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## God Needs Gideons

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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*"And the Lord looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might... have not I sent thee?  
And he said unto him, Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I...?  
And the Lord said unto him, Surely I will be with thee." Judges 6:14-16*

Gideon lived at a time when so much in Israel was contrary to the honour and glory of God's name. The Israelites were at the mercy of their enemies, a defeated people. They were pitifully poor, having no enjoyment of their land, which had been the land of promise, flowing with milk and honey. They were in confusion, with no unity, no cohesion, and no leaders who could speak with finality the authoritative Word of God which alone can bring hope and confidence. In His sovereignty, however, God reacted to recover such conditions as would honour His name among the people, and for this purpose He apprehended Gideon, a young man.

An indication that God means to go on with His purpose in spite of much failure is that He brings in young people. Older believers must not be jealous of the younger generation, for increasing age can mean loss of freshness, and if we of the older generation cling to our static position we may bring in death. What is our salvation? What is the renewing of our youth? What is the answer to growing limitation on our part? It is not to suspect youth; not to criticise it; not to despise it as some evidently did in Timothy's case (1 Timothy 4:12); but to do everything in our power to help the younger generation.

When I first started ministry I was quite a young man, and I had to assume responsibility for a church where there were some older men who objected, "But he is so young"! I had, however, a champion among those critics, and he answered their objections with the words, "Yes, but that is something he is getting over every day"! We need to see that after all it is not years that govern. Age

is not the criterion; the criterion is spirituality. What is true in nature is also true in the realms of things spiritual. As soon as any organism in nature ceases to reproduce, death has commenced. The law of nature is ever fresh reproduction. The law of life is reproduction. God, having once created, does not create a second time; He proceeds by reproduction. Every new generation is meant by God to bring past values into new freshness. No new generation is a new created humanity, but a generation of fresh humanity which perpetuates the good which has gone before. Some of us are a passing generation, and our freshness and fruitfulness will be found in helpfully making way for the next generation.

The Lord's glory and honour are expressed in perennial youth, but the new generation cannot succeed just because of youth, any more than it can be officially appointed; it must take up the succession in an inward way, and that means by spirituality. This was the test applied to Gideon. He, like the other judges, illustrates how in divine sovereignty God takes up whom He will, but he also indicates the ground on which that sovereignty works. It is not a contradiction to say that while God acts in absolute sovereignty, He does look for certain conditions which will bring that sovereignty into operation. So it is that we may get some profit from examining a few of the qualities which marked this young man, Gideon, and made him usable by God.

### **Humility**

The first of these - and it is everywhere evident - was his humility. Humility is the prime mark, the hallmark, of spirituality. No wonder it says that "The Lord looked upon him"! With Gideon there was no pride of person, for far from thinking highly of himself he clearly rated himself very low. He had no pride of family, being ready to confess that his was the poorest household in Manasseh. Now in fact it does appear that his father, Joash, stood for something and had a position of prominence in his city, for it was to his altar of Baal that the citizens came to worship. Moreover Gideon was able to select ten servants from his father's house. The truth seems to be that Gideon was a man of a genuinely humble spirit. He was not proud of being young. Nobody is going to be used by God just for that reason. Nor did he harbour any sense of superiority over the people around him in spiritual matters. He put himself among them and recognised himself to be one with them in their poor spiritual state. If we are proud of our more advanced understanding or of our imagined spirituality; if we look down on others in a critical fault-finding way; then the Lord will never look upon us as He looked upon Gideon nor choose us as His instruments.

It is not our business to let it be known that we disapprove of other Christians; it is our business to find a way of helping them. If we seek true humility then we may come into the Lord's view as His instruments to serve Him and His sovereign purposes to recover the glory due to His name. The whole story of Gideon is a declaration that such an instrument must never have any glory of its own. God found Gideon in a humble spirit at the beginning, and He subsequently took pains to reduce him and bring him even lower, for lowliness is the ground of the presence and the power of God. It is only when personal glory is set aside that the Lord can say, as He said to Gideon, "The Lord is with thee...." This is the kind of man whom God can use. A Moses, whose reaction to his call was, "Who am I, that I should go... Oh my Lord, I am not eloquent... but I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue". A Jeremiah, who argued, "Ah, Lord God! behold I cannot speak: for I am a child". An Elisha, who was a man not of the wind, the earthquake and the fire, but only an expression of God's power in "a still, small voice". This same principle was indicated for Gideon in the sign of the dew, that silent, lowly expression of life-giving power. God's instrument is always conscious of his own personal inadequacy.

