

PROPHETS & JUDGES

IN THE PROMISED LAND

“If you would know the mystery of godliness, you must follow the plain word of truth—feeling or no feeling, emotion or no emotion. Obedience must be rendered from a sense of principle, and the right must be pursued under all circumstances.” {Christian Education, pp. 117, 118}

WEEK 4 - GIDEON

I. A Test of Faith

1. What proclamation was to be given before Israel went into battle? Why?

2. What determines what our character is?

3. How high of a priority should working for God be to me?

4. Our characters are often proved by simple means. What did the test at the water-side reveal?

5. Why can God do so little for us today?

6. What should we do when appearances are forbidding or even apparently impossible?

7. While the cause of God needs workers, what kind of people does God *not* need?

II. Victory at Last

1. To what extent does God allow Satan to work?

2. Why would it ever be necessary for God to disappoint or frustrate my plans and hopes?

3. Why doesn't God typically work through the most talented and qualified?

III. A Wise Reply

1. It is tempting to look at the success of other churches or worldly planners and then utilize their methods, hoping for success. But what should we do?

2. God wants to give us a precious experience. What is our part?

3. The Ephraimites were unhappy that they had not been invited to take part in the battle and victory. What proved them to be unworthy?

4. What lesson of dependence on God can we learn from this story?

5. What was wise about Gideon's reply—and what can we learn from it?

A Test of Faith**June 30, 1881**

Gideon's courage was greatly strengthened by the tokens of divine favor vouchsafed to him. Without delay, he went out with his forces to give battle to the Midianites. But now another severe trial of faith awaited him. With the immense host of invaders spread out before him—the thirty-two thousand of the Hebrews seeming, in contrast, like a mere handful—the word of the Lord came to him: “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. 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.” ^{1.1}

It had been made a law in Israel that before they went to battle, the following proclamation should be sounded throughout the army: “What man is there that hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. And what man is he that hath planted a vineyard, and hath not yet eaten of it? let him also go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man eat of it. And what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her. And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart.” What a striking illustration is this of the tender, pitying love of Christ! He who instituted the relations of life and the ties of kindred, made special provision that these be not too widely broken. He would have none go forth to battle unwillingly. This proclamation also sets forth in a forcible manner the influence which may be exerted by one man who is deficient in faith and courage, and further shows the effect of our thoughts and feelings upon our own course of action. ^{1.2}

“As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.” The thoughts and feelings cherished give direction to the conduct, and thus determine the character. A strong, well-balanced character is built up by faithfulness in all the smaller as well as the greater acts of life. A man is measured, not by the power put forth in some one great effort, but by the zeal and integrity which he brings to the daily round of cares and responsibilities. ^{1.3}

True Christian character is marked by a singleness of purpose, an indomitable determination, which refuses to yield to worldly influences, which will aim at nothing short of the Bible standard. If men will permit themselves to become discouraged in the service of God, the great adversary will present abundant reasons to turn them from the plain path of duty to one of ease and irresponsibility. Those who can be bribed or seduced, discouraged or terrified, will be of no service in the Christian warfare. Those who set their affections on worldly treasures or worldly honors, will not push the battle against principalities and powers, and spiritual wickedness in high places. ^{1.4}

All who would be soldiers of the cross of Christ, must gird on the armor and prepare for conflict. They should not be intimidated by threats; or terrified by

dangers. They must be cautious in peril, yet firm and brave in facing the foe and doing battle for God. The consecration of Christ's follower must be complete. Father, mother, wife, children, houses, lands, everything, must be held secondary to the work and cause of God. He must be willing to bear patiently, cheerfully, joyfully, whatever in God's providence he may be called to suffer. His final reward will be to share with Christ the throne of immortal glory. {1.5}

