Session Four

We come now to the fourth of the great judges (deliverers) of Israel during the years after the death of Joshua. Remember that this book of Judges occurs during the four centuries between the death of Joshua and the birth of Samuel - roughly 1400-1000 B.C.

God delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery and bondage under the leadership of Moses. When Moses died (on Mount Nebo in southwestern Jordan), he was followed in leadership by Joshua. Under Joshua’s leadership, the Jews occupied the Promised Land (what we know today as Israel).

Just before Joshua’s death, he challenged the Israelites to follow God in all ways and at all times. But over and over - seven times nationally - the disobeyed God’s edicts, falling prey to idolatry. There were seven cycles in Judges of the people following God, then falling into idolatry and backsliding, being taken captive by other nations or powers, repenting and then God giving them another judge (deliverer).

Thus far we have studied

☐ EHUD, the left-handed judge (Judges 3:12-30)
☐ SHAMGAR, the ox-goad judge
☐ and DEBORAH AND BARAK, the associate judges

Today we come to the fourth judge - and perhaps, as Samson, the best-known judge. He was also known as THE FLEECE JUDGE, as we shall see.

Following the stunning success of Deborah and Barak, overcoming the armed might of the Canaanites (with their 900 chariots of iron), the people did evil AGAIN in the sight of the Lord and suffered for their sins.

THE MIDIANITES

The cycles continued, despite the best efforts of the first three judges. Once again, a generation of Israelites came along who could not come to grips with their responsibility to God - much like so many Americans today. No one, individual or nation, can thumb the nose at God. There are always consequences to diminishing God.
Here is how the story begins:

Judges 6:1-3

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. [2] And the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel: and because of the Midianites the children of Israel made them the dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strong holds. [3] And so it was, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against them;

Midian was a country to the south of Israel to the south and east of the Dead Sea. Primarily the inhabitants were nomads, Bedouins. They were raiders. They would raid the crops and supplies of others. By sheer numbers they overwhelmed the inhabitants of Israel. The Jews fled from their homes and lived in caves and dens. It is the same old story once again. Israel sinned and the hoop started moving. God had blessed the Children of Israel under the administration of Deborah. When they sinned, God delivered them to Midian, and they cried out for deliverance.

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The Midianites were thieving nomads. They saw that Israel had good crops and when they themselves needed grain or supplies they just raided Israel.

The tribe of Manasseh had a young man among them named Gideon. He lived in what we know today as the Valley of Armageddon - or the Jezreel Valley. The Midianites had so frightened them that they had left their homes, their farms, their foods to live in dens and caves, cowering in fear.

At this point, the moving cycle begins and upward move toward God once again.

Judges 6:7-10

And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord because of the Midianites, [8] That the Lord sent a prophet unto the children of Israel, which said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage; [9] And I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all that oppressed you, and drave them out from before you, and gave you their land; [10] And I said unto you, I am the Lord your God; fear not the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but ye have not obeyed my voice.

God hears their prayer and promises them a deliverer (a judge). This fellow was named
Gideon. And what a story would here unfold. I doubt if you or I would have ever
chosen Gideon as a deliverer. He had no apparent attributes of leadership. But God sees
the heart and mind of a person; He sees what we don’t see - even in ourselves. Gideon
would be powerfully used to set Israel free once again!

So - was Gideon out on the front lines, imploring Israel to be strong? Hardly. We find
him in an embarrassing situation to tell you the truth.

Judges 6:11-12 And there came an angel of the Lord, and sat under an oak which
was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abi-ezrite: and his son Gideon
threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites. [12] And the angel
of the Lord appeared unto him, and said unto him, The Lord is with thee, thou
mighty man of valour.

The winepress, if it was a normal one, would have been situated at the foot of a hill.
Grapes would have been brought there for pressing. A threshing floor, on the other
hand, would normally have been situated on top of a hill where a farmer could catch the
wind in order to winnow the grain. The wind would separate the chaff from the grain
when it was pitched into the air. So why isn’t Gideon on a summit somewhere?
Because he was worried - afraid - that the Midianites would see him and rob him of his
grain. But despite his fear, God was going to use him powerfully!

Note how the Lord greeted him: “....mighty man of valor....” Was God using a bit of
sarcasm here? Possibly. At least some humor. Gideon looked like anything BUT a
man of valor. Possibly Gideon looked around wildly, “Uh....hey there, who are you
talkin’ to?” Maybe the way some of you have been challenged by God and you
wondered how the Lord could think of you in such a situation.

Note Gideon’s halting response:

Judges 6:13 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.

That was a misconception on Gideon’s part. The Lord never said He was with Israel
(back in verse 12). He said, “The Lord is with YOU, Gideon!”

Gideon could not conceive that God could use HIM in such perilous times. He was
skeptical, shy, weak, frightened. But God can use anyone - yes, even cowards!
Look at God’s response to this man: Judges 6:14  And 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?

