

Gideon's Transformation

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“Then the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. So the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian for seven years, 2 and the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel....

“And the Angel of the Lord came and sat under the oak tree which was in Ophrah, which belonged to Joash the Abiezwite, while his son Gideon threshed wheat in the winepress, in order to hide it from the Midianites. And the Angel of the Lord appeared to him, and said to him, ‘The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor!’

“And Gideon said to Him, ‘O my lord, if the Lord is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about ...?’” (Judges 6:1, 11-13).

We don't usually think of Gideon as a negative or cynical man. We think of him as his name in Hebrew describes him, a hewer (as of wood), thus one who cuts down or breaks in pieces; in other words, a great warrior who broke down the altar of Baal and in the end led a small troop of only 300 men against thousands of marauding Midianites!

The Hebrew word, *geedah*, from which Gideon is derived, is the same word used in at least two passages in Deuteronomy where the Lord described what the Children of Israel should do to the people of the land of Canaan when they conquered it. He said, “Thus shall you deal with them: you shall *destroy* their altars, and *break down* their sacred pillars, and *cut down* their wooden images, and burn their carved images with fire” (Deut. 7:5 & 12:3). This of course is *exactly* what Gideon did to the altar and the wooden image of Baal that his own father had set up and that his own household worshipped in Manasseh in direct contradiction of the Lord's Word. So it seems the name, Gideon, was given to him prophetically to highlight the significance of his actions.

Be that as it may, we know from the doctrines that all names in the Word represent qualities of life. So Gideon represents the ability the Lord gives each one of us by means of truth to cut down and break up the arguments of falsity springing from a selfish or worldly life.

But Gideon, the man himself, gives no hint of this quality when he first appears in the Word. Instead it is quite clear when the angel first appeared to him that he was both negative and cynical: negative in that he doubted and disbelieved everything the angel told him, and cynical in that even when he was convinced he had seen an angel he assumed the worst and maintained a fearful spirit right up to the hour of battle with Midian. Gideon, in short, *became* a great hero, but he was *not* a great hero in the beginning. And this is exactly why his story is so important to us, for *we* are not great or mighty of ourselves, but with the Lord's help, like Gideon we can *become* strong enough to overcome the evils and falsities in our lives, for “with God all things are possible.” So the story of how Gideon was transformed – both literally and in the spiritual sense – is the story of how *we* can be transformed in the fight for our spiritual lives.

Let's review the situation. When the angel appeared to him and said, “The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor,” it seemed almost ridiculous to Gideon, who was all too well aware of his weakness and vulnerability. So his response was pretty cynical: “Oh, my lord, if the Lord is with

us, why has all this happened to us?" He might as well have said, "Riiight! ... It sure doesn't look like it!" In fact he knew perfectly well why the Midianites had overwhelmed them, since the Lord had sent a prophet to *tell* them, "You have not obeyed My voice."

But the angel wasn't surprised by Gideon's doubt – and didn't react with anger or even disappointment. As a representative of the Lord he knew what to expect and how to respond – in this case with continued affirmations. So he assured him that he *would* be the one to lift the oppression of his people, saying, "Go in this might of yours and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have **I** not sent you?"

But Gideon still wasn't sure. Like Moses before him, he began to protest and complain even more: "O my lord," he said, "how can **I** save Israel? Indeed, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." Still, the angel (now referred to as the Lord) persisted in His encouragement: "Surely," He said, "*I will be with you*, and you shall defeat the Midianites as one man."

So at last Gideon began to take the angel seriously. But his doubts persisted. Really? Me? Don't you realize, he may have thought, that even my father and my whole family worships these idols? Who am I? In fact, who are YOU to be *telling* me these things? In effect he said, "Prove to me that you are who you say you are!" "Show me a sign!"

And so he does – even as Gideon requests: he consumes a sacrifice of meat and bread and broth in fire, and then just as suddenly as he had appeared, he disappeared. Was Gideon convinced? He sure was, but even then his negativity got the better of him and instead of being encouraged he began to fear for his life because he had seen an angel!

Now if *you* were the Lord you'd probably be throwing up your hands and saying, "What does it take to encourage you, Gideon!?" But the Lord persists, "Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die." And then He gives him explicit instructions about what to do – and how to do it.

Now let's pause and reflect. Can you see yourselves in this story? Can you see how the Lord is speaking to you? Think about the difficulties you face in your lives; think about the enemies of your spiritual health and happiness: do they not often seem overwhelming? Do we not all sometimes feel too weak and small and helpless to do anything about them? And how do we respond when someone offers help? Too often we are just like Gideon, saying, "Oh, that won't work," or "Yeah, right... sounds good, but I can't do THAT; look at all my problems; look at my circumstances and my limitations!" And yet the Lord, directly or indirectly, continues to encourage us; He continues to AFFIRM us and tell us what we CAN do – with His help.

In fact, the Lord's part in this story – as in so many stories of the Word – is nothing BUT encouragement. Remember the 23rd Psalm? Remember what the Lord said about having faith like a mustard seed – and moving mountains? Remember the Sermon on the Mount? – "Seek first the kingdom of God," and all that you need will be added to you.

Yes, we remember these and similar teachings, but we still struggle.

So if nothing else this story of Gideon should be a powerful reminder of the Lord's infinite patience and persistence as He works to help us overcome our doubts and fears, and do what is

necessary to confront the evils impacting our lives. It shows what we *can* do when we take Him seriously. It is also a significant lesson in *how* the Lord provides the encouragement that can lead to real change in our lives: first He reminds us that He *is with us* (and not against us) and He speaks to our strengths. Then He gives us a responsibility to co-operate with Him. Then He assures us that He *will be* with us, working with us to gain the victory; and finally He offers evidence of His power, a sign to confirm His instruction. So if we read the Word really paying attention, even if we are extremely skeptical we will see the Lord offering these four elements of hope: His presence, His direction, His help, and His power. We may not trust the Lord, and we may not understand Him, but if we will just look we will see these things. And if we act on them, like Gideon we can be transformed.

