

A love we must never lose.

I have always been amazed at how quickly the children of Israel fell away from God. God would deliver His people miraculously and reveal himself in great power to crush their enemy demonstrating his love and faithfulness, but then almost in the next breath, we read how they fell away from him, turning to the god's of the nations.

What can we learn from this? Is there a truth here that God will reveal to help us keep the Holy fires burning?

Having entered the promised land through Joshua's leadership, we read in the book of Judges about an Angel from God who comes with words of warning to this new generation. Thankfully they heard and responded to the word, but this was a word not just for that generation but also for generations that followed.

Judges 2:1-6

On this occasion, these were a soft hearted, responsive people who heard God's word, recognised their failure repented in tears and did not continue in their sin.

"Bochin" (bo-keem) means weeping, it was a place of true repentance, that comes with deep conviction.

V 10 But after Joshua had died and all of that generation, there arose a generation who did not know the Lord or the work He had done for Israel. This next generation did evil and served Baal and Ashtoreth. They forsook the Lord God of their fathers.

V21 God makes a promise to them. **Don't you just love it when God gives you a word? A promise you can live by?**

This promise however is not a nice one. It is not what they wanted to hear; something to tickle their ears. It was a promise, non-the-less and promise with a loving purpose. He would allow trouble as a means to bring his people back into relationship with Himself.

He promises to allow their enemies to remain in the land and they would be powerless to defeat them until such time as they turned their hearts again to Himself.

We then read of successive champions who God raises up. People who had zeal for the Lord, who were on fire for God and who God uses to remind Israel they had not been forsaken by God even though they had forsaken Him.

I want to turn to one of the best known of the judges that God raised up. To Gideon in Judges 6.

The account comes immediately after the account of Deborah, who God had used 40 years earlier to defeat the Canaanites.

The last verse of Deborah's song **Judges 5:31** pronounces a curse on God's enemies but a great blessing on those who love Him. I know which side of that prayer I want to be on!

Sadly, it was only 40 years on and Israel had by now forsaken God for Baal and Ashtoreth once again.

Why was the worship of these foreign deities so enticing?

Let me suggest quite simply, these god's appealed to the desires of the flesh and allowed total abandonment to lust with no sense of respect or duty toward others, these were god's of their own making and self restraint was not necessary.

The name Ba'al is translated "Owner" "Master" "Husband"

God speaks so clearly to Jeremiah 2 & 3 about Israel's harlotry. They have shamelessly forsaken their husband and gone after foreign god's in open prostitution polluting the land with their wickedness and God calls His people to repentance. They had forsaken Almighty God for a new Master, a new Husband and were enslaved to a new owner. Paul speaks about being delivered from slavery to sin and an oppressive master called Satan. We are encouraged not to become enslaved to sin again when we have such a great salvation.

Jeremiah does not mince his words but speaks God's word clearly and the people hate it. They find the truth unpalatable and refuse to accept God's diagnosis for their troubles.

Baal worship was an appalling practice. It involved animal sacrifice but in times of crisis they would up the anti and sacrifice children. Ashtoroah was worshipped together with Baal and Ashera poles were erected alongside the image of Baal. They believed she was Baal's mother and the worship of this false goddess included ritual sex and highly immoral sex acts with the intention of bringing Baal and his mother together in some mystical union in order to bring great fertility to the land. Magic and sorcery were practiced as part of these worship rituals.

We of course find all of this utterly detestable. But I wonder how modern day idolatry might be seen from heaven's perspective? Today's god's are less personalised than in ancient times, but they still exist, they still entice and they still defile. The god's of money, power, possessions, celebrity, pride which is considered as the sin of witchcraft. We would do well to remember the powerlessness of pagan god's which are no more than bits of stone and wood and to realise the futility of worshipping the god's of today.

God sees the worship of other things as nothing less than adultery, the forsaking of our first love.

God will not share his glory. He is not one of many gods.

Rom 12:1 It's living sacrifices God wants. Holy & pleasing.

The church at Ephesus was an amazing Church.

This was a church that was well founded in the word of God. Today, we would be green with envy if we saw the teaching giants they benefitted from. No, let me re-phrase that! We would say how blessed they were as a church to have such a rich teaching resource!

This is a church you would want to be part of. It is thought that it was founded by Aquila and Priscilla who had a thorough understanding of scripture. The church also had a teacher called Apolus who was described as being "mighty in the scriptures". Aquila and Priscilla taught him more thoroughly in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul on his third missionary journey stayed there 3 years equipping the church and its leaders (Acts 20) and later Timothy pastored the church. Then they had another faithful servant called Tichicus and the great apostle John!

