

The Days of the Judges

Part 4

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[00:00:00] In these meetings that we've had concerning the Book of Judges, we have seen again and again Israel getting into difficulty because of their disobedience to the Lord.

Here again we find the same story. Terrible condition, real trouble, because they had disobeyed the Lord. Their condition was extremely serious. Normal life was disrupted. They were living in caves and dens and strongholds. Food supply was very, very scarce. The Midianites, they destroyed all that was sown. They took all they could get for themselves and Israel was impoverished.

The Midianites were a very strong and resourceful enemy. The name Midian means [00:01:07] strife or contention. I don't think I need to say much more in this connection.

How often we have seen amongst the people of God normal conditions in assembly life being absolutely disrupted because of strife and contention. People seeking their own way, strong-willed people demanding certain things, strife and contention arising over things that ought never to be considered amongst the people of God. Personal animosities, family animosities, parties and cliques arising, and strife and contention existing amongst the saints of God.

Whenever that comes in, well, normal assembly life is disrupted. There's very [00:02:02] little in the way of worship to the Father or the Son. There's very little in the way of testimony to the Lord or testimony to the unconverted, and there certainly is precious little in the way of food supply. What the saints are asked to feed upon is strife and sorrow and backbiting and misrepresentation and cruelties of different kinds, and you can't grow spiritually on that kind of food. Now I believe this was the kind of condition that Israel was in actually. No family life, all the business life of the nation disrupted, and food supply at a very low end. Now in such a condition we find the people very much distressed, and it's a very good thing when the people do get distressed and cry aloud to God for some blessing and some help and some direction as to how to get out [00:03:05] of this awful condition. So it's something when the people become very distressed and concerned about the conditions that prevail. We've seen this over and over again in these addresses on the book of Judges. Well, God is a faithful God, and he sends a nameless prophet, and the prophet, he tells the people the reason why they're in that condition. As we've said once before, it wasn't because the Midianites were more powerful than the children of Israel. Perhaps they were numerically, but when the children of Israel had God in their midst and God fighting for them, then it didn't matter how great the enemy was the battle was a foregone conclusion. God was with his people, helping his people, and as so often we find in the Old Testament, the word was, the battle is [00:04:02] the Lord's. And when the battle is the Lord's, there's no enemy powerful enough to deal with the nation of Israel. The reason for their condition was their

