

### Saints under Pressure 3 Gideon: Fleeces & Faith

Judges 6:11-16

We have thus far learned that Saints under pressure, those with feet of clay, need time alone with God. They need to let God take the initiative and when they do, they need to know that God is gentle with us. Last week with Joseph we saw that Saints need to trust God whatever the circumstances say, to know His timing is perfect, and to allow God to use all things (good and not so good) to get us ready for our unique assignment or calling. Today's story of Gideon includes Fleeces & Faith. Saints under pressure is need to test the guidance they are receiving, be watchful, and exercise faith not fear. As Joseph found out last week, God's thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9), so Gideon learned the same lesson.

A long time ago the story of Gideon may have been, but human nature, it seems, doesn't change a bit. Why me Lord? I can't possibly do that! Lord how can I save your people (answer: you can't!) I'm from the weakest clan; I'm the least in my family (great!) Have you noticed how God chooses the weakest, the least to do the greatest service? God's instrument is an undistinguished person going about his regular duties. Now God will always leave us till our resources are exhausted! Israel had fallen into sin and idolatry and - as a judgement - God had permitted vast hordes of Midianites to invade their land each year and rob them of their harvest. So one day, while Gideon was furtively threshing wheat in a winepress - to hide it from the Midianites - the Angel of the Lord appeared to him and said: "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valour!" (6:11-12) Obviously the Lord saw Gideon quite differently from the way he saw himself. Gideon saw himself as young, weak and ineffective. But the Lord treats us not as we are but as we shall be: He hailed Gideon as a "mighty man of valour". That's grace! As Saints we

need to be less concerned with how we see ourselves and more concerned with how God sees us. In Christ, each of us is a new creation (man or women)...created according to God, in righteousness and true holiness (Ephesians 4:24). Viewing ourselves like this will inevitably affect the way we live!

Gideon's conversation with the Angel is instructive: we may know we are being called by God when we find God steadily insisting on His will. In v13 he refers to the Angel as sir, but subsequently having been assured: Am I not sending you! He refers to the Angel as Lord! An altar is build and called Yahweh is Shalom (The Lord is Peace) as God confirms his call to Gideon, and divine steak on toast is served up. Now one way God trains saints with feet of clay is to give them practice in a smaller venture of faith before taking them on to something bigger. So Gideon is told o tear down his Father's altar to Baal, build another altar and sacrifice one of his father's bulls. Gideon does it but at night (cause he is scared), however the next day the men of the town find out and come to get kill him. Surprisingly his Father however stands up for him: Let Baal defend himself! If he can: **but he can't**. So Gideon is called Jerub-Baal: "Let Baal contend with him". As a result of his obedience the Holy Spirit comes upon Gideon and he is ready. Now I don't suppose that Gideon wanted to make a fool of himself and neither do we. It wasn't that he disbelieved God's promises of some special and difficult responsibility. It was just that (you know) a bit of proof would be nice and reassuring. A sign or a message maybe or a thunderbolt - anything that would satisfy that little niggle at the back of the mind of Gideon that whispered: "It's all in the imagination." And so Gideon put out his famous fleece, and twice God gave him the tangible sign he asked for. Twice, notice! The first time should have been enough. After all, the odds against a localised shower or a patch of dew on that tiny scale were ludicrous, but Gideon needed a lot of convincing. Maybe it was just a remarkable coincidence. One more time, then

he'd believe. Incredibly, God was patient one more time and the inexplicable happened again & Gideon was convinced and got on with the job. The Lord then commissioned Gideon to lead Israel into battle against the Midianites. In response, Gideon assembled an army by the well of Harod, with the Midianites encamped to the north. Gideon's army was 32000 and the Midianites 135,000 (Judges 7:3 & 8:10). He was outnumbered more than four to one. So imagine Gideon's reaction when the Lord told him. "The people who are with you are too many!"(7:2) God wants to use people who are weak, willing and watchful. So the Lord instructed Gideon to send away all those in his army who were fearful and afraid. As a result, 22000 men departed and Gideon was left with 10000. At this point he was outnumbered more than thirteen to one. But God was not finished! To Gideon's astonishment, He said, "The people are still too many." Then He instructed Gideon to bring his men down to the water, so that He might test them there by the way they drank from the water. All those who went down on both knees to drink were eliminated. Only those who lapped like a dog passed the test (7:4-7). The test focused on one single character requirement: vigilance or watchfulness. Picture those who drank in the normal way. Laying aside their shield from the left arm and their spear - or sword - from the right arm, they went down on both knees and buried their faces in the water. In this posture, they were totally vulnerable to a surprise attack. They could not see any approaching enemy, nor did they have their weapons ready to use. In the time they took to get themselves ready, the enemy would have overcome them.

