

THE STORY OF GIDEON

Judges 6; 7

In every class above the Primary, the teacher should read aloud Judges 17:6 as the keynote of the period of the Judges and explain the difference between looking to self and looking to the Lord for knowledge of what is right. Be sure to point out the difference between the Judges and the patriarchs and Moses and Joshua, and also the kings, who are to come later. The Judges were local and temporary leaders.

Doctrinal Points

We never in this world reach a state in which we should consider ourselves “saved.”

Humility and courage are both essential in our fight against evil.

Notes for Parents

Gideon was one of the Judges. The period of the Judges came between the time of Joshua—under whom the Israelites conquered the Holy Land and divided it by lot among the tribes—and the period of the kings. The Judges were not rulers over the whole land. They were individuals raised up from time to time by the Lord in one or another locality in the Holy Land to lead an attack upon a particular enemy. The enemies in Gideon’s time were the Midianites, who were overrunning the land “like grasshoppers” and stealing the crops before the Israelites could harvest them. The whole story of Gideon is a striking one and is given in the Bible to teach us that the power to gain victory over our temptations is not in ourselves, but comes to us from the Lord as we learn His truths from the Word and obey them.

If the Israelites, after they reached the Holy Land and conquered it, had remained faithful to the Lord and continued to keep their enemies in check, they could have been happy and prosperous.

The troubles they got into in the time of the Judges were the result of their becoming self-satisfied and yielding to the great temptation of prosperity—the temptation to forget the Lord. Whenever we get to thinking that we know enough to do right without trying to learn any more, we are sure to get into trouble.

Primary

The little ones will enjoy the story, especially the way in which the three hundred were chosen and the way in which the lamps and trumpets were used. Tell them that Gideon did not think much of his own abilities, but that he won the victory because he was willing to obey the Lord and was not afraid. All the details of the story will be interesting to the class, especially those concerning Gideon's call, his destroying the altar of Baal, and the signs given him. The Midianite's dream will also interest them.

Under Joshua the Israelites conquered the whole land.

Then it was divided among the tribes by lot.

They set up the tabernacle at Shiloh, in the center of the land, halfway between Shechem and Bethel.

Then they settled down in their new homes and became prosperous, and they began to forget the Lord.

Joshua died, and for a time they had no great leader.

Their enemies began to grow strong again and to trouble and attack them.

Each time an enemy attacked, they suddenly remembered to ask the Lord's help, and each time He raised up someone to lead them to victory again.

These people were called Judges.

They did not rule over all the people, but each had one special task to do.

In our story for today, the enemies who are attacking them are the Midianites. They came into the country in hordes, just like grasshoppers, and destroyed the crops of the Israelites and drove away their cattle.

Then the Israelites began to think about the Lord again and begged Him to save them, and the Lord did save them. He sent an angel to a man named Gideon and told him to raise an army and fight the Midianites. Gideon, just like Moses at the burning bush, thought at first that he was not great enough to lead the people, but the Lord promised to be with him.

You see, Gideon was modest about himself just like Moses and Joshua. But the Lord proved to Gideon that He would be with him and give him victory.

Then Gideon was able to raise a great army of thirty-two thousand men.

Why did the Lord tell him he had too many men?

Who were first sent home?

What further test was given?

How many were there in the army finally?

What “weapons” did they have?

What did Gideon tell them to do?

What were they to shout?

What happened to the Midianites?

If we forget the Lord and do not obey Him, He cannot help us. But if we do obey Him and trust Him, then it does not matter how weak and small we are or how few there are of us, for the Lord is with us and gives us power.

Junior

Show the Juniors a map of the land as it was divided among the tribes and have them find the tribe of Manasseh, from which Gideon came; and the tribes of Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, who sent men for Gideon’s army. Then locate the place of the battle, with the place where each army was drawn up. Stress Gideon’s humility, his obedience, and the reason given for the reduction of the army (7:2), as well as the point emphasized in the pupils’ notes that it takes courage to do right when those about you are doing wrong, but that such courage is one of the essentials of real leadership.

Under Joshua the Israelites conquered all of the Holy Land. Then it was divided by lot among the twelve tribes, and all the people settled down and built homes. The tabernacle was set up at Shiloh, which was about halfway between Bethel and Shechem. Then Joshua died. Read Judges 2:6-13. Joshua had charged the tribes to complete the conquest of their enemies, each within its own borders, but the tribes of Judah and Simeon were the only ones who obeyed. The others were all too much interested in becoming prosperous themselves. So the Lord allowed their enemies to become strong again and to rise up and attack them. Of

course when they were in trouble, the people always begged the Lord to save them. They had no one leader, but each time they asked Him, the Lord raised up someone to lead them against the particular enemy who was attacking. These leaders were called Judges.

