

Lectures on the Book of Judges

Judges 7 — Gideon's Three Hundred

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The next chapter (Judges 7) shows him in public. The children of Israel gathered round him whose bold stand for Jehovah would soon be spread abroad; for they well knew how sinful it was for any, and for Israel above all, to worship Baal. "And Jehovah said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many." What a blessed thing it is to have One to guide us who is entirely independent of circumstances! "The people that are with thee are too many." Never before in going to war in this world was there heard such a plea. Though the principle might be seen perhaps in the selection from the twelve tribes under Phinehas to fight against the same Midianites before Moses was gathered to his people, they were, in God's estimate, too many to go to war with a host like grasshoppers for multitude (Num. 31). It is good to have God to judge for us, whether in peace or war, service or suffering. "The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me. Now therefore go to, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead." This was a distinct appeal to His own word in Deut. 20: 8: "And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart." How precious thus to find God recalling His word by Moses! "And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand." But they are not few enough for the purpose of the Lord. "And Jehovah said unto Gideon, The people are yet too many; bring them down unto the water, and I will try them for thee there: and it shall be, that of whom I say unto thee, This shall go with thee, the same shall go with thee; and of whomsoever I say unto thee, This shall not go with thee, the same shall not go." The root of the mischief, which really had brought in declension, was that the people, ceasing to value what God had given, were not willing at first to contend for it, and that, having accustomed themselves to the presence of Jehovah's enemies, they had fallen into their evil ways against Himself. The great moral lesson they had then to learn was what Jehovah is for His people. For Israel it was no question of numbers, or munitions of war; but of Jehovah, who would use and bless those only who have confidence, whose heart is to Himself. So it was brought down to a

strange but searching test. "Everyone that lapped of the water with his tongue, as a dog lapped" — not those that took the water with ease as at ordinary times, and like men. From this very thing, from themselves and their comforts, they wanted to be delivered. It was not here only a question of faint-heartedness, but of entire devotedness to the Lord and the work before them. We may not walk as men, nor entangle ourselves with the affairs of life, to be good soldiers of Jesus Christ. The evil was in thinking that it was merely a question of man against man, whereas the faith that counts on God is willing even to be counted as a dog before Him. Those God would use must not seek their own ease or honour. They were men so hanging on the word and work of the Lord that to partake of the refreshing by the way, though it might be in the most hasty fashion, no better than a dog might, seemed intuitively good enough for them: their hearts were set on His task before them, and not on their own things. This then at once severed those who cared not for themselves, but for what was given them by God to be done, from the men who, even upon such an occasion, could stay to consult their own habits, their own liking, their own ease. This I believe to be just the truth intended here for our instruction: with a little handful of that sort Gideon was to do his errand. "By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand: and let all the other people go every man unto his place." Then comes another remarkable dealing of God with other instruction for us. "Jehovah said unto Gideon, Get thee down unto the host; for I have delivered it into thine hand." He was encouraged, though it was a service of immense danger in appearance; but what is this to the Lord? Ours is only to obey. "But if thou fear to go down, go thou with Phurah thy servant down to the host: and thou shalt hear what they say; and afterward shall thine hands be strengthened to go down unto the host. Then went he down with Phurah his servant unto the outside of the armed men that were in the host." There is no book in the world comparable to the Bible for transparency. The writer was inspired to tell as calmly of Gideon's fear as of his courage. "If thou art afraid, go down with Phurah." Who but God could speak out so simply? He was afraid, and takes with him the servant. Where is the honour of the successful warrior? It belongs to God alone. "And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the seaside for multitude. And when Gideon was come, behold, there was a man that told a dream unto his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along. And his fellow answered and said, This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of

Joash, a man of Israel: for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host. And it was so, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream, and the interpretation thereof, that he worshipped, and returned into the host of Israel, and said, Arise; for Jehovah hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian. And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers." The cake of barley bread was no great thing in itself or in men's eyes. But so it is that God delivers, not by wit, power, or wealth, but by His Spirit working through a despised instrument. And Gideon worships as he hears. His confidence is in the Lord. He was less than ever in his own eyes: God filled them, and His people too had therefore a great place: "Jehovah hath delivered into your (not my) hand the host of Midian." Yet we know that their actual state was as low as their number within was small. All turns on Jehovah; but these were His ways. And Gideon's faith saw it all done. The two arrive about the beginning of the middle watch. "And they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands." Strange mode of fighting this — to us how full of suggestive instruction! We too have to bear testimony, not of ourselves, but of Christ, as they blew with trumpets; we too must have death working in us, if life in those we serve, and the earthen vessels breaking; and thus it is that the light can shine out brightly. For it is not only that we see the light of God's glory in Christ; our God would have it reflected more and more, as we are changed into Christ's image, beholding it, as by the Lord the Spirit. And the war-cry was heard, "The sword of Jehovah, and of Gideon." "And they stood every man in his place round about the camp: and all the host ran, and cried and fled. And the three hundred blew their trumpets." It was not their skill, nor their prowess, but their testimony, that was used, their loud testimony of Jehovah's mission, Jehovah's will, Jehovah's deliverance of the Midianites into their hands. But if faith does not wait for numbers, nor rest on them in the battles of the Lord, others follow when the enemy has received a manifest defeat. "And the men of Israel gathered themselves together out of Naphtali, and out of Asher, and out of all Manasseh, and pursued after the Midianites. And Gideon sent messengers throughout all mount Ephraim," and accordingly victory was complete. Many, however, who had no heart for the work when all was depression, are forward to complain of the conquerors. "And the men of Ephraim said unto him, Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites? And they did chide with him sharply. And he said unto them. What have I done now in comparison of you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abi-ezer." (Judges 8) It is admirable to find one who knows how to meet the chafed spirits, even of those who have

done little to secure the victory. These men of Ephraim no doubt helped, and Gideon only said what was quite true. Everybody knows, I presume, that the main destruction of an army is far more when the battle is turned than when it rages. Those who fall during the struggle are comparatively few, while those who are cut down when it has become a flight may be very many; and therefore one can see how the mild answer of Gideon might be strictly true; but we do well to weigh the lowliness of it, and the willingness of him who bore the brunt, exposed to all danger, to take the least and give the highest place now that God had wrought for His people. Alas! it is as sweet as it is rare. "