

Gideon's Sevenfold Qualification for Service.

Judges 6.

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The book of Judges has an especial claim upon our attention; for it is the record of Israel's failure in the land. God had brought them out of Egypt with a high hand and an outstretched arm, had brought them through the Red Sea, while He smote Pharaoh and his host, and caused them to sink "as lead in the mighty waters." And He led them onward still, through the waste howling wilderness, accomplishing the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and set them in possession, under the leadership of Joshua, of the promised inheritance. They were now across the Jordan — river of death and judgment; God had rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off them at Gilgal (Joshua 5: 9); and as long as they walked in obedience and dependence, no foe could stand before their face. But man invariably fails when entrusted with blessing under responsibility, even under the most favourable circumstances; and Israel was no exception to — nay, was the most striking exemplification of — the rule. No sooner was their blessing at the flood-tide mark than it began to ebb. It is true that they are said to have "served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua" (Judges 2: 7); but it is immediately added that "there arose another generation after them which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which He had done for Israel. And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and served Baalim," etc. (vv. 10, 11.) The consequence was that "the anger of the Lord was hot against Israel," but "nevertheless He raised up judges which delivered them out of the hand of them that spoiled them." (vv. 14-16.) Here indeed we have the two aspects of the whole book, *Israel's failure, and the Lord's faithfulness*. And out of God's faithfulness sprang His intervening grace, giving His people a little restoration and reviving in the midst of their departure, corruption, and bondage. The correspondency between this state of things and the present state of the Church will be apparent to all; and hence I propose to call attention to one of the most signal instances of God's intervention — I mean in His raising up of Gideon to be a judge and deliverer to His people. The object before my mind in taking this instance is, that we may learn, as the Lord may enable us, what are the qualifications which God seeks for (and surely also they are of His own providing) in those whom He can use for service and testimony amongst His people.

The sixth chapter commences: "And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years." (Read vv. 1-6.) Midian was near of kin to Israel, having descended from Abraham through Keturah his second wife; and again and again they are brought into contact with the chosen people. In the wilderness "the Lord spake unto Moses" (and Moses had married Zipporah, daughter of the priest of Midian), "saying, Vex the Midianites, and smite them, for they vex you with their wiles." (Num. 25: 16-18; Num. 31: 1-12.) But now they are in the land itself, though they had never followed the ark across the Jordan; "and Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites." How solemn the warning! But "Israel cried unto the Lord, and it came to pass when the children of Israel cried

unto the Lord because of the Midianites, that the Lord sent a prophet." (vv. 6-8.) First, the Lord sent a prophet to bring their sin home to their conscience, and then He sent an angel to raise up a deliverer; and He finds Gideon threshing wheat by the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. (v. 11.)

1. We may name this first *qualification* — *Feeding on Christ in secret*. For wheat is surely a figure of Christ. (See John 12: 24; John 6: 35.) It was a time of great difficulty: idols had usurped the place of Jehovah, so that those who remained faithful in the midst of the general ruin could only worship the Lord alone and in private. So was it with Gideon; Baal had an altar in his father's house; but this "mighty man of valour" threshed wheat alone that he might find sustenance, notwithstanding the watchful eye of the Midianites. Alone in his family, and alone in threshing wheat, he gathered strength from communion with the Lord.

And, beloved friends, may we not say that feeding on Christ in secret is the fountain-head of all qualification for the Lord's service? Thus it was that Joseph was sent into exile and a prison; that Moses was sent for forty years into the desert; Paul into Arabia, etc. For it is when we are alone with Christ that we learn both what we ourselves are (that in our flesh there dwelleth no good thing), and, blessed be His name, what He Himself is, in the infinite fulness of His grace and sufficiency; and the Lord can never use us as standard-bearers, until both of these lessons have been learned. More than this; not only do we thus apprehend (after we have come to the end of ourselves) the all-sufficiency of Christ for every need; but we learn also something of His unspeakable preciousness and beauty, so that we can go out afterwards in His service with *satisfied hearts*, as well as with confidence in His infinite resources. To feed on Christ in secret is indeed the present and abiding need of all our souls.

