

When you commit yourself to the Lord he commits himself to you.

Go forth in his name, proclaiming, 'Jesus reigns!' Now is the time for the church to arise and proclaim him 'Jesus, Saviour, Redeemer and Lord.'

Recently, as a church, God has been pressing a text on us. It's 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 9. God says, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' That was the lesson Joshua had to learn and now Gideon was to learn it too.

A large contingent of Israelites volunteered for Gideon's army, 32,000, and God said, 'Too many.' Judges 7 verse 2: 'In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, announce now to the people, "Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead." So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.'

But still God said there were too many and the number was reduced to 300. I'm not sure the criterion of how they drank was particularly significant. What matters is the final size of the army, a reduction to less than one per cent of the original number.

God then gave Gideon a further assurance by telling him to sneak into the enemy camp at night and listen to what they were saying. A Midianite man had been having a bad dream and he took it as an omen that Gideon and his army would win.

Sometimes as Christians we need to be reassured that we have nothing to fear from our enemies, the forces of Satan and of evil. They are powerful, yes, but Christ has defeated Satan. Christ is the head over every power and authority. He overcame them at the cross and in his resurrection. Satan is not God. He is not omniscient. He is not omnipresent. He is not omnipotent. He is a defeated enemy.

Finally, Gideon and his tiny army of 300 men invaded the Midianite camp in the night. They divided into three companies. Each man was armed with weapons: an empty jar with a torch inside for one hand and a trumpet for the other. At a given signal they blew the trumpets and broke the jars, which flooded the camp with light. They shouted 'A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!'

Go back a minute. Can you imagine what the soldiers thought when the weapons were distributed? A torch – yes, a trumpet – OK, but where are our swords? No swords. Humanly speaking, they were totally unarmed. I tend to think that the older translators got it right when they translated in verse 20 'The sword of the LORD and of Gideon'. The Israelite soldiers were unarmed. From a human point of view they went in total weakness. The only sword which could win them victory was one they could not see – the sword of the LORD.

The New Testament passage which talks about our spiritual warfare also talks about a sword. Ephesians chapter 6 verse 17. 'Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.' The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that 'the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart' (Hebrews 4:12). Our greatest weapon on the spiritual battlefield is the word of God, the sword of the Spirit.

The book of Judges gives us a fascinating insight into just how the LORD won the victory. It was the middle of the night just after the changing of the guard. Suddenly the Midianite camp was wakened by a shout, a resounding crash in three-part stereo, and a flash of light. There was total panic and total confusion. Verse 22 tells us, 'When the three hundred trumpets sounded, the LORD caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords.'

When the Midianites fled Gideon summoned men from the other tribes to pursue them and seal the victory. The ultimate sequel is in chapter 8 verse 28: 'Thus Midian was subdued before the Israelites and did not raise its head again. During Gideon's lifetime, the land enjoyed peace for forty years.'

Before we leave the story of Gideon's victory I want you to notice three other sequels. The first is in chapter 8 verses 1 to 3.

Criticism

For some reason, which is not stated, when Gideon summoned the tribes to pursue the Midianites he left out the Ephraimites, but they came along too. In chapter 8 verse 1 we read, 'Now the Ephraimites asked Gideon, "Why have you treated us like this? Why didn't you call us when you went to fight Midian?" And they criticised him sharply.'

The Bible doesn't tell us why Gideon failed to call on the Ephraimites to help him. Perhaps it was a genuine mistake. Perhaps for some reason he didn't completely trust them. Perhaps their presence would have caused a quarrel among the other tribes. Whatever the reason, they felt snubbed and criticised Gideon sharply.

Notice how he handled the situation. Verses 2 and 3: 'But he answered them, "What have I accomplished compared to you? Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer? God gave Oreb and Zeeb, the Midianite leaders, into your hands. What was I able to do compared to you?" At this, their resentment against him subsided.'

It was a classic example of Proverbs 15 verse 1. 'A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.'

There are three things to do with criticism. Firstly, evaluate it. It may be right. Secondly, do something about it. And thirdly, forget it.

Opposition

Verses 4 to 21 describe a far more serious situation, open opposition from the men of two towns, Succoth and Peniel. Open rebellion could not be tolerated and Gideon had to deal with it.

Adulation

The third sequel was as different again, not opposition but adulation. Verse 22: 'The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us —you, your son and your grandson — because you have saved us out of the hand of Midian.'" Notice his reply, verse 23: 'But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you.'"'