

## Gideon- Contending for God

The story of Gideon is part of nearly every Sunday School curriculum. Who doesn't love the story of how Gideon's big army became a small group of 300 men who, by God's power, overcame Israel's enemies, the Midianites? It's a story that sparks our imagination.

Less known is the part of the story where Gideon chops down the altar that was dedicated to Baal and builds an altar to the Lord. This was a neighbourhood altar, and he was afraid of his neighbours' negative reaction, so instead of making the destruction of Baal's altar a public spectacle, he and a few of his men did the job at night. When morning came, Baal's altar was gone and the remnants of Gideon's sacrifice to the Lord remained on the new altar.

When the people woke up in the morning, they were rather upset that their centre of worship had been torn down and a new one was standing in its place. They did a little investigating and discovered quite quickly that it was Gideon who had destroyed their community altar, and they demanded that Gideon's father, Joash, hand him over so that they could punish him. Joash refused, saying instead that if they really believed that Baal was the most powerful god, then Baal could defend himself. This made quite a bit of sense, and the townspeople left Gideon alone. They also gave him a nickname, Jerub-Baal, which means "let Baal contend." If anything happened to Gideon, they could say that Baal had punished Gideon for his sacrilegious act. We know the rest of the story: Gideon, aka Jerub-Baal, went on to defeat Israel's enemies because the Lord was on his side, and he died an old man. Baal never did anything to Gideon, proving to his worshippers that he was a very weak god, not truly worthy of the worship or even the attention of anyone.

In sharp contrast the Lord could take care of himself. Or could he? We are told that the Midianites had overrun the land of Israel, forcing the Israelites to become refugees from their own homes to live in caves and makeshift shelters. They cried out to the Lord for help, and God raised up Gideon to provide that help. Gideon did accuse God of not keeping his promise to protect his people from their enemies, but he was not justified in so saying. God had sent a prophet to tell the people that the reason they were suffering was because they had abandoned him, and because they had abandoned him, he had no obligation to protect them. Nevertheless, he would provide a leader (called a judge in Judges) to lead them to victory over their enemies.

But can the Lord take care of himself, or does he need people to help him out? Gideon wasn't sure. It sounded like the Lord needed the help of people to rid the land of the Midianites, and Gideon wanted to confirm that the Lord was asking for his help. Three times over he asked for a sign to confirm that the Lord truly had called him to fight the Midianites, and three times the Lord provided a sign, first by consuming a meal Gideon had offered with fire and second and third by first making a fleece wet and then keeping it dry as it lay on the ground through the night. Gideon was not a man of great faith, and he wanted to be sure that he could take God at his word. God accommodated him by giving him his signs.

---

And, to prove that he (God, not Gideon) was going to contend with the Midianites, he had Gideon reduce his army from 32,000 men to a mere 300. Against impossible odds, the Israelites defeated the Midianites so thoroughly that they never bothered the Israelites again. (Recall that the Midianites had been the first army to attack Israel after they were freed from Egypt, and they continued to find ways to destroy God's people.) The Midianites had disrespected the Lord, and the Lord dealt with them. God's action stands in striking contrast to Baal's inaction, proving that the Lord truly is God.

The Lord can take care of himself, and he does. In fact, it is quite clear that he doesn't need us to fight his battles. The odds were so stacked against Gideon and his 300 men that it is foolish to think that they had any real part in winning the battle. Without a doubt, the battle belonged to the Lord.

Although the Old Testament there are many other examples of how God contended for himself, often by using his people, but nearly always in situations where his people could never have been victorious had he not been doing the actual work. This is most certainly true in Jesus Christ who should not have been victorious but yet was. As a man he would have been defeated, but as God he won the victory over the most powerful of enemies, one who has overrun the world, the devil himself. God defended himself and provided salvation for his people.

Since Jesus ascended into heaven left behind his church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to do his work of building his kingdom. Another way of saying, "building the kingdom," would be to say, "showing God to be victorious." In the past (and perhaps also in the present), the church has attempted to defend God's honour by taking up sword and spear. We need only look to the ill-conceived crusades of 1000 years ago as an example in which Europeans attempted to free Jerusalem from the "infidels" and defend God's honour. The crusades were an unmitigated disaster and remain a blight on Christianity and, by extension, on Jesus himself. Perhaps Christian leaders were calling the church to fight in the same way as was done in the Old Testament. It is always dangerous, however, to take Old Testament examples of Israel and use them as instruction for how we ought to act today.

How does the church respond to this world being overrun by evil and sin? It lets God contend with those who disrespect him and even seek to overthrow him by tearing down his altars through the marginalization and persecution of the gospel. That doesn't mean we don't have a task, but our task is not to defend God. Perhaps the song, "Lead On, O King Eternal," which has seemingly military overtones captures well our role: "For now with swords' loud clashing or roll of stirring drums, but with deeds of love and mercy, the heavenly Kingdom comes." We don't have to defend God, for God will defend himself, quite capably, in fact. It seems impossible that by being kind and simply caring for people we will win any victories. And it is impossible. But, of course, it is not up to us to win victories. We are simply called to be faithful to the calling Jesus has placed on our lives and trust that he will contend for himself. And he will. And he does. By his grace.

*Pastor Gary*