The church was firmly founded and had an amazing beginning. Things really took off and a great ministry in the word went out from this church. The teaching was so powerful that the makers of idols were going out of business and all of Asia heard the word. The word was confirmed with powerful miracles and caused an almighty stir. People were even burning the books of spells and throwing out anything that defiled their homes.

This ministry of the word was in the midst of persecution and at times intense opposition. The converts were idolaters, witches, sexually immoral, corrupt people who had come from the prevailing culture. In their worship of the goddess Artimus or Dianna as it was called, a god that had lost any distinction between the genders, it was said that the morality in this temple was worse than that of animals.

Yet the church flourished as people were converted from out of this culture. God's word is powerful and effective!

This gives me great hope for our towns and cities. If God's word could call people out of that culture, he can do the same now in ours.

In the book of Revelation our risen glorified saviour Jesus heaped praise on this church.

I know your deeds and your labour

You toiled for the kingdom

You've not stood for evil behaviour

You have patiently endured

You have tested those who speak in His name and weeded out false apostles.

They knew the word! They were not going to be fooled easily!

You've persevered.

Not given any place to the devil. Hated evil in the church.

What great praise from Jesus. A great church by any measure. They could say in truth that they were giving all for Jesus.

Yet Jesus was ready to remove their lamp-stand. Why? because they had left their first love.

Rev' 2:4

This is not an Old Testament problem. This is an issue for every church in every generation of believers. Paul spoke to the church in Galatia at how amazed he was that the church was turning so quickly to a different gospel. Gal' 1:6

I am so glad we have the bible. It is God breathed and He continues to speak to us through it. It keeps us on our toes and helps us to stay true to the faith, live holy lives and walk closely with Jesus.

Back to our passage in **Judges 6**

The consequence of Israel's sin was not good.

V1 Because of their sin, this next generation was delivered into the hands of the Midianites for 7 years.

Had the people continued in the way of their forefathers, they would have inherited the same blessings, but they forsook God and with Him, his blessings.

We don't inherit salvation. It takes New birth every time. Each and every generation must experience rebirth and grow in Faith through continual revelation by the Holy Spirit.

When Paul hears of the coming to faith of the believers in Ephesus he doesn't just say "praise the Lord, isn't that great!" **He prays that they might now be flooded with light and understanding. We need the baptism of the Holy Spirit and to be continually filled.**

Ephesians 1:15-23

We too must be filled with this great understanding and live our lives in the reality of it. We are talking here about matters of life and death. We have the most precious gift in Christ, a treasure that is beyond price and we need our eyes to be fully opened to the reality of this gift and our calling in Christ.

Judges 6

"The people made for themselves the dens, the caves and the strongholds which are in the mountains."

They went into survival mode hiding in makeshift shelters where they, with their families and children could crouch down until the danger passed. They hid in dark, cold, damp caves and strongholds. **Sin never leads to victorious living but eventually they became impoverished, destitute and afraid.** Temporary pleasures are short lived and come at a high cost spiritually.

In this pitiful state, they cry out to God once more.

God sends His word to them by way of a prophet who gives the true diagnosis for their troubles.

Judges 6:7-10

God reminds them who had brought them to this land out of bondage in Egypt, who it was that had delivered them from oppression and who had given them the land as their possession. He also tells them about their sin. They had broken covenant with God by disobedience and idolatry. "You have not obeyed my voice."

There is no indication that the people gave any credence to what God said through His messenger. It was as though they were completely deaf to it. They had let the sun go down. There was no repentance, not even an acknowledgment that God had spoken, but God had been stirring the heart of a young man named Gideon and clearly he had been impacted by and thinking about this message.

Judges 6:11-16

God saw something in Gideon that Gideon didn't even recognise in himself - "a mighty man of valour!" I don't think this was a sarcastic angel. God had seen in Gideon a man of deep conviction.

V13 Gideon spoke out from from deep conviction and a sense of indignation. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" What had been stirring deep within him rose to the surface and he gave both barrels to the angel:

"If the Lord is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all His miracles....?"

Why is God silent and why doesn't he act? I do wonder why we don't see many mighty miracles in the church.

I can't accept that God's to blame!