It comes as a surprise to many who are called by the Lord for His service. They cannot conceive how God could ever use them. Note Gideon’s response to the divine call:

Judges 6:15  And he said unto him, 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.

Gideon could think of all kinds of reasons why God would never use him:
- Israel had been tormented by the oppressive Midian regime for seven years
- Gideon lamented that he was of the Tribe of Manasseh - one of the poorest of Israel
- I am hiding in this winepress, he said, to protect my meager crop

I love the verse in Hebrews 11:3: Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

The raw material God uses is NOTHING. Many of our Lord’s followers think they have to have money or talent or whatever to be used of Him. But God uses us weak people to do His work. That’s what Paul reminded us of in 1 Cor. 1:26-27: For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: [27] But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

There must be a reason for this and Paul responds to that as well in the follow-up verse: 1 Cor. 1:28-29  And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: [29] That no flesh should glory in his presence.

Look in Scripture to see how God used men and women most would have passed by:
- Moses was a baby, a Jew, on the genocide list by Pharaoh, yet today called on of the world’s truly greatest leaders
- Peter was a fisherman in the tiny town of Capernaum. God used him in a leadership role of changing the Roman Empire.
- And our “star” today: Gideon
THE DEVASTATING EFFECT OF FEAR

Judges 6:23 And the Lord said unto him, Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die.

So many times we read in Scripture divine words to those God chose to use: FEAR NOT! Gideon was a farmer in a conquered nation yet God told him “he would save Israel from the hand of the Midianites.” ( Judges 6:14) Gideon received the commission from God to go to his home down and destroy the pagan altar to Baal and burning the grove by it.

BAAL

Throughout the Scriptures, Baal was named a Caananite god, often portrayed as the primary enemy of Yahweh (God). The worship of this false god was prevalent in Israel from ancient times (prior to the Israelite exodus from Egypt) until well after the Babylonian exile (586 B.C.). Baal was introduced to the Israelites early in their existence. For example in the days of Moses: Numbers 25:1-3 And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab. [2] And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods: and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods. [3] And Israel joined himself unto Baal-peor: and the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.

There were various forms of this god, but keep in mind all were vile and repugnant to God and His true people. Baal was often worshiped in “high places” at which a priest or prophet of the local baal would offer various animal, vegetable or wine offerings. The Book of I and II Kings describes the prophets of Baal engaged in shaman-like dances: 1 Kings 18:26-28 And they took the bullock which was given them, and they dressed it, and called on the name of Baal from morning even until noon, saying, O Baal, hear us. But there was no voice, nor any that answered. And they leaped upon the altar which was made. [27] And it came to pass at noon, that Elijah mocked them, and said, Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth, and must be awaked. [28] And they cried aloud, and cut themselves after their manner with knives and lancets, till the blood gushed out upon them. One of the attractions to Baal to people of that day was its association with ritual sex. Child sacrifice was also done in certain instances.
Small wonder Gideon felt pangs of fear. As we will see later in our study tonight, by any human equations, Israel had no chance against the massed military power of the Midianites. But...had Gideon succumbed to his first fears, who knows how the history of the Jews might have been altered.

In this next short passage, we see Gideon beginning to obey God - but in the cover of night’s darkness rather than the bold daylight:

Judges 6:24-27

Then Gideon built an altar there unto the Lord, and called it Jehovah-shalom: unto this day it is yet in Ophrah of the Abi-ezrites. [25] 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: [26] 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. [27] Then Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as the Lord had said unto him: and so it was, because he feared his father's household, and the men of the city, that he could not do it by day, that he did it by night.

But...fearful obedience is better than no obedience! God will encourage Gideon to develop courage and faith (without faith it is IMPOSSIBLE TO PLEASE GOD - Heb. 11:6). Look what happens now in verse 34: Judges 6:34 But the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet; and Abi-ezer was gathered after him. (Abiezer was a descendant of Joseph and was head of one of the main families of the tribe of Manasseh).

THE “HUMANNESS OF GIDEON”

Good start, to be sure! But then Gideon began to have second thoughts:

Judges 6:36-38

And Gideon said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said, [37] Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew he on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said. [38] And it was so: for he rose up early on the morrow, and thrust the fleece together, and wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water.

But Gideon wanted to be sure so he asked God to reverse the process:
Judges 6:39-40  And Gideon said unto God, Let not thine anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once: let me prove, I pray thee, but this once with the fleece; let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew. [40] And God did so that night: for it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground.

Today people still use “the fleece” tests. You know, “God if You will do this or do that, THEN I will do this or that.” How much better to just believe what God says.

Chapter 7

TOO MANY MEN!