own unfaithfulness, their own disobedience to God's plain and distinct word to have nothing to do with idolatry, but to have himself enshrined in their affections. We were saying somewhere recently that the last word of John's first epistle, little children, keep yourselves from idols, is not a negative statement, it's a very positive statement. It simply means I want the affections of my people for myself. I don't want any interference from any other source. We can prove this from the Old Testament. In the book of Deuteronomy, there are three distinct [00:05:04] occasions when God describes himself as a jealous God, and the context in which he describes himself in this way is connected with a warning to the people not to have anything to do with idols. In other words, God was jealous over the affections of his people. And when John, inspired by the Spirit, said to the saints, little children, keep yourselves from idols, John is saying to them, the Father, the Son, they want your love for themselves. And in the view of all the wonderful truths that have been revealed, what a sad thing it is that the affections of the saints should go astray after other things, and prevent their enjoyment of these precious things, and prevent a response to the Father and to the Son. So here the nameless prophet is telling the nation very plainly that the [00:06:02] reason for their condition is their disobedience. Now it would be very, very difficult for anyone to say today that there is one particular reason for failure amongst the people of God, wherever they are found. And I am very much aware that we are not the only Christian company that is experiencing difficulty. I've read in magazines, and I've heard from other sources, that all companies of Christians are experiencing the difficulty and declension that is marking this favored land of ours. There may be isolated places where the Lord is blessing, and thank God for that. But generally speaking, we are all knowing something about the low condition of things that is prevailing. I think it would be right to say that in whatever way the declension is marked, and it may be different in various localities, I think we can all trace it to this one word, disobedience. In some way or another, we have failed in relation to the Word [00:07:06] of God, either individually or collectively. If that is so, we must expect the corresponding failure in testimony and in worship. It's inevitable. Things just don't work automatically in divine things. If there is failure in disobedience, then there must be failure in response. Now you might say, well that's a very despondent kind of message. Well, this nameless prophet didn't come along and say, well, God's prepared to show you grace and love. God's a gracious God. He didn't come along to boost up their feelings and make everything nice when everything wasn't nice. The nameless prophet told the truth, and if we're told the truth, we are well on the way to getting something done to repair the difficulties. And, thank God, there was one man at least who was doing something to [00:08:01] make the conditions better. It would seem that synchronizing with the prophet's message, there was this man, Gideon, extremely active in the secrecy of his father's home. He's threshing wheat in a wine press. You might say, well, that's a very odd kind of place to be threshing wheat. He ought to be on the threshing floor. Yes, that's the normal place that then Gideon was living in abnormal times. And we've seen in this book that very many abnormal things are done. And when we come to the story of Samson, we see that Samson did many abnormal things. Tying torches on jackals' tails, killing people with the jawbone of an ass, that kind of thing is something that's abnormal. And so here is Gideon, and he's threshing wheat in the wine press. I believe there's one obvious reason. There was no one to gather in the harvest of the olives for the simple reason it [00:09:03] didn't exist. The Midianites had destroyed it. There were no olives to press in order to get the oil, no olives to be gathered in to be used for other purposes. The Midianites had destroyed all that was available. But there was some wheat, and Gideon had it, and he was threshing it in order to hide it, that the Midianites might not obtain it. Now this man was very, very much concerned about some food being available for the people of God. A very useful kind of man to have in our companies today. A man who's concerned to provide real nourishing food for the people of God. I believe Paul was that kind of man, and he was a man of very great discernment. If the people of God required milk because of their spiritual condition, he fed them with milk. If they [00:10:03] were capable of partaking of strong food, strong meat, then he

fed them with strong meat. In spiritual wisdom and discernment, he fed them with the food that was convenient for them. You remember the Lord asked the disciples at one juncture if they had any food, and they hadn't any. And he said, there's a little boy here, and he has some loaves and some fishes, but what are they among so many? Well it certainly was more than they had, and they were the great disciples who had been so blessed by the Lord, they hadn't anything to give, but the little boy had something. And when the Lord took it into his hands, he expanded it, he enlarged it, so that a vast multitude was fed. As one has so aptly said, little is much if the Lord is in it. And so here we find this man, he's threshing wheat, he's concerned about food being supplied. Dear brethren, are we [00:11:04] concerned about providing something that is nourishing, something that is helpful for the Saints? In the Bible readings, in the ministry meetings, in dresses, if we have the opportunity to address the Saints of God, are we concerned that they might have some real good food? The best food of all, of course, without question, is our Lord Jesus Christ. And if we can minister him to the hearts of the Saints and build up their affections and their desires, then we are doing a good work. He's the bread from heaven, the bread of God. And if we want to have the enjoyment of eternal life, as presented in John chapter 6, it means that we feed upon him. We eat his flesh and we drink his blood. We are reminded, too, that we are to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. I believe this involves feeding upon him, his glories, his person, his work, all connected with [00:12:04] him. This is real food that builds up the affections of the Saints. We want to be aware of the kind of food that the sons of the prophets provided. It might have seemed a very nourishing meal when it was cooking, might have been a very large meal, too, but it was a large meal sprinkled with some very, very serious, poisonous goods. And the man of God detected it. There was death in the pot, and he was the man who could rectify matters by casting in the handful of meal, and what was poisonous was made nourishing. And today we have to be aware of many sanctimonious statements that are made, liberally sprinkled with quotations from the Scriptures, and yet there's death in the pot. It's not the truth. It can't stand the light of Scripture. It's poisonous, it's evil, and [00:13:04] it won't nourish the people of God. Gideon, he's a man who is active, energetic, and he's providing something worthwhile for the Saints of God. It's to that kind of man that the angel of the Lord appears and addresses him in such a remarkable way. He says, The angel of the Lord appeared unto him and said unto him, The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor. Had he done anything outstanding to warrant such a description? A mighty man of valor? All that we know of him is that he was threshing wheat in this winepress. Was that a courageous, valiant thing to do? In the sight of God, it was. It's so easy for us to look back and say, Oh, that servant of the Lord made a mistake. He ought to have been more intelligent. That [00:14:06] servant of the Lord ought to have gone a little further. He didn't really know the full scope of the truth. It's all right saying that when you don't know the circumstances in which the servant was operating. It's all right saying that when you're not aware of the awful conditions that prevailed at his time. And it was a courageous, valiant thing to take a step out of the confusion and say something for the Lord. I know we often say that the Reformation didn't go far enough. That he ought to have gone two or three steps further and got rid of many of the other things that were untrue. But how valiant those men were. How courageous. They risked their lives. They risked their all in fighting for what they knew to be the truth at that time. And let's think of what we might have done if we had been in their position. Would we have risked our lives, our property, our loved ones by standing up for the truth in that day? I don't know [00:15:04] if we would. We have to wait before we're in the circumstances before we can make positive statements as to how we react in them. So Gideon was working in a very difficult time. The enemies were out to destroy everything and he says I'm not going to let them. And I'm going to risk all that belongs to me in order to provide this. And I believe this is why the Lord said he was a mighty man of valor. He said something else. The Lord is with thee. If you have the time and you can go through a good concordance and find all the persons who were addressed in this way, the Lord is with thee, or those of whom it could be said the Lord was with