2. The next qualification is evidently *an exercised heart*. "And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, and said unto him, The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour. And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, 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." (vv. 12, 13.) These words show that Gideon identified himself with the condition of his people; for he says, "Why is all this befallen us?" etc.; and that, entering into their state, he bore it on his heart before the Lord. And without this he had not been qualified to be their helper. It was so with Nehemiah (see Neh. 1); with Daniel (see especially Dan. 9); and pre-eminently was it the case with our blessed Lord. Take an instance or two. They brought unto Him one that was deaf, and had an impediment in his speech; and we are told that before He healed him, looking up to heaven, *He sighed*, and saith unto him, Ephphatha; that is, Be opened. (Mark 7: 32-35.) Again too, before He raised Lazarus from the dead, we have the marvellous record that He wept; and that "groaning in Himself" He came to the grave — signs surely of His entering into and taking (if we may so speak) upon His spirit the condition of those to whose succour He had come — that in sympathy and grace He so identified Himself with them that He became the voice of their sorrow and grief; for "Himself took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses." (Matt. 8: 17.) The cross is of course the highest expression of His entering into our state; for on it "He bare our sins in His own body." (1 Peter 2: 24.) The principle remains; for our power to succour others will be (not forgetting our entire dependence on the Lord) just in proportion as we have been able to enter into, and to make their sorrows or difficulties our own. It might be well to remember this in

our desire to bring saints into their true place. The Lord will use us, if we are qualified for it; but to be qualified for it we must have felt deeply the character of the evil in which they are entangled, and have mourned over it before the Lord. Hence, in the case before us, no sooner does Gideon unburden his exercised heart than "the Lord looked upon him, and said, "Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: *have not I sent thee?*" (v. 14.)

3. We get now another very important qualification — *a sense of his own nothingness*. He replies, "Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." (v. 15.) His exercises had thus not been without blessing, for he was now in the place where God's power could come upon and use him. It was so with the apostle Paul after the exercises of heart produced by the thorn in the flesh; he was then brought face to face with his own utter impotence, and want of natural adaptation for the Lord's service, and then the Lord could say to him, "My grace is sufficient for thee." (2 Cor. 12) And all the Lord's servants must learn this lesson sooner or later — that there is nothing in themselves, in their position, or in their circumstances, which can be used for God; that, in a word, the whole of our resources and strength lie outside of ourselves, *in Himself; that our sufficiency is of God*. (2 Cor. 3: 5.) It is then no longer a question of what the Midianites are, but what God is; for we go to meet them in His strength. Accordingly, the Lord now said unto Gideon, "Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man." (v. 16.)

4. Thereupon Gideon becomes bolder, and asks a sign that the Lord talked with hire — prepares a kid, and unleavened cakes of an ephah of flour, and bringing them, placed his offering, at the direction of the angel, upon the rock. " Then the angel of the Lord put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. Then the angel of the Lord departed out of his sight." By this Gideon is made to know that he had seen an angel of the Lord face to face, and he is filled with fear. But "the Lord said unto him, Peace be unto thee: fear not: thou shalt not die;" and thus he obtains from the Lord a further qualification for service; viz., *a soul at liberty — in peace before God*. God had revealed Himself to His servant, and the effect was terror; but the terror passed away before the peace-speaking word of Jehovah. We need not enlarge upon this feature, as it is the history of every soul that is brought into the presence of God (see Isa. 6; Job 42; Luke 5, etc), and every one will understand that there cannot be any true or effectual service for the Lord while the soul is occupied with its own condition, until indeed it is set free, and is at home in God's presence. Thus, when the Lord Jesus came into the midst of His disciples, after the resurrection, He said, "Peace be unto you. And when He had so said, He showed unto them His hands and His side. Then were the disciples glad when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, *Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.*" (John 20: 19-21.) Here we have a direct connection between peace and service.

