

Gideon

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Gideon was the son of Joash, of the tribe of Manasseh. His name means “tree feller” or “warrior”, and his story is related in the book of Judges, chapters 6, 7, and 8.

The Condition of Israel At the time of the account of Gideon’s story, Israel was in one of its many spiritual down-cycles, having relapsed into evil and idolatry and been brought under divine discipline through the domination of the Midianites for the past seven years. The Amalekites and the “children of the east” (east of the Jordan river) were allied with Midian; and the power of these allies brought so much pressure on the Jewish people that they “made them dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strongholds.”

Judges 6:1-6

The enemy camped in Israelite territory, destroyed or stole the crops and flocks, “till thou come unto Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass.” Israel was said to be “greatly impoverished.” The people “cried for help from the Lord”, (6:7). The Lord sent a prophet (name not given) to reprove them for their disobedience and to bring them to repentance.

Judges 6:7-10

The Call of Gideon Gideon was threshing wheat in the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. The angel of the Lord appeared to him and said “The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor.” Gideon’s despondent reply was, “ if the Lord 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 the Lord bring us up from Egypt? But now the Lord hath forsaken us, and

delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.” The angel of the Lord replied, “Go...and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites; have I not sent thee.”

Judges 6:15-24

Gideon Destroys the Altar of Baal The Lord told Gideon to purify his father’s house from idolatry, and to sanctify himself by offering a burnt offering. The following night, in the dark for fear of the other people, he tore down the altar and cut down the grove of trees where Baal worship was held.

The people wanted to kill Gideon because of this act of desecration, but Joash, Gideon’s father, took his part, telling the men to allow Baal to plead for himself — if he was a god, he could protect himself.

The Sign of the Fleece The Midianites and their allies again invaded Israel, and Gideon gathered an army from the tribes of Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali. But before going out to battle, he asked for a sign from the Lord. He asked that dew be allowed to fall on a fleece which was spread on the threshing floor, which the ground around remained dry. The next morning the fleece was so wet that Gideon wrung a bowl of water from it, but the ground was dry. The next night, the miracle was reversed, with the ground getting wet and the fleece remaining dry (6:36-40). Thus encouraged, Gideon led his army toward the Midianite forces.

The Defeat of the Midianites Gideon advanced against the enemy and camped near the brook Harod, in the valley of Jezreel (the Plain

of Esdraelon). His army numbered about 32,000 effectives, which the army of the Midianites was 135,000 (8:10). Nevertheless, the Lord told Gideon that his army was too large! So Gideon announced to his forces that every man who was afraid or faint-hearted, was free to go back home. At that time 22,000 of his troops left for home. (This was not the Alamo.)

The Lord wanted the army reduced so that there would be no doubt that it was the Lord fighting for Israel and that the victory would be a true miracle. But even 10,000 troops were too many, the Lord said, and He gave directions for cutting the army still further, the water-drinking test. Those who knelt to drink were rejected and sent home. Those who scooped water in their hands and lapped it from their hands, in order to drink from an alert posture, were selected. Only 300 qualified!

Each of the 300 was equipped with a trumpet, a torch, and a pitcher. Gideon divided these men

into three companies, and told them to surround the Midianite camp, to put their torches inside the pitchers and sent them on fire, and to wait for the signal of the trumpet. At the signal, the men broke the pitchers, revealing the torches, blew the trumpets, and shouted “The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!”

The effect was complete surprise and shock. The 300 looked like a massive army, and the Midianites fled hastily, with Gideon in pursuit. Gideon sent word to the Ephraimites to cut off the enemy retreat at the Jordan River; and the Midianite prince was captured and executed.

Gideon was offered the kingship of Israel, but he refused. He requested a gift of the gold earrings which were taken from the enemy. With these he made a golden ephod (weighing about 50 pounds), which subsequently became an object of worship proving a snare to Israel and to Gideon because he had invaded the prerogatives of the priesthood.