### **Diligence**

The next point which impresses us in connection with Gideon was his industriousness; he was threshing out corn in the winepress. He did his work in that most unlikely and unsuitable place in order to hide it from the Midianites. The days were so evil that very little seemed possible, and indeed most of the people had fled to caves and holes, being paralysed and impotent because of their ever-present enemies. It looked as though nothing positive could be done, and therefore the tendency was to despair of action and accept the situation of defeat. Gideon, however, had a different attitude. It might be that not much could be done, but there was a little, and he determined to keep occupied with what was possible. As he considered their impossible situation he saw that there was a small, hidden contribution which he could make for the preservation of life. The Lord took note of this spirit. The Lord was standing right by that winepress and watching Gideon's efforts. Perhaps it was for this very reason that He said, "The Lord is with thee thou mighty man of valour". The Lord is certainly not "with" a slothful person, since to Him diligence is an essential quality. "In diligence not slothful, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord" (Romans 12:11) describes the kind of man God looks for, and in the person of Gideon He found him.

Gideon's activities were very limited and performed in a cramped sphere, but he was doing all that could be done, even if it seemed so little. The Lord took note of that, for sometimes even a gesture is enough for Him. If He sees one who, as it were, on entering a room makes straight for the armchair, a man who is looking for excuses and glad to skirt around or evade some responsibility which confronts him, then the Lord will not look on him as He did on Gideon. The margin tells us that "The Lord turned toward him". The Lord always turns toward those who are alert to seize even small opportunities of service.

The same principle applied to the ten thousand who were taken down to the river to get a drink (Judges 7:4). The last thing that could have occurred to those men was that their method of drinking was really a test, but once again God's decision and choice was based on a gesture, a gesture which revealed those who were putting divine interests before their own personal affairs. It was not that in His sovereign majesty He had ordained that some would lap and some would go down on their knees but that His sovereign work would be done by those who revealed their dispositions by their behaviour in a small matter. We, too, reveal our dispositions by very simple actions, and it may well be that in our daily life and work the Lord's eye is upon us to watch our disposition, for if we will jump at that which gives us some personal gratification or grasp at an opportunity to shirk hard work, then He will not use us in His great purposes. None of us will ever be used of the Lord in any vital way unless our hearts are wholly set on Him and His interests. "Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings." (Proverbs 22:29) God is looking for men like that.

### **Concern for Others**

In a sense this is part of what we have already said - Gideon was concerned for others. He looked and saw that the people were starving, and that the enemy was seeking to steal away what little food they had, so he did his best to help an undernourished and weakened people who could not lift a hand for their own deliverance. All of us need the outward look - "Not looking each one to his own things, but each of you to the things of others" (Philippians 2:4). Gideon was not one of those introverts who are always pre-occupied with their own condition. He might well have been filled with self-pity and complaints at being involved in such a sorry situation, but instead he was concerned about the troubles of others and was ready to pray and act on their behalf. That activity down in the winepress suggests a secret concern and effort to outwit the enemy, even if only in a small way.

Further, Gideon betrayed a real heart concern by replying to the statement that God was with him with a question about his people's troubles and needs. His great concern was not about himself but

about the fact that the former activities and wonders of God among His people were now no longer operating. This was all so different from theorising and giving slick theological answers to the Israelites' circumstances; it was as though the winepress was symbolic, and Gideon a man who was being crushed in spiritual travail over the needs of God's defeated people.

Whether a man is young or old he will only be useful to God if he bears this kind of heart concern. Nobody is going to serve the name and honour of the Lord by doctrines, by clever interpretations of the Scriptures or by mystical vistas of spiritual truths. The Lord will not spend much time looking towards the theorists; He is watching for men with hearts that are as burdened as Gideon's was, burdened with inward suffering over the unhappy state of His people.

### **No Complicity with the Enemy**

The further point to note is what took place when Gideon destroyed the idol in his father's house. We will never destroy Satan and his kingdom, we will never destroy what is represented by the Midianite tyranny if privately, behind the scenes, there is any kind of complicity with that kingdom. In our case the problem is not in our father's house but in our own hearts. There seems to be something inside us which is in alliance with the kingdom of darkness, a false altar which has to be overthrown to make way for God's altar. Before Gideon could go out and save Israel, recovering among them the honour due to the Lord's name, something had to be dealt with in the background of his own life. He did it! It is true that he did it fearfully, for he was a man without self-confidence, and it is true that he did it at night; nevertheless - night or day - he did it, and that was what mattered.

The altar and the name! It is impressive and significant how often these two are linked together in the Scriptures. The focal point of Gideon's whole story was that altar. It symbolised a new relationship and harmony between God and himself. Where there is an altar for the Lord's name, and where He finds His full satisfaction, there the glory of the Lord is secured and that being so it is peace - Jehovah Shalom. It seems that up to that point there was some uncertainty with Gideon, but after that there was no more uncertainty. The great victory was sure from then onwards.

The real battle is often in the heart of the man who is going to serve God; it is as though the Lord has to fight him before He can fight through him; having subdued and silenced his flesh by the mighty power of the cross, then He can lead His servant out to the battlefield around and use him for the honour of the name. God's warriors are those who through the cross are brought to enjoy God's peace in their own hearts, and then in the power of that peace they can bring to bear His victory on the kingdom of darkness. These are the Gideons whom God so greatly needs in our day.