Because of the weak condition of the armies of Israel, in contrast with the numbers of the enemy, Gideon had refrained from making the usual proclamation. He was filled with astonishment at the declaration that his force was too large. But the Lord saw the pride and unbelief existing in the hearts of this people. Aroused by the stirring appeals of Gideon, they had readily enlisted; but when they saw the multitudes of the Midianites, their courage failed. Yet, had Israel triumphed, those very men would have ascribed the victory to their own skill and valor, rather than to the mercy and power of Jehovah. As a people, they had little faith in God. Many were suffering the reproaches of a guilty conscience. {1.6}

Instead of being too many, the Israelites felt that their numbers were too few; but Gideon made the proclamation as the Lord had directed. With sinking heart he saw twenty-two thousand, or more than two-thirds of his entire force, depart for their homes. {1.7}

Again the word of the Lord came to his servant: "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." {1.8}

The people were led down to the water-side, expecting to make an immediate attack upon the enemy. A few hastily took a little water in the hand and sucked it up as they went on, but nearly all bowed upon their knees, and leisurely drank from the surface of the water. Those who took of the water in their hands, were but three hundred out of the ten thousand; yet these were selected, and the great body of the army were permitted to return to their homes. {1.9}

Here we see the simple means by which character is often tested. Those who in a time of great peril were intent upon supplying their own wants, were not the men to be trusted in an emergency. The men of God's choice were the few who would not permit their own wants to hinder them in the discharge of duty. Not only did they possess courage and self-control, but they were men of faith. They had not defiled themselves by idolatry. God could direct them, and through them he could work deliverance for Israel. The Lord designed to show his people that he was their source of strength. By the simplicity of the means employed, he designed to rebuke their pride and self-exaltation. {1.10}

As with ancient Israel, so it is with the people of God at this age of the world. The Lord can do but little for the children of men, because they are so ready to esteem themselves wiser than their Creator. If blessed with a measure of success, many become elated and self-confident, and forget their dependence upon God. There is too much reliance upon human plans and methods, and too

little faith in the mighty God of Jacob; too much machinery, and too little of the life-giving Spirit and power of the Most High. {1.11}

Christ is the light of the world. All wisdom and all knowledge flow from Him who is the fountain of wisdom. He bids his followers, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in Heaven." It is when reflected in his disciples, that the divine loveliness of Christ is revealed to the world. Those who depart from the simplicity of the gospel, have gone on in advance of their Leader; but Christ says, "Follow me." {1.12}

All who indulge pride and self-importance, "vaunting themselves against God," he will separate from his work; and, in their stead, will choose those who will walk in the path of humility and obedience, acknowledging that all their success comes from God. {1.13}

All the wonders which God has wrought for his people, have been performed by the most simple means. When the people of God are wholly consecrated to him, then he will employ them to carry forward his work on the earth. But we should remember that whatever success may attend us, the glory and honor belongs to God; for every faculty and every power is a gift from him. {1.14}

God will test, to the utmost, the faith and courage of those to whom he has intrusted responsibilities in his work. Appearances will often be forbidding. Although God has given repeated assurance of his help, yet faith will almost stagger. "Thus saith the Lord," must be our firm reliance, independent of human reasonings, or apparent impossibilities. {1.15}

The experience of Gideon and his army, was designed to teach a lesson of simplicity and faith. The leader whom God had chosen occupied no prominent position in Israel. He was not a ruler, a Levite, or a priest. He thought himself the least in his father's house. Human wisdom would not have selected him; but God saw in Gideon a man of integrity and moral courage. He was distrustful of self, and willing to listen to the teachings of God, and carry out his purposes. The Lord is not dependent upon men of high position, of great intellect, or extensive knowledge. Such men are frequently proud and self-sufficient. They feel themselves competent to devise and execute plans without counsel from God. They separate themselves from the true Vine, and hence become dry and fruitless, as withered branches. {1.16}