At the time of our lesson for today, an enemy from the cross-Jordan country is attacking Israel.

Who were these enemies?

You may remember from our lesson about Moses at the burning bush that Midian was a son of Abraham by Keturah, whom he married after Sarah's death. His descendants had helped Israel in the wilderness (Exodus 18; Numbers 10:29-32; Judges 1:16), but now, except for the family of the Kenites, they have become enemies.

Gideon of the tribe of Manasseh was chosen and prepared to lead Israel against the Midianites.

What was he doing when he was called to serve the Lord?

Who called him?

He was humble and willing to obey. These are the two qualities in us which the Lord needs to find in order to use us for His work in the world.

How did the Lord test Gideon's willingness to obey?

What other name was given to him?

What two signs did he ask of the Lord?

Look on a map at the plain of Esdraelon. Part of its western boundary is the hill of Morah. The Midianites were camped in the valley at the foot of this mountain. A little further south is the well of Harod, which was later called "Gideon's spring" because Gideon's army was gathered there. Esdraelon is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Jezreel. Jezreel is mentioned many times in the Old Testament, but we usually call it "the plain of Esdraelon" because under that name it has become a famous battlefield.

What tribes furnished the men for Gideon's army?

Why did the Lord say the army was too big?

Who were first sent home?

When we are trying to fight a temptation, we must first get rid of the fear of being defeated. And there was another kind of man

who had to be sent home.

How many men did Gideon finally have?

What assurance of victory did the Lord give him?

How did he divide his army?

What did they have instead of weapons?

The lamps in the pitchers picture truth from the Lord hidden within the letter of the Word. Blowing on trumpets pictures declaring the power of obedience to the commandments. Truth from the Lord and obedience to the commandments are all the “weapons” we need in order to overcome our temptations. In the face of them, evil and falsity become confused and destroy themselves, just as the Midianites did.

Intermediate

The correspondence of the Midianites, the altar of Baal, the two tests by which the army was reduced, and the lamps, pitchers, and trumpets should all be discussed. The need of humility, obedience, and courage and the fact that the power to overcome is in the Word are the important lessons.

Under Joshua the Israelites conquered the land and settled in it. The country was divided among the tribes by lot, and the tabernacle was set up at Shiloh near the center of the land. Shiloh means “peace.” But the people, with the exception of the tribes of Simeon and Judah, did not obey Joshua’s injunction to complete the conquest of the enemies within their own borders and to make no terms with them (Joshua 23:4-13), and they were led away into the worship of the gods of their enemies, the worship of Baal and other idols. The Lord had warned them in the wilderness against just this evil (Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

After Joshua’s death they had for a time no one leader. The characteristic of the period is described in the words: “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” (Judges 17:6) When we look to ourselves for the knowledge of what is right, we are setting ourselves up above the Lord; this is worshipping Baal. Because of this unfaith-

fulness the Lord permitted their enemies to increase in strength and to attack them. Then, whenever they were sufficiently frightened to turn to Him for help, He would raise up some person to lead them against the particular enemy who was troubling them. These leaders were called Judges. Only the last one, Samuel, had more than a temporary and local authority. They picture the particular truths which the Lord calls to our memory when we need them to fight against particular temptations.

In our lesson for today, the particular enemies are the Midianites. You may remember that they also were descended from Abraham and had been friends of the Israelites at the time of the Exodus, protecting Moses for forty years and later giving him good advice. One family of Midianites, the Kenites, joined the Israelites and settled with them in the Holy Land. But the rest of the Midianites had become enemies. The Midianites picture the kind of thoughts we had about the Lord when we were children. These were holy and good, and so long as they are used to protect our worship, they are friends to our spiritual life. But they can become enemies. For example, when we were little children, our thoughts about the birth of the Lord centered in the little baby in the manger with the animals nearby and the shepherds and wise men coming in. But as we grow older, our thoughts of the Lord's Advent should grow greater and deeper. If we think only of the infant Jesus, the thoughts of the external and superficial surroundings of His birth will fill our minds, as the Midianites overran the fields of Israel, and will take away the real spiritual food which we need at Christmas time. They may even become false thoughts if they lead us to think of the Lord as a mere man and to doubt that the Divine could have come into the world as a helpless baby.

Gideon told the angel sent to call him that his family was the lowliest in the tribe of Manasseh, and that he was the least in his family. Yet when he was assured that he was really called to lead his people against its overwhelming foe, he obeyed immediately and fearlessly. These two qualities, humility and courage, were the same ones enjoined upon Joshua, and they are essential to a fight

against evil because the only power which can overcome evil is the Lord's, and we can use the Lord's power only when we recognize our own weakness and are willing to obey Him wholly.