them, you'll find it an extremely interesting study. And of course preeminently this was so in connection with the Lord Jesus himself. You remember when Peter was preaching in Cornelius's home in Acts 10, it says [00:16:06] he went about doing good for the Lord was with him, for God was with him. And what a wonderful thing that is when God is with anyone. He can be sure of support and power and blessing and fruitfulness. This always follows in the life of the servants of whom it can be said the Lord was with them. Well Gideon's immediate reaction to this is, if the Lord is with us, mind the angel didn't say that the Lord was with them, he said the Lord was with Gideon, not with the nation. But Gideon took it up as if it were the nation that was being referred to, and he says, if the Lord is with us, why has all this happened? Why our fathers have told us of wonderful times, and now we are in very, very bad conditions, why has this befallen us? The Lord said to him, go in this thy might, and thou shalt save [00:17:08] Israel. What was Gideon's might? The conscious sense that things weren't right, that they weren't what they ought to be, that things were different from what they used to be, and a desire in his heart to do something to rectify them. You see dear brethren, if we are conscious that in our own lives, and in the collective testimony, things are not just as good as they used to be, it will make us inquire why. And once we get to know, we'll be very much concerned in prayer and energy to do something to make things better. But if we go along quite complacent and say, oh well everything's all right, and not much concerned, I don't think things will get better. But when we act like a man like Gideon, then things are going to be better, because the Lord is going to link up with us in [00:18:02] our exercises. This is the kind of thing that he delights to see. And so Gideon is credited with having strength and power, because he actually felt in a God-like way the conditions that prevail. Well he said, 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. The Lord said unto him, Surely I will be with thee. Here was the proper condition for every saint of God at any time, whether the conditions are good or bad. Here is the proper condition for any saint of God, the condition of humility before the Lord. Now it's easy to say that, but we have a nature in us that can feed on pride and prominence and preeminence and anything but humility. But all the men of God who have really done anything for the Lord [00:19:05] have been men who have been marked by the spirit of humility, none more than the Lord himself. That passage in Philippians 2, that we so often read at the breaking of bread to describe the Lord coming down, was written by Paul under the guidance of the Spirit to show the saints of God that they should be as he was when he was here in this world. And the two great features that come out in that passage are humility and obedience. He humbled himself, he came down, made himself of no reputation, took upon him the form of a servant, and then became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Now the Apostle prefaced what he said by, let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus. [00:20:01] We have to be humble, we have to be obedient, and this is the pathway, this is the characteristics for every Christian who wants to be for God. Humility and obedience. Arrogance and pride and forcefulness, the assertion of our natures, have no place whatsoever in the testimony of any who want to be for the Lord. And so Gideon is described here in this very, very commendable way. A valiant man, the Lord is with him, and he's marked by humility. Now after his experience with the angel of the Lord in verse 24, we read it together, Gideon built an altar there unto the Lord and called it Jehovah Shalom. He knew something about peace in his heart. Certain things that hadn't been plain to him before were now very plain. Also this commission that the Lord had given [00:21:05] to him, and the fact that the Lord had promised to be with him, produced peace in his heart. And there was this wonderful response, before ever he was engaged in conflict with the enemy, he raises an altar to the Lord and he worships. Now that's a very important part, isn't it, in Christian life, worship. It's not all conflict, it's not all engaging the enemy, it's not always engaging with the difficulties and problems that beset us. There's something to be done by each of us, either individually or collectively, a responsive heart to the Lord who cares for us and the Lord who has blessed us in such a wonderful way. I think it's a remarkable thing that in the midst of a