The Lord would put to shame the vaunting of men. He will give success to the feeblest efforts, the most unpromising methods, when divinely appointed, and entered upon with humility and trust. God will not test our faith beyond endurance. He will give us sufficient evidence, that we may, in our weakness, lean upon the arm of his strength, and trust wholly in his power. Talents, education, and influence, may, under the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, be employed in the service of God; but Satan is more often served by them, than is Jesus Christ. {1.17}

The Majesty of Heaven walked among the children of men with the dignity of a king; yet he preserved the simplicity of a little child. He was never known to boast of superiority, to exalt his own power, ability, or attainments. Christ was

the Creator of the earth; he was the king of glory; yet his life of meekness and humility put to shame the proud boasting of men. He was the embodiment of wisdom, the fountain of knowledge. Let those who would pride themselves upon their superior abilities, learn of the great Teacher. Jesus invites all, "Learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls." He said to his disciples, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of Heaven." ^{1.18}

How does God look upon men who cherish pride, and boast of their superiority, when they are dependent upon him for every breath they draw, for the food they eat, the clothing they wear, and, above all these, for the precious gift of reason—the power of thought? Let the hand of God be laid upon man, let the mind be clouded, and what then would he have whereof to boast? ^{1.19}

Success does not depend upon strength or numbers. God can deliver by few as well as by many. A large church is not necessarily a strong church. Some of its members may be cherishing selfishness, pride, or unbelief; some may be dishonest, others corrupt in heart and life. All these are a source of weakness to the church. They bring the frown of God upon his people, and the great adversary will work through them to advance his own cause. ^{1.20}

Anciently, those whose worldly interests would draw their hearts from the work of God, were bidden to return to their homes. It were better for the cause of truth today, if those whose attention is absorbed with their own private interests, would separate from the work of God, and give themselves to the things in which their hearts delight. Then they would not, by their wrong example, exert so dangerous an influence upon others. ^{1.21}

God is honored, not so much by the great number, as by the character of those who serve him. He appreciates moral worth. He draws the dividing line between those who bear his name by profession, and those whose character shows them to be his children. Those who have the fear of God will listen to his counsels, and obey them. They will not be content with spurious theories, nor build upon false principles to secure the friendship of the world. Yet, at the same time, they will cherish and exemplify those virtues that promote the happiness of the family, the church, and the community. ^{1.22}

Many who occupy responsible positions in the church of God, are sacrificing their integrity to secure the favor of the ungodly. A strong current is sweeping downward, and they decide that it is easier to float with the tide than to row against it. Like the children of Israel, they sacrifice the blessings of God by their indolence and spiritual sloth. Many set up idols in their hearts—idols of selfishness, idols of pride, and love of display. Eternal things lose their value. Withdraw the influences which God has provided to preserve and strengthen our spirituality, and it decays and dies. We must be continually seeking to draw near to God, and to learn his will. We must become more unlike the world, and more like Christ in character. ^{1.23}

Victory at Last**July 14, 1881**

When Gideon stood at the head of thirty thousand men to make war against the Midianites, he felt that unless God should work for Israel, their cause would be hopeless. At the divine command the Hebrew force had been reduced by successive tests, until there remained with him, only three hundred men to oppose that countless multitude. What wonder that his heart sunk within him as he thought of the conflict of the morrow. {2.1}

But the Lord did not leave his faithful servant to despair. He spoke to Gideon in the night season, and bade him, with Phurah, his trusty attendant, go down to the camp of the Midianites, intimating that he would there hear matter for his encouragement. He went, and waiting there in darkness and silence, he heard one soldier, just awakened, relate a dream to his companion: "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." {2.2}

The other answered in words that stirred the heart of that unseen listener, "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." {2.3}

Gideon recognized the voice of God speaking to him through the words of these Midianitish strangers. His faith and courage were greatly strengthened, and he rejoiced that Israel's God could work through the humblest means to abase the pride of men. With confidence and hope, he returned to the few men under his command, saying, "Arise, for the Lord hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian." {2.4}