Isa 59:1-2

**"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened,
That it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear
But your iniquities have separated you from your God;
And your sins have hidden His face from you so that He will not hear....."**

The problem is not with God. His hand is not shortened, that he cannot save and he's not gone deaf. The problem is at this end of the line! Our iniquities and our sins have hidden God and broken the connection.

If you were at the scene of the most desperate incident and someone with the power to save stood by and did nothing you would have the right to ask him why he stood there motionless. The problem was not that Gideon didn't have any faith, he had something inside, an inner conflict that believed what God had done before but he didn't know why it wasn't happening today.

So why don't we hear and why doesn't God appear to act?

We should all be moved to ask God this very question.

We desperately need God and we must turn from pointing the finger of blame at others and consider where we are at. Spiritual revival begins with me! I need to search my own heart and ask God to show me where I am wrong.

He will not act until we get right and We must not settle for any brand of Christianity that can be done without God?

"He is everything to us or nothing at all."

Like Gideon, we should have a searching soul.

Jet 29:11-14

I know the thoughts I have for you.....you will search for me and you will find me when you you search for me with all your heart.

He does not want small degrees but seeking with all our heart.

"If you can take it or leave it, you will leave it."

If it seems seems that heaven has hushed again, then **the trail leads right back to our own heart.**

Will we turn once again to God?

God called this passionate outburst "Gideon's might". **"Go in this might of yours and you shall save Israel...."**

"Have I not sent you?"

God is saying **"this passion that you're feeling is good and right and because you have it, guess what? I've called you"**

If you have within you a deep inner conviction or a burden from God then perhaps you need to consider what He is saying. If God has called you, He will also equip you for the task.

We could rephrase what God is saying like this:

"Stop focussing on your natural ability and look to Me and the call I have placed on your life."

God is looking for **faith and obedience not faith and ability.**

Peter tells us what we need to add to our faith in **2 Peter 1:5-10**
What a great promise, but I don't see our own strength and ability in this list, do you?

This "might of yours" had nothing to do with Gideon's physical strength, superior wisdom or any personal gifting. It was the might of the burden God had placed within him.

If you have passion and conviction but little or no ability, guess who God has chosen? Yes, you!

The problem is, we often come with our convictions and passions and wonder why no-one else is prepared to do it. Maybe God has called you so that His power may be made perfect in and through you. There are many dreams that have been lost or buried because people thought they couldn't possibly do it. The shame is, that it's true, you couldn't do it but God could and perhaps even today God will bring back a long forsaken burden and wants you to humbly accept this as your call.

Who gets the glory when you can do it yourself?

Who gets the glory when you cannot do it but trust God?

Who then is God going to use for his purpose? Those who rely entirely on Him.

V15 Out come the excuses. They are good one's and reasonable ones too. They show us all the reality of the situation. God never wants us to deny reality. How would denying reality give Him any glory? He wants us to face the facts of our predicament just as Abraham did and yet still believe the promise of God.

The word of God and promise of God takes presidency over everything. **We are mistaken to try and shrink the problem so that it appears smaller than our already diminished view of God. No. we must exalt God and realise, regardless of the nature of the problem and the very real danger or threat that it poses, we still have faith in what God has spoken.**

Children's Song -

"Have we made our God too small, too small? Have we made our God too small? He made the heaven and earth and He reigns on high and He's got the time for you and I."

God sends forth his word. **He doesn't whisper it in the hope Satan won't hear.** When God speaks it happens. Our next mistake, is that we try to make God say what we want to hear. That ain't going to work either. We need to

humble ourselves before Him and receive the promise He has spoken. Not just make one up for ourselves and wonder why He doesn't answer. It can be a spiritual struggle at times, not knowing what God is saying. This is when we should pray and fast, humbling ourselves and crying out to God for an answer.

V22 Gideon was terrified! He thought he was going to die. Here's the mighty man God chooses! Those who realise what an awesome God we serve and have a reverent fear of Him.

V23 God then speaks "peace" into Gideon's fear. "What you fear, i.e. 'Death' is not going to happen." He was not being sent on a suicide mission that was not part of the plan and God graciously gave him a deep seated peace.

God had a mission for Gideon but he had to first deal with the messenger. Gideon had a "Kiros" moment and stepped into the truth that "The Lord is Peace" v24 and at the time of writing the alter was still there. God's peace was lasting peace because He is our peace. It did not sprout wings and fly away once his conversation with God ended, but remained established in his heart.