nation that had given itself up to idolatry, here was one man who was immediately responding to the message he had received and he was worshiping the [00:22:03] Lord. Well, the altar of Baal cannot stand any longer. If I'm going to worship the Lord, I must get rid of everything that's offensive to the Lord. And Gideon had been instructed that this was the real canker that was in the heart of the nation. This was the real cause of all the trouble, this altar that was reared to Baal. And it was there, right in his father's house. He knew about it only too well. And so at night he knocked it down. He destroyed it. And of course there was great consternation in the morning. Who's done this awful thing? Knocked down the altar of Baal? Who's done this thing? Whoever it is will need to be punished. But as ever, whenever a man takes a stand for the truth, there's [00:23:04] always someone who will come to support him. You'll always have fellowship. And this encouragement came from the right quarter. Gideon's father, he supported him. There's no one going to be killed here, he said. Is it right or is it wrong that this altar should be thrown down? It's indisputable that it's an evil thing in our midst and my son has done right in throwing down this altar. Dear brethren, it's not enough just to do one thing and to be expert in what is right and proper before the Lord. It's also right to get rid of the offending things that God might not be offended. And this is exactly what Gideon did. He did what was right before the Lord in worshiping and he did what was right before the Lord in removing the rival to the Lord's affections. He destroyed the altar of Baal. You see, there are certain things that [00:24:06] you cannot possibly have any tolerance with. Indeed, to have tolerance with this kind of thing is tantamount to treason to the Lord. You can't trifle with Baal. He's in opposition to God. You can't do anything with him with grace and love. It's impossible. He'll never change. The Midianites, the Amorites, the Moabites, all those enemies of the Lord, they never change. They never get better. They're fixed in their determination to oppose the things of God. And showing grace and love never alters them. They have to be ruthlessly dealt with and removed. And this is what Gideon did. He threw down the altar of Baal and he raised up a standard for the Lord. And so in verse 34 that we read, the spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon. It's quite interesting that in this book of Judges that deals [00:25:04] with so much that is of a dark character, there are more references to the spirit of the Lord in it than in any other book in the Old Testament. Samson, and here we find Gideon, Othniel, and others, the spirit of the Lord actively engaged in times of difficulty. Oh dear brethren, how thankful we are for the wonderful truth that we possess, that the spirit of the Lord indwells us individually and is with us collectively. And he'll never be taken from us. He's with us to the end. The Lord's promise is he shall abide with you forever, right to the end of the Christian testimony. And this is the real resource of the people of God at all times to deal with all that's offensive to God. He's the spirit of truth. He and his divine power and greatness and glory can detect error when we can be [00:26:03] hoodwinked. He can reveal to us what is really wrong and specious in teachings that are offensive to God and to Christ. And he is the power that enables us to stand for him in an evil day when false doctrines are increasing on every hand. And so how thankful we are for this statement that the spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon and he blew a trumpet and Abba Ezer was gathered after him.