What about those who lapped like dogs? When a dog drinks, it does not bury its nose in the water, it stretches out its tongue and laps the water up into its mouth, usually splashing some water around. How, then, should we picture the men who lapped? They went down on one knee only. Retaining their shield on their left arm, with the right arm, they set down their spear or sword

beside them. Then, with capped hand, they scooped up water with their mouths. In the posture, they remained alert, constantly watching for any surprise attack. Their shields were already in position and they could instantly pick up their spear or sword and have it ready to use. There was no possibility of the enemy taking them by surprise. Only 300 of Gideon's men passed this test.

They were facing 135000 Midianites. They were now outnumbered 450 to one. I can picture some of them who were dismissed saying to themselves, "Well, thank God we're out of that! That man, Gideon, must be crazy. What difference does it make how a man drinks water? Let's see what will become of him and the idiots who stayed with him."

In the outcome, of course, Gideon and his 300 broke through the Midianites and threw them into real confusion. God's strategy is often crazy in the world's eyes. The 300 hit the Midianite camp in three groups at the perfect time: just when the guards were changing and at the darkest time. After that, other Israelites rallied behind them and inflicted a total defeat on the Midianites. The proportions are illuminating. Only 300 men fulfilled the qualifications for making the initial breakthrough. But once the breakthrough was made, there were thousands of Israelites who were eager to pursue the fleeing Midianites. This whole account vividly illustrates how different God's ways are from ours. Left to himself, Gideon would surely have concluded, "The people with me are too few. I need to get reinforcements." But God's perspective was exactly the opposite. "The people with you are too many." In the end, Gideon was left with less than one out of a hundred of those who originally joined him. For God, the question is not "How many people?" but "What kind of people?"

In the light of this account, we each need to make a personal assessment. If God should gather an army today like Gideon, would I be one of the few who qualify? Or would I be like the first 22000 who gave way to fear? Or like the second 10000 who

laid down their weapons and buried their faces in the water to drink? It is easy - and often normal - to bury our faces in the business of daily living; to be absorbed in all the practical needs that confront us every day; to forget that we are in a spiritual conflict with unseen forces of darkness who are continually watching for an opportunity to catch us unprepared. To maintain unceasing watchfulness in every situation demands conscious, personal discipline. It goes beyond all our normal concepts of Christian conduct and morality. Yet the NT clearly warns us: "Be self controlled and alert. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour (1 Peter 5:8)". If we ignore this warning, we become vulnerable to subtle, unpredictable assaults of Satan. Take, for example, the question of holidays. Lorna and I have found that we cannot effectively continue our ministry unless we pause from time to time to take a holiday and to wait upon God (our holidays are really holy days). But I have learned one thing: Satan never takes a holiday. Just when we feel our greatest need to relax, Satan releases some totally unanticipated pressure against us and we may easily be caught without our weapons. We have learned that holidays are often times when we need to exercise the greatest watchfulness. But holidays are just one example that would apply in many different areas; family relationships, business activities, special celebrations, educational opportunities. We can participate in all of these, but we must not bury our faces in any. Remember, in Gideon's army, less than one out of a hundred qualified! Would the proportions be different today?

Gideon's later story initially shows great wisdom and grace, but by the middle of chapter 8 (v13f) he is exhibiting a strand of ruthlessness (too confident in himself, moving from indecisiveness to arrogance) and a strand of vindictiveness (by killing the Midianite kings rather than showing mercy).

Scarcely ever in the Bible do we find saints or heroes of faith have an unblemished record. They start well but deteriorate towards the end of their life. Every institution, every character, every king, every man or women of faith turns out to be fallible and imperfect: saints with feet of clay. Only one person in the Bible never fails or disappoints: Jesus! Only one person really did endure to the end with an unblemished record and really deserves to be our hero: The Lord Jesus. Gideon's strong point was not anything in himself: it was his faith in a strong Saviour God. If God can use fallible people like Gideon, then God can use me and God can use you. And if Gideon's faith challenges us to be a 'mighty person of valour', his later weakness might also challenge us to hate vindictiveness and leave revenge to God alone.

Pastor David

August 18<sup>th</sup> 2013.