The apparently powerless condition of that little company of Israelites, compared with the vast host of the enemy, was fitly represented by the cake of barley bread. But as that loaf overthrew the tent upon which it fell, so would the handful of Israelites destroy their numerous and powerful enemies. The Lord himself directed Gideon's mind in the adoption of a plan which the latter immediately set out to execute. He divided his three hundred men into three companies. To every man was given a trumpet, and a pitcher containing a lighted lamp. He then stationed his men in such a manner that they surrounded the entire camp of Midian. They had been previously instructed how to proceed, and at midnight, at a signal from Gideon, all the three companies blew their trumpets, uncovered their lamps, and broke the pitchers, at the same time shouting, "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" The light of three hundred lamps, piercing the midnight darkness, and that mighty shout from three hundred voices, suddenly aroused the sleeping army. Believing themselves at the mercy of an overwhelming force, the Midianites were panic-stricken. A terrible scene of confusion ensued. In their fright they fled in all directions, and mistaking their own companions for enemies they slew one another. {2.5}

As the news of Israel's victory spread, many who had been sent to their homes returned, and joined in the pursuit of their fleeing enemies. Gideon also sent messengers to the Ephraimites, requesting them to seize the fords of the Jordan that the fugitives might not escape eastward. {2.6}

In this terrible overthrow, not less than one hundred and twenty thousand of the invaders were slain, and so completely were the Midianites subdued that they were never again able to make war upon Israel. A remnant of fifteen thousand who managed to escape across the river, were pursued by Gideon and his faithful three hundred, and utterly defeated, and Zebah and Zalmunna, two Midianite princes, were slain. [2.7]

Nothing can happen in any part of the universe without the knowledge of Him who is omnipresent. Not a single event of human life is unknown to our Maker. While Satan is constantly devising evil, the Lord our God overrules all, so that it will not harm his obedient, trusting children. The same power that controls the boisterous waves of the ocean can hold in check all the power of rebellion and of crime. God says to one as to the other, "Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther." [2.8]

What lessons of humility and faith may we not learn as we trace the dealings of God with his creatures. The Lord can do but little for the children of men, because they are so full of pride and vain glory. They exalt self, magnifying their own strength, learning, and wisdom. It is necessary for God to disappoint their hopes and frustrate their plans, that they may learn to trust in him alone. All our powers are from God; we can do nothing independent of the strength which he has given us. Where is the man or woman or child that God does not sustain? Where is the desolate place which God does not fill? Where is the want that any but God can supply? [2.9]

The psalmist represents the presence of the Infinite One as pervading the universe. "If I ascend up into Heaven, thou art there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there." We can never find a solitude where God is not. The ever watchful eye of Omniscience is upon all our works, and although he can marshal the armies of Heaven to do his will, he condescends to accept the services of frail, erring mortals. [2.10]

Because of the pride and ambition of the children of men, God has chosen to perform his mighty works by the most simple and humble means. It is not the men whom the world honors as great, talented, or brilliant, that God selects. He chooses those who will work in meekness and simplicity, acknowledging him as their leader and their source of strength. He would have us make him our protector and our guide in all the duties and affairs of life. [2.11]

His care for the works of his creation is unwearied and incessant. When men go forth to their daily toil, as when they engage in prayer; when they lie down at night, and when they rise in the morning; when the rich man feasts in his palace, when the poor man gathers his children about the scanty board, each is tenderly watched by his Heavenly Father. No tears can be shed that God does not notice. There is no smile that he does not mark. Those to whom he has committed important trusts he regards with vigilance. All their actions and most secret motives must pass his scrutiny. He has bestowed upon them all their talents and abilities, and he will hold them to a strict account for the improvement of these gifts. If they attain success, it is because the God of wisdom has prospered them.