Here are people in his own vicinity. They are gathering to his standard. He sounds the note, the clear distinct note. You remember Paul said if the trumpet doesn't give a distinct sound, how can men prepare themselves for battle? Well this is what Gideon's doing. He's blowing a trumpet. He's giving a signal to all concerned that there is something being done. Now not only a food supply being [00:27:03] provided, thank God for that, but now a very determined effort to get rid of the bondage of the Midianites. I think it's the 31st chapter of Numbers, you can look it up, your leisure, where we find God saying that he will have vengeance on Midian. Now this is what God says. God is determined that Midian shall have no part with the people of God and he's determined that they won't interrupt the blessings of the people. And so just as he said against Amalek and against Moab and Ammon,

God declares his hatred of all that belongs to the Midianites. And so here the standard is being raised but it goes a bit further. In verse 35, Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, Naphtali, they gather to the standard too. We are very glad to see [00:28:01] our friends Zebulun and Naphtali here again. They were prominent in the revival in Deborah's day and Barak's day. They jeopardied their lives in the high places, prepared to lay down their lives to defend what belonged to God. And here they're in the forefront again. That's a very fine thing to see, consistency in a desire to maintain what belongs to the Lord. Now it came to this army that was going to meet the Midianites, 32,000. Quite a useful army to have, Gideon. But Gideon had a few lessons to learn yet. And one of them was that God doesn't necessarily work by large numbers, neither is he committed to work with large numbers. Not by might, nor by strength, but by my power, saith the Lord. God can save by few as well as by many. We are reminded of Paul's statement in [00:29:03] 1 Corinthians 1, God has chosen the weak things of this world to confound the things that are mighty. And the many other statements that Paul made in that connection, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us, in 2 Corinthians chapter 4. There we find this wonderful history portrayed for us.

In 1 Corinthians 1, in 2 Corinthians 4, it fits exactly to the story of Gideon and his army. 32,000. How are you going to use them, Gideon? How will you deploy your troops in order to meet this great army? Well, God says, Gideon, you speak to them and tell them, those who are a bit timid and fearful, to go home. Because such people aren't much use when it comes the day of battle. They turn back. The book of Proverbs tells us that. So Gideon tells them what God has said to [00:30:03] him. And 22,000 turned back and went away home. Well, that's considerably reduced the army from 32,000 to 10,000. That's a very great reduction. Never mind, we might be able to do something, says Gideon. And God says, Gideon, take them down to the river and just see how they drink and I'll tell you the ones that you have to keep. And then the army was drastically reduced to 300. 300 out of 32,000. Ah, but the God, the Lord had said, I'll be with thee. The enemy will be destroyed. And when God starts to work, it doesn't matter. Suppose there are only 300 against a vast army, the battles won. And this was the lesson that Gideon had to learn. But it's not necessarily large numbers that indicate the power of God. Oh, how [00:31:04] unfortunately people have been governed by this kind of thing in our meetings. Two dozen, 30, 40 are too small for some people. We want hundreds, thousands. And so they leave the little companies. Principle doesn't matter. As long as there are numbers, as long as there is plenty of movement and activity and plenty of brightness, principles don't matter. And so they leave and away they go. But the Lord is quite happy if there are twos and threes who go on with the truth. Mind, I'm not putting any premium on the fact of small numbers. We do need adequate numbers to carry on an adequate testimony. And there's no particular virtue in that we're only two or three. It might be our own folly. It might be our own weakness that numbers are reduced to such small quantities. We can be sure of this, that if there are two or three or two dozen or 30 or 40 who very humbly and very [00:32:03] genuinely are maintaining the truth as it is revealed to them in the scriptures, they'll know in a very real way the presence of the Lord. They'll know his power and they'll know his blessing. And I believe this is the lesson that Gideon had to learn. It wasn't in his power. It wasn't in the largeness of the army. It was in the power of the Lord. It was in his ability to guide, to direct, to control, and to win the victory. Gideon was a man who always wanted to be sure. And we have four occasions where he asked the Lord for guidance. And the Lord showed to him that everything was all right. And the Gideon's two signs in connection with the fleece, and then his desire to the angel to be, to have it revealed to him who it was who was speaking to him. And then lastly, the Lord directed him to go down into the camp of Midian. And there he heard of the dream of one of the men. And the dream was of a little barley cake rolled into the camp, [00:33:06] overturned the tents, and awakened up. And they said, this is nothing else but the sword of the Lord and Gideon. At battle's loss, we have defeated. Now a little barley cake isn't a very strong-looking