Gideon had enough faith go by night and pull down the false alter to Baal. He's not criticised for doing it by night, but it is stated as fact that he was afraid to do it by day. **What matters, is that he did it. He obeyed.** God does not give us an instruction manual on how we must obey. We just have to obey and do it as we see appropriate in the circumstances.

This act of obedience caused an outcry amongst the people but also a great battle in the spiritual realm. V33 the enemy started to gather. They gathered in great force filling the land like locusts.

Amazing isn't it that opposition came first from within. His own people, who bearing in mind had cried out to God and have just heard God speak through a prophet about their idolatry, were now ready to kill Gideon. When that failed, the enemy decides to get his big guns out, to crush Israel.

God continues to deal with Gideon giving him confirmation after confirmation that He is God and nothing is impossible for him. He lays out a fleece and God causes dew to fall only on the fleece and then only on the ground.

Now Gideon was convinced, it was time for God to use him and the lessons he has learned to show all Israel who is God. But notice God first spoke to Gideon and Gideon became both the message and the messenger. God forms His word in us, this is so much more than head knowledge. His word must first live in us if we are to be God's messenger.

God uses a unique way of selecting his warriors for the battle!

Judges 7

Gideon assembled 32,000 men ready to fight against the Midianites. God spoke to Gideon telling him the army was too strong and if they went to war

and were victorious, the people would claim victory for themselves. So God tells Gideon to dismiss anyone who was afraid and 22,000 people went home.

10,000 people were left. Suddenly the army was looking somewhat depleted. Large swathes of ground could be seen where these thousands of people had previously gathered. So God told Gideon to watch how the men drink at the water and he would show him those who must be chosen.

The qualification to fight did not begin with natural ability, training and skill. It began with God's sovereign choice. He doesn't look at outward appearance but the heart.

God can use anyone He chooses for his purposes. They were not the 300 strongest and best trained or most skilled. They were not the people's champions with the battle scars to prove it. They were God's choice and I'm sure there were those in the crowd who looked on and wondered what chance they had against such a vast and powerful enemy.

There were not many who were chosen to fight God's battle because God wanted them to know that He is their deliverer. He is bigger than any problem and any enemy we may face.

V7 God confirms that He will use the 300 men to bring deliverance to Israel and tells him to "Let everyone else to go home."

God is not interested in gathering a crowd, His purposes will be fulfilled through those who have a willing heart and are ready to serve.

V2 God deserves all the glory. We are here to glorify God and we must resist all temptation to allow our flesh to gain any glory for itself. The moment we boast of our achievements, we diminish God. We are here to give him ALL the glory. We only do that when we humble ourselves and allow the Holy Spirit to renew our hearts.

Judges 7:18

The battle cry was "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon."

Gideon armed the men with empty clay pitchers, a lamp and a trumpet. The weapons of our warfare are not the world's weapons but they are mighty in the battle. He then ordered the 300 men to do a number of things: to conceal their lamps in the pitchers and break them open at the appointed time and to blow their trumpets then cry "The sword of the Lord and of Gideon". All they had to do then, was to stand their ground.

This is precisely what all Christians are called to do. You must let your light shine, allow the earthen vessel, our flesh life to be broken so that the life of Christ can shine forth. **"Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven."**

You must shine in such a way that when people see your light, they glorify God and not you!

Then there must be a clear sound. The trumpet blast. We speak the truth to people in love declaring the good news of Jesus.

The sword is the Lord's, **we can do nothing of ourselves but that does not mean we do nothing! Paul says "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."**

We are God's instruments. The body of Christ, that Christ may be made known to the glory of God the Father.

The sword of the Lord is a mighty weapon with unstoppable power and authority, yet he chooses to use humble servants to wield it.

The enemy was defeated and they experienced another 40 years of quiet before once again the next generation fell into idolatry.

The church is always one generation from extinction. Let us never lose our first love but carry a lit torch and hand it over still on fire to the next generation.

Words of a poem by William Cowper that speaks of the void that is left when we leave our first love of God for the worlds idols.

O for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame,
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb!

Where is the blessedness I knew,
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul refreshing view
Of Jesus and His Word?

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!
How sweet their memory still!
But they have left an aching void
The world can never fill.

**Return, O holy Dove, return,
Sweet messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn
And drove Thee from my breast.**

**The dearest idol I have known,
Whate'er that idol be
Help me to tear it from Thy throne,
And worship only Thee.**

So shall my walk be close with God,
Calm and serene my frame;
So purer light shall mark the road
That leads me to the Lamb.

Amen.