

# Lectures on the Book of Judges

## *Judges 6 — The Call of Gideon*

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In Judges 6 opens the preparation for another and a greater deliverance. On this we must say a few words more before we close. Here undoubtedly the Spirit of God may well prepare us for a larger work and for fuller lessons. It is not a deliverer despatched in a verse, like Shamgar. Neither is it a man that was employed overshadowed by the superior light and even courage of a woman, Barak being small indeed in comparison with Deborah. Here we have the grace of God interfering to raise up a deliverer when the Midianites had reduced the people of God to slavery for seven years. "And the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel: and because of the Midianites the children of Israel made them the dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strongholds." They had never been brought so low. To be like wanderers and fugitives in the land of God, in their own land, was a burning disgrace to Israel. But there was a deeper need. They had forgotten Jehovah, and gone over to Baal more than was ever known before: hence also the necessity for awakening to this him whom God would use. What was it before God? Gideon felt this, and he felt it all the more because he knew their servitude to Midian was Jehovah's doing, who was obliged, because of the moral condition of Israel, to reduce His people to so despicable a condition. What must God have felt so to deal with those He loved! Midian then, "and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against them; and they encamped against them, and destroyed the increase of the earth, till thou come unto Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass. For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it. And Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto Jehovah." How touching it is, my brethren, to find this so often repeated story! Any one but God would have refused to listen to such a cry, at least from such a people. For had they not over and over sinned, and been chastised, and cried? Had they not gone back, cried, and been delivered; then fallen into sin again, cried again, been delivered again — always crying, always delivered, and always falling back again, into a lower depth than ever? Only God could feel patience and show tender mercy to such a people. For if they cried under the sore trouble which Jehovah brought on them for their sins, none the less did He answer, grieved for them and pitying them.

"And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried unto Jehovah because of the Midianites, that Jehovah sent a prophet unto the children of Israel, which said unto them, Thus saith Jehovah God of Israel, I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage; and I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all that oppressed you, and drave them out from before you, and gave you their land; and I said unto you, I am Jehovah your God; fear not the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but ye have not obeyed my voice. And there came an angel of Jehovah, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abi-ezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites." Mark the twofold process of the Lord. He sends first a prophet, then an angel; the one to bring their sin home to their conscience, the other to raise up a deliverer. He loves to extricate His people from the wretched consequences of their failure, but He will have the evil owned first. Clearly therefore Gideon knew by experience what the state of the people was. His condition was in miniature what that of the people was in general. He was threshing wheat behind a winepress, no doubt for fear of the Midianites. The commonest duty of a man in Israel could not be done without the dread of those mighty and numerous foes; but "the angel of Jehovah appeared unto him, and said unto him Jehovah is with thee, thou mighty man of valour." Now there is power that goes forth with the word of Jehovah. What an encouragement to its object! What! the man that was cowering behind the winepress? This to be the choice of God to break the yoke of Midian! What grace on God's part! "And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if Jehovah be with us" — for on that he takes his stand — "if Jehovah be with us" — not merely "with me." He binds the people with the name of Jehovah, not merely with himself — the invariable mark of true faith and love. "If Jehovah be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not Jehovah bring us up from Egypt? but now Jehovah hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites." They were both true. It was Jehovah that had blessed, and it was Jehovah that had delivered into the hands of the Midianites; and that very fact, overwhelming as it was, is precisely what gives confidence. Had it been merely that the Midianites had got the better of Israel, this were nothing for faith, save indeed a denial of Him and of their relation to Him. But it was not so with Gideon. He sees that their affliction was the Lord's doing because of their sin. But the same Jehovah who delivered His people into the hands of the Midianites now said to the trembling son of Manasseh, "Jehovah is with thee, thou mighty man of valour." A difficulty presented itself to his spirit. His heart was no doubt not without its exercises how all these things could be. It was not that