The Majesty of Heaven works by whom he will. His providence sometimes selects the humblest instruments to do the greatest work; for his power is revealed through the weakness of men. We have our standard of reckoning, and by it we pronounce one thing great, and another small; but God estimates not according to the standard of men; he does not graduate his scale by theirs. We are not to suppose that what is great to us must be great to God, and what is small to us must be small to him. [2.13]

He who upholds the unnumbered worlds throughout immensity, at the same time cares for the wants of the little brown sparrow that sings its humble song without a fear. He cares for everything and sustains everything throughout the universe that he has created. [2.14]

If we would but fully believe this, all undue anxieties would be dismissed. With humble prayer and trusting faith, we would seek counsel from God in all our plans and purposes of life. Then all our acts would be governed by discretion, our energies would be rightly directed. Then our lives would not be so filled with disappointment as now; for everything, small or great, would be left in the hands of God, who is not perplexed by the multiplicity of cares, nor overwhelmed by their weight. We should then enjoy a rest of soul to which many have long been strangers. [2.15]

A Wise Reply

July 21, 1881

After the overthrow of the Midianites, the tidings spread swiftly far and wide that Israel's God had again fought for his people. No words can describe the terror of the surrounding nations when they learned what simple means had prevailed against all the power and skill of a bold, warlike race. [3.1]

Wherever the news spread, all felt that the victory must be ascribed to God alone. Thus the Lord's name was glorified, the faith of Israel strengthened, and their enemies were brought to shame and confusion. [3.2]

It is not safe for God's people to adopt the maxims and customs of the ungodly. The divine principles and modes of working are widely different from those of the world. The history of nations presents no such victories as the conquest of Jericho or the overthrow of the Midianites. No general of heathen armies had ever conducted warfare as Joshua and Gideon had done. These victories teach the great lesson that the only sure ground of success is the help of God, working with human effort. Those who trust to their own wisdom and their own skill will surely be disappointed. The only safe course in all the plans and purposes of life is to preserve the simplicity of faith. Humble trust in God and faithful obedience to his will are as essential to the Christian in waging spiritual warfare as they were to Gideon and his brave associates in fighting the battles of the Lord. [3.3]

God's commands must be implicitly obeyed, irrespective of the world's opinion. This lesson should not be disregarded by those who occupy positions of responsibility among their fellowmen. Such persons above all others should neglect none of the Lord's ordinances or commands. He who conforms to the customs and practices of the world separates himself from God. All should ear-

nestly improve every religious privilege, and inquire of God daily to learn his will. The life and words of Christ must be diligently studied, and his instructions cheerfully obeyed. He who will thus gird on the armor of righteousness need not fear the enemies of God. He may be assured of the presence and protection of the Captain of the Lord's host. {3.4}

It is a sad fact that the simplicity of true faith has, in a great measure, departed from the church of Christ. Many who occupy responsible positions are in constant danger of separating themselves from God by neglect of the means of grace. They do not drink daily at the fountain of wisdom and righteousness, and do not acknowledge God as the right arm of their power. {3.5}

The Lord is willing to give his people a precious experience. He would lead them to confide in his wisdom, his power, and his love, instead of trusting to themselves. He would teach them to submit their judgment and their will implicitly to him. Then will they see and know that of themselves they can do nothing; that God is all and in all. His love will dwell in their hearts, and his praise will be continually upon their lips. God works for his people by agencies which the proud and worldly-wise will despise; but the grace and power of God are the only hope of sinful men. {3.6}

After his glorious victory over the Midianites, Gideon was subjected to another test, differing widely from those already given, but unexpected and peculiarly severe. He must now meet unjust accusation and censure. When, at his call, the men of Israel had rallied against the Midianites, the tribe of Ephraim had remained behind. They looked upon the effort as a perilous and doubtful undertaking, and as Gideon sent them no special invitation, they availed themselves of this excuse not to join their brethren. But when the news of Israel's triumph reached them, the Ephraimites were dissatisfied and envious because they had not shared it. {3.7}