But this is where the *spiritual sense* of the story is so important. If we are to see fully how it all applies to us we need more than just a moral lesson about trust and obedience; we need real insights on the spiritual plane of life, the deeper levels of the will and understanding. We need to see what the various characters and events actually signify within ourselves!

Let's start with the Midianites. As you heard in the first lesson, it was because Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord that "the hand of Midian prevailed against them." So they lived in dens, caves and strongholds in the mountains, and harvested their crops in fear. Not only the Midianites but the Amalekites also continually ravaged the countryside, coming with their livestock, their tents and their camels, destroying everything like a plague of locusts so that Israel couldn't even keep their own sheep, oxen or donkeys. But what does all this mean to us?

Well, the Writings tell us that the Midianites represent the truths of faith, simply put, the teachings of the Word. Midian was a son of Abraham, and they were Midianites who rescued Joseph out of the pit where his brothers had left him to die. So, like a lot of things in Scripture, they have a positive meaning in the beginning, but by the time of Balaam, the prophet, they are in league with Balak, of Moab, in an effort to destroy Israel. So how is Midian corrupted? How, in the spiritual sense, does the truth of faith become an *enemy* to spiritual life? Simple: it becomes an enemy when it is separated from the life of charity, or when it is not used to support that life, which is the whole purpose of faith. In fact, the moment we separate faith from charity, or the good of life, it becomes a destructive force.

So, as the story goes, when we "do evil in the sight of the Lord," the Midianites attack. We use our faith to justify our actions and not to correct them. We *talk about* our teachings but we don't practice them. We think we can *think* or *believe* our way into heaven. At that point the truths we know are perverted and in effect they become falsities, confirming anything we want, and the sheer multitude of teachings tends to paralyze us, ravaging all the innocent states of good and genuine truth in the church of our hearts. This is what is meant by the Israelites being left without sheep or oxen or donkeys. The sheep are the good loves, the oxen the good deeds, and the donkeys the reasoning powers that support the good of life. But there comes a time in the confusion of faith without charity that we hardly know the simplest thing with any confidence about our spiritual lives. We dwell in caves of obscurity in the mountains of our self-love and make strongholds for ourselves of our defensive reasoning.

In our story when the angel appeared Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to avoid being seen by the enemy. Threshing wheat has a wonderful meaning in spiritual life as it pictures the separation of useless information from the kernels of genuine truth that look to the good of life.

And the fact that it was done in this story in a winepress adds a poignant touch, since wine has to do with spiritual truths. But the winepress was a stone-walled enclosure for crushing grapes; it would have made threshing difficult, to say the least, and winnowing impossible for the lack of wind to blow the chaff away. So what we have here is a perfect illustration of the church member bereft of true faith because of the evils of his or her life, trying nevertheless in doubt and fear to thresh out some good and find some meaning in life. It's a hard, thankless job.

And how do we get to this point? Literally, of course, it's because we worship Baal, a carved or "graven" image. And what is that in the spiritual sense? Very simply, it is the arrogance or conceit of self-intelligence, that is, love and effort to live according to the thoughts or ideas of one's own imagination rather than the teachings of the Word. It seems to work, and the Lord permits it out of respect for our freedom, but it's not nice, and compared to the life of heaven it is like living in a cave and threshing wheat in a winepress, constantly being harassed and oppressed by useless thoughts that keep us from enjoying anything of real innocence or spiritual good.

The transformation of Gideon from a man of fear and disbelief into a man of courage and confidence did not come about suddenly. He required constant reassurance from the angel even to begin the process. So do we. It's not enough to hear the Lord's Word once in times of temptation, for the negative spirit has a firm hold. We must go back again and again to let the encouragement sink in. But when the truth is clear we just have to stop complaining and get on with it. The first step is the hardest. We have to break down the altar and destroy the image of our Baal, that is, whatever pride or self-intelligence that preoccupies our minds.

Note, this does *not* mean we have to give up reasoning or thinking about our spiritual life; far from it. But we have to stop worshipping and putting all our hope and trust in our own ideas. Gideon was told to burn the wooden image of Baal and sacrifice the ox of his father's house. Natural fire corresponds to the spiritual fire of love; so it is that we have to submit the pride of our own intelligence to the fire of love from the Lord and let that pride be entirely consumed. Remember, Gideon's father also worshipped Baal, so his ox represents the sad life of good works done for the sake of reward, in other words, self-love. This has to be sacrificed if we're going to serve the Lord – and by the way it's no easy job! An ox is a BIG animal.

Gideon grew in spirit little by little. When the Lord finally convinced him he could destroy the altar of Baal he did it at night, for fear of his father's household and the men of the city. Night represents a state of obscurity, a darkness of the spirit caused by errors and misunderstandings. But lacking clarity doesn't excuse us from taking action. We can go by night, too, as long as we go; that is to say, we don't have to understand everything, but we do have to make our commitment to the Lord and find some way to follow through.

Finally, let's take heart from the story of Gideon as it is intended for us. Let's do our best to let the Lord transform the negative, disillusioned, hopeless spirit in our own lives into a positive, courageous, dynamic spirit willing to break down the altars of Baal and then go on to conquer the miserable Midianites according to His plan. And let's remember, as the angel said, the Lord is with us, the Lord has sent us on this mission, and the Lord surely *will be* with us.

Amen.

Lessons: *Judges* 6, selections
Matthew 5:1-16, and *Arcana Caelestia* #3242, selections