Judges 7:1-7

Then Jerubbaal, who is Gideon, and all the people that were with him, rose up early, and pitched beside the well of Harod: so that the host of the Midianites were on the north side of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley. [2] And the Lord said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me. [3] Now therefore go to, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead. And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand. [4] And the Lord said unto Gideon, The people are yet too many; bring them down unto the water, and I will try them for thee there: and it shall be, that of whom I say unto thee, This shall go with thee, the same shall go with thee; and of whomsoever I say unto thee, This shall not go with thee, the same shall not go. [5] So he brought down the people unto the water: and the Lord said unto Gideon, Every one that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise every one that boweth down upon his knees to drink. [6] And the number of them that lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, were three hundred men: but all the rest of the people bowed down upon their knees to drink water. [7] And the Lord said unto Gideon, By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand: and let all the other people go every man unto his place.

On the next page of your notes (page 8) you will see an overlook photo of this geographic area where Gideon amassed his original 32,000 warriors. It is believed the Midianites had many more soldiers....so that the odds numerically against the Jewish army were about 8-1. If you have studied the Six Day War in June of 1967, you are aware that the Israelis were facing a massive army from the Arab Countries. The Associated Press called the Israeli effort “Lightning Out Of Israel.” Facing improbable odds, the Jews
The area in northern Israel (Mount Moreh) where Gideon led the Israelite army against the Midianites. Note Mount Tabor and Nazareth in the fairly-near proximity.

won a colossal victory in less than one week. Gideon’s 32,000 men probably would have won a victory over the Midianites, but they could have taken the credit for it. God said, “No - you will take personal credit for this.” God will not share His honor with anyone. So He began paring down the Israeli military might.

First, those who were afraid were sent home. 22,000 men left. Not Gideon had but 10,000 against the massive Midianite army. God said, “No, you still have too many. At Harod Spring, the thirsty soldiers found water. In their eager quest for water most of the men set aside all precautions and began putting their faces in the water, guzzling the water. But 300 of the soldiers used their lands to bring water to their mouths while keeping on the alert. These are the soldiers God allowed to go with Gideon. Wow - from 32,000 soldiers (already vastly outnumbered) to a mere 300!

ISRAEL’S VICTORY OVER MIDIAN

The victory began with a rumor mill in the Midianite camp. Judges 7:10-14
But if thou fear to go down, go thou with Phurah thy servant down to the host: [11]
And thou shalt hear what they say; and afterward shall thine hands be strengthened to go down unto the host. Then went he down with Phurah his servant unto the outside of the armed men that were in the host. [12] And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude. [13] And when Gideon was come, behold, there was a man that told a dream unto his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along. [14] And his fellow answered and said, This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host.

Gideon reconnoitered to the Midianite camp and overheard several soldiers talking about a dream one of them had. That dream spelled doom for their soldiers and even though it was just a dream, it frightened them. So the Midianites were already edgy!

The Divine Strategy

Judges 7:16-22

And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet in every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers. [17] And he said unto them, Look on me, and do likewise: and, behold, when I come to the outside of the camp, it shall be that, as I do, so shall ye do. [18] When I blow with a trumpet, I and all that are with me, then blow ye the trumpets also on every side of all the camp, and say, The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon.

[19] So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands. [20] And the three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal: and they cried, The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon. [21] And they stood every man in his place round about the camp: and all the host ran, and cried, and fled. [22] And the three hundred blew the trumpets, and the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host: and the host fled to Beth-shittah in Zererath, and to the border of Abel-meholah, unto Tabbath.

Gideon gave his little army three things:

- Pitchers
- Lamps
- Trumpets
The lamps (probably fueled by olive oil and wicks) were placed inside the pitchers so their light would not shine on that dark night. Why didn’t the Jewish army have weapons of war? Because the Midianites had controlled every aspect of their lives for seven years and allowed them no weapons. But a trumpet and a flashlight in the hands of God can win the world.

Under Gideon’s direction, at a certain time in the night, the 300 men blew the trumpets and threw the pitchers on the stony ground, breaking them, and revealing the bright light inside. Remember, the Midianites were already skittish and this really spooked them. In their panic, some of them killed their own men. They soon fled over the hills and disappeared in all directions. The victory was accomplished miraculously!

The Israelites had forty years of peace. Gideon refused to be their ruler: Judges 8:23 And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you. Back in those days, men had a lot of wives.
Gideon had a bunch of them resulting in 70 sons: Judges 8:30 And Gideon had threescore and ten sons of his body begotten: for he had many wives. He also had one more son by a concubine (Judges 8:31 And his concubine that was in Shechem, she also bare him a son, whose name he called Abimelech.)

Alas....when Gideon died, Israel once again turned to false gods: Judges 8:33-35
And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baal-berith their god. [34] And the children of Israel remembered not the Lord their God, who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side: [35] Neither shewed they kindness to the house of Jerubbaal, namely, Gideon, according to all the goodness which he had shewed unto Israel. The people not only turned against God, but against a Godly founder, Gideon. Just as so many people in America today have forgotten the founders of our nation who built America on Biblical precepts.

NEXT TIME: ISRAEL GOES INTO A NIGHTMARISH TWILIGHT ZONE UNDER GIDEON’S PROGENY - AND TOLA AND JAIR THE NEXT JUDGES.