5. The immediate consequence in Gideon's case was — and this gives us a further qualification — that he became *a worshipper*. "Then Gideon built an altar there unto the Lord, and called it Jehovah-shalom." (v. 24.) That is, he worships God in the character in which He had revealed Himself — as Jehovah who had spoken peace to his soul. The sequence is very instructive. First peace, then worship; and the lesson is, that only those who have peace with God

through our Lord Jesus Christ can worship. What a commentary upon the "public worship" of our land! But now we direct attention to this — that the true servant must first be a worshipper; for, indeed, to go out in service before we are worshippers, is to go out in ignorance of the character of Him we profess to serve; to misrepresent our Lord, and to expose ourselves to certain defeat. Let us then be careful to maintain the divine order.

6. Now the Lord calls upon Gideon to act; but he must first begin at home. "And it came to pass the same night that the Lord said unto him, Take thy father's young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old, and throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down the grove that is by it; and build an altar unto the Lord thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place, and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shalt cut down. Then Gideon took ten men," etc. (vv. 25-27.) Here we get *obedience*. Gideon was associated with evil in his father's house ; and, as another has said, "faithfulness within precedes outward strength: evil must be put away from Israel before the enemy can be driven out. Obedience first, and then strength: this is God's order." We have an illustration of this truth in the gospels. After the Lord Jesus had cast out the demon from the lad, the "disciples asked Him privately, Why could not we cast him out? And He said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing but by prayer and fasting." (Mark 9: 28, 29.) So with Gideon: until he had dethroned the idol in his father's house, he could not be sent to smite the Midianites. There is ample ground in this direction, beloved friends, for heart-searchings with us all. How often, when we have mourned over want of power in the Lord's service, might we have traced the cause to some lack of obedience, of self-judgment, of separation, of faithfulness! We were weak because we had not first dealt with some idol of our hearts or households. Satan is helpless in the presence of an obedient man; he cannot touch such an one, for he is armed with a coat of mail which not one of his fiery darts can ever penetrate. It was thus that the Lord Jesus vanquished him in the desert. The reply, 'I It is written," foiled him in every attack. And here, too, was Gideon's strength, for no sooner had he received the command than he "took ten men," "and *did as the Lord had said unto him*" (v. 27), and in obedience he overcame, and purged his father's house — and the subsequent anger of Baal's followers did but expose their own weakness, and the impotence of their god. The devil resisted in obedience is the devil vanquished.

7. Gideon is now a vessel sanctified, and meet for the Master's use, and we get accordingly the crowning qualification of *power*. It is very instructive to note the course of the record. The vessel is now prepared for service; and immediately we are told, "Then all the Midianites, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east were gathered together, and went over, and pitched in the valley of Jezreel. *But the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet; and Abi-ezer was gathered after him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh; who also was gathered after him: and he sent messengers unto Asher, and unto Zebulun, and unto Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.*" (vv. 34, 35.) Satan can never forestall God. While Gideon is being prepared, the Midianites, etc., are still; when Gideon is ready, God gathers them together for destruction. They marshal their forces to destroy Israel; but the Spirit of the Lord comes upon Gideon, and now it is God Himself against the Midianites. Ah, beloved friends, let us see to it that we never move forward against the foe excepting in the power of the Spirit of God.

Note another instruction. The Spirit of the Lord comes upon Gideon, *and he blew a trumpet*. This Gideon, who was threshing wheat to hide it from the Midianites, now puts a trumpet to his lips, and sounds forth defiance in the face of the foe. In like manner, the Peter who trembled before a servant-maid, being, clothed with power by the Spirit, charges home upon the rulers the sin of crucifying Christ. The apostles also, being filled with the Holy Ghost, spake the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4: 31.)

But we cannot pursue the subject; as we have now traced the qualifications of this "mighty man of valour" for testimony and service. He is now equipped, ready for the conflict. There will be weaknesses and failures, doubtless; but still he is one whom the Lord can now employ. If the Lord will, we may trace his history farther another day. In the meantime, may He grant that the sevenfold qualification of Gideon may be found in all who are engaged in His service and testimony in these closing days!