he doubted; but he desired to have it explained. He was realizing the position of things before God; and Jehovah looked upon him, and said, "Go in this thy might." Was not this enough, that Jehovah was with him — the same Jehovah that had delivered over Israel to their foes? The God of Israel declared Himself with him to deliver them now and to bring to nought the power of the Midianites. "Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee? And he said unto him, Oh, my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house. And Jehovah said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man." He asks a sign, it is true; and Jehovah answers. I am far from denying that there was weakness in the faith of Gideon; nor is it implied that there was not a drawback here as in all the others who have passed before us. But allowing all this, it must be allowed that, after the Lord graciously condescended to his weakness, we find the power of God at work in his heart and ways. But it is a great lesson to which our attention may be drawn here, that the might by which God works for His glory is in no sense a consciousness of communicated power. Never before had Gideon so felt his own littleness, his family poor, himself the least. And now there is another and deeper feeling. "When Gideon perceived that he was an angel of Jehovah, Gideon said, Alas, O Lord Jehovah! for because I have seen an angel of Jehovah face to face. And Jehovah said unto him, Peace be unto thee, fear not: thou shalt not die." He was consciously withered up before the presence of God — the habitual effect, as we find in the Old Testament continually, of meeting what is there called the angel of Jehovah. Gideon, strengthened by that which put the sentence of death on his nature, builds an altar in the confidence of the word given him, and calls it Jehovah-shalom. Thus he lays hold of the word of peace, and promptly acts on it; and when once he has done this alone as a question between him and God, another great moral principle is seen. There is no groundwork for any deliverance according to God, there is no proper basis for His intervention, but the removal of all barriers between God and our souls. This is the prime necessity — peace, then work; but there is no service safe till the person is secured and in peace. On the other hand, before God can according to His own mind use a servant with strangers or enemies, He will have him begin at home. This is the next thing traceable in Gideon's history. How act abroad if there is sin and dishonour of God in the family? "And it came to pass the same night, that Jehovah said unto him, Take thy father's young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old, and throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down the grove that is by it: and build an altar unto Jehovah thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place, and take the

second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shalt cut down. Then Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as Jehovah had said unto him: and so it was, because he feared his father's household and the men of the city, that he could not do it by day, that he did it by night." Still it was done. "And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was cast down, and the grove was cut down that was by it, and the second bullock was offered upon the altar that was built. And they said one to another, Who hath done this thing? And when they enquired and asked, they said, Gideon the son of Joash hath done this thing. Then the men of the city said unto Joash, Bring out thy son, that he may die: because he hath cast down the altar of Baal, and because he hath cut down the grove that was by it. And Joash said unto all that stood against him, Will ye plead for Baal? will ye save him? he that will plead for him, let him be put to death whilst it is yet morning: if he be a god, let him plead for himself, because one hath cast down his altar. Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, Let Baal plead against him, because he hath thrown down his altar." Thus does God honour the uncompromisingness of faith. The will of Jehovah was explicitly declared to Gideon. He had nothing but death to expect, had it not been the will of the Lord; but, come what will, "he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever;" and Gideon was content to abide all consequences. I do not of course say that he could definitely anticipate these blessed words of John to us; but he had the instinctive sense in his soul that there is nothing like obedience; and Jehovah had made His will plain about His own dishonour at home. Indeed the inconsistency would have been enormous of a man's going forth to deal with the heathen enemies of Israel, while Baal was worshipped in his own father's house. No doubt there was the difficulty for a son so boldly to deal with his father's idolatry; and the greater too for one who did not disguise from himself how little he was, as we find when the angel appeared just before, meddling with that which would shock the prejudices of the family and of all around. For nothing wounds more than that which treats their religion as nothing. Again, whatever appearances may say, there is nothing so truly humble as obedience; nor is anything so firm as faith. There are many persons who seem to think that man's will is the only thing that is strong. It is a great mistake. Self-will — the action and energy of the flesh — is merely spasmodic; it soon passes away, and this in the measure of its violence. But "he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever." There is never continuance except in obeying Him. Gideon then went forth in this his might. But his might was shown in his father's house at home before it could be displayed abroad, and he wins a new name over the false god before a blow is struck at the Midianites, though they are seen now gathered together in Jezreel, for Satan was roused;

and the Lord meets again his difficulties, giving him external and repeated tokens, as we see at the end of Judges 6.