Gideon was not anxious to secure the honor to himself, for he knew that it belonged to the Lord alone. As soon as the Midianites were routed, Gideon had sent swift messengers, desiring the Ephraimites to seize the fords of the Jordan that the fugitives might not escape. A large number of the enemy were slain, among whom were two of the chief princes of Midian. Thus the men of Ephraim followed up the battle, and helped complete the victory. Nevertheless, they were jealous and angry, as though Gideon were governed by his own will and judgment. They did not discern God's hand in the triumph of Israel, and this very fact proved that they were indeed unworthy to be used as his instruments on that occasion. They would have taken the honor to themselves, instead of ascribing it to God. The wicked spirit manifested toward Gideon shows that they were not men who could be trusted, who would appreciate God's mercy and power in their deliverance. {3.8}

The wisdom of God, as displayed in the methods and instrumentalities employed to carry forward his work, is foolishness to the boastful and self-confident, because they know not the mystery of godliness. The Lord would teach his people at the present day the lesson of simple dependence upon that mighty arm

which can overthrow the strongholds of Satan. The prayer of faith, offered by God's humble, obedient, trusting people, will bring them the victory. {3.9}

The most complete and perfect system which men have ever despised, apart from the power and wisdom of God, will prove a failure; while the humble means which God sanctions must succeed. The simple act of blowing a blast upon the trumpet, by the army of Joshua around Jericho, and by Gideon's little band about the host of Midian, was made effectual, through the power of God, to overthrow the might of his enemies. Deep are the counsels of God, and the finite mind seeks in vain to comprehend them. {3.10}

The bullock standing between the altar for sacrifice and the plow in the furrow—ready for either—fitly represents the position which God's people should occupy. The Lord has no place in his work for the indolent and self-indulgent. Like the men of Ephraim, there are many at the present day who are ready to work diligently to secure honor to themselves; but unless they can do this they will not work at all. And not only will they do nothing to themselves, but by their example and influence they will discourage others. {3.11}

The men of Ephraim, returning from the fords of the Jordan with the trophies of victory, addressed Gideon in terms of angry reproach: "Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites?" {3.12}

Gideon knew that he had acted by the divine command, and though harshly censured by those who should have commended, he restrained all feelings of anger or indignation. How easily the spirit of jealousy and discontent might have been fanned into a quarrel that would have caused division, bloodshed, and ruin! By his self-control, Gideon showed himself a hero. He proved the truth of those words written so long afterward, "A soft answer turneth away wrath." In his reply to the Ephraimites he modestly threw a veil over his own success, but spoke in the highest praise of their achievements: "What have I done now in comparison of you?" Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abi-ezer? God hath delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; and what was I able to do in comparison of you?" He represented the victory gained by himself and his army of three hundred men as little in comparison with their taking the princes of Midian. And he further showed that the glory belonged neither to him nor to them, but to the Lord. {3.13}

Gideon's modest and prudent answer appeased the anger of the men of Ephraim, and they returned in peace to their homes. How much of the trouble that exists in the world today, springs from the same evil traits that actuated the men of Ephraim, and how many evils might be avoided if all who are unjustly accused or censured would manifest the meek, self-forgetful spirit of Gideon. {3.14}

Answer Hints

Section 1: | 1) 1.2, 1.4 | 2) 1.3–1.4 | 3) 1.5 | 4) 1.10 | 5) 1.11 | 6) 1.15 | 7) 1.21 |

Section 2: | 1) 2.8, 2.14 | 2) 2.9 | 3) 2.11, 2.13 |

Section 3: | 1) 3.3–3.4 | 2) 3.6 | 3) 3.8 | 4) 3.9–3.10 | 5) 3.13–3.14 |

This lesson is from a 13-week (1-quarter) set of Sabbath School lessons for youth and young adults called *Prophets & Judges*, based on a series of articles by Ellen G. White in *The Signs of the Times*, 1881–1882.

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