thing, is it? Humble instrument. And I believe the Lord was just indicating to Gideon how small he was personally. A little barley cake. That was God's way of showing Gideon how small and how weak he was. But it was the Lord who was doing the wonderful battle. He was fighting it. And the victory was a foregone conclusion. Now very briefly, Gideon takes his three companies and he provides them with their equipment for fighting this battle. A vast army in front of him. And then he gives them what they require for fighting. And it's a peculiar arrangement. [00:34:03] He puts into their hands a trumpet and a pitcher, a clay pitcher, and inside the pitcher, a lighted torch. What a queer arrangement to fight a battle with. But this is God's arrangement. And Gideon, he does it. So he divides his 300 into three companies. Now he says, whenever I give the signal, you do what I do. You follow me. Now there's the language of a man who is leading the saints of God in a positive way. He's sure of his ground. He knows what he's going to do. And he directs the people to do as he is doing. So the appropriate moment came. The trumpet was sounded. The 300 created quite a noise. 300 trumpets blaring at the one time. The pitchers are smashed. The torches shone forth. And the Midianites, they fled for their lives. The battle was won. It was a great slaughter. [00:35:06] Princes were killed. God had fulfilled his word. The enemy was overthrown. Well, we turn to 2nd Corinthians 4 and we get the explanation of all this. Paul says, we have this treasure in earthen vessels. The earthen vessels are the pitchers, those weak bodies of ours, in which indwells all the precious things that God has placed there in view of testimony for himself. This is the testimony, the trumpet, trumpet sound, the testimony that is to go forth, contained in poor weak vessels. But when they're broken, that is, when they're humbled under the hand of the Lord and kept there, there is an adequate testimony to meet all the power of Satan and to defeat his armies. Dear brethren, that's those of us who are here this evening. We're all poor, weak creatures in ourselves, are we not? But as under the hand of the Lord, if we keep humble [00:36:05] and allow him to work with us, then an adequate testimony will be rendered for his pleasure and for his glory. Now, as always, there are always grumblers and we find that after the battle was won, there were some who came to Gideon and they complained to him, why didn't you come for us? Well, the trumpet had been blown. They would have had it. I don't think there was any question about that, but they didn't come when the trumpet was blown. So Gideon and those whom God chose for him, they carried on and the victory was theirs. It was all right to come in at the end and make complaints, but Gideon wasn't a man of forceful spirit and he's a beautiful example of a soft answer turning away wrath. And instead of causing frustration amongst his brethren or causing them to be in animosity towards him, he won them for his cause. I read the last portion because I think [00:37:08] it's a very sad thing when a man of God goes astray. What a terrible thing. This man of God, who broke down the altar of Baal in his own home and who was used of God in such a marvelous way, and then he's led to make an effort and all the nation went a-whoring after it and it was a snare unto the children of Israel. Very, very sad. Does it not remind us, dear brethren, that we need to be kept every inch of the way, right to the very end. There's not a moment when we can afford to lack in vigilance. There's not a moment when we can say, well, we're all right, nothing will go wrong, we're standing, we're strong. When a man thinks he's standing, he's to take heed lest he fall. George Muller, wonderful man of faith in Bristol, he prayed right till the day he died, [00:38:04] Lord, preserve me from being a wicked old man. He knew the propensities of the flesh. He had known what it was in his unconverted days to be led by Satan, and he didn't want to return to that. So his continual prayer was that he might be kept. So the fact that we've been successful at any moment in our lives from the Lord doesn't mean that we'll be immune from temptation or failure. We need to be kept right to the end. And I believe that sweet word in Peter is something that we can lay hold of if we're humble and we leave ourselves in the Lord's hand, kept by the power of God. How wonderful it is to look back over our lives and trace all the keeping to the Lord himself, and certainly not to ourselves. But may these few remarks from the life of this man of God be an encouragement for us in our day that we might go on, provide food for the saints, [00:39:03] make

sure we provide plenty for ourselves first, build up our own souls, and so be a help to others for his name's sake.