Gideon's first assignment was the overthrow of the altar of Baal in the face of the certain displeasure of everyone he knew. We must be able to pass this test of ability to do right bravely when everyone around us is doing wrong. It takes real courage to face the ridicule and disapproval of the people we live with every day. The result of this first act of bravery on the part of Gideon has a lesson for us, too. Although his neighbors at first wanted to kill him for throwing down their altar, his bravery before them made such an impression on them that afterward they accepted his leadership and followed him to battle. Moral courage always in the end inspires respect.

The reduction of Gideon's army was another lesson to Israel in the truth that their strength was in the Lord alone. For us it pictures the fact that when we set out to fight our temptations, we must first get rid of the fear of failure and then of all the tendencies to hesitation and self-indulgence; these were the two tests by which Gideon's army was reduced. We must always meet the enemy not in our own strength or with our own arguments, but with simple truth from the Word—the lamps in the pitchers—and with obedience to the commandments, which is pictured by the blowing of the trumpets. The division of the three hundred men into three companies represents the simultaneous attack upon our temptations in our hearts, our minds, and our conduct. The enemy camped in the valley pictures the false reasonings in favor of having our own way which have filled the lower part of our minds. We all know how easy it is to find excuses for doing what we want to do. These false reasonings all fall into confusion when we flash upon them the truths we get from the Lord in the Word and when we make ourselves remember and obey the commandments. The next chapter tells how Gideon chased the enemy across the Jordan and beyond; he then destroyed them with their kings. After we have conquered a temptation, we need to clear out of our hearts and

minds all the wrong feelings and thoughts that have been connected with it.

Basic Correspondences

the Judges = particular truths which help us to overcome particular temptations

Senior

The necessity of looking to the Lord instead of to our own intelligence for the knowledge of what is right is an important point to make with this class. Every detail of the story can be seen to add to the force of this lesson. After suggesting the use of quotations from the Word as weapons against temptation, the teacher might read to the class the quotations found at the end of the Adult notes, and then ask the class to suggest others.

We recall from our previous knowledge of the Bible that the book of Joshua covers the period of conquest of the Holy Land and its division among the tribes. This is a picture of coming into a state of regeneration with all our faculties ordered in their proper relation to our service of the Lord and the neighbor. The tabernacle was set up at Shiloh (which means “peace”) in the center of the land. But it is a great mistake to think that we ever come into a state when we can consider ourselves regenerate and, as some churches express it, “saved.” Again and again the Bible teaches us that our enemies are always with us and that we must be constantly on our guard against them or we shall surely slip back. In Deuteronomy 6:10-12 the Lord had warned Israel against this danger which would be inherent in their victory, and in Joshua 23:4-13 the tribes are charged to maintain their worship of the Lord and to make no terms with the enemies that remained within their borders. But all the tribes except Simeon and Judah disregarded both the warning and the charge, and turned to the worship of the gods of their enemies. Then the enemies regained strength and rose against them.

This is the picture presented in the book of Judges. “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was

right in his own eyes.” (Judges 17:6) This is not the way to spiritual success. It is the way to danger and destruction. Only as the Lord raised up people to lead them was it possible for the Israelites to be saved. These people, the Judges, were not rulers over the whole country or for long periods of time. They represent particular truths which the Lord raises up from our memories when we realize that we are in grave danger and turn to Him for help. Each enemy represents a particular temptation.

The story of Gideon is the description of our battle against superficiality, for the Midianites, as enemies, represent superficial and hence false thoughts about religious things. Midian, the son of Abraham by Keturah, the wife of his old age, originally pictures our childish concept of religious truth, innocent and good at the time when it is formed. Moses, after his first flight from Egypt, was protected for forty years in the land of Midian by Jethro the priest, whose daughter he married. So long as there is innocence in the heart and our minds have not developed enough to be troubled by arguments against our faith, this childish thinking is helpful. But as we grow older and come in contact with worldly reasoning, it begins to stand in the way of our spiritual growth. A host of inconsequential thoughts, like the Midianites, overrun our minds when we should instead be growing in depth of understanding of the Lord and of spiritual living. In the animal kingdom grasshoppers and locusts represent this indulgence in childish and superficial thinking. So the Midianites were likened to them. We should remember that all thinking which is based on the testimony of sense experience alone is superficial and childish. Our minds are given us to use in religion as well as in everything else.

Gideon, threshing wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites, pictures our higher self trying to discover what is really good in a time of temptation. His humility and his willingness to obey the Lord made it possible for the Lord to use him to save Israel.

The two signs which he asked are interesting. The fleece pictures a good external life from a principle of innocence. The ground

pictures the mind in general. The dew, which comes in the morning, pictures truth from the Lord refreshing us at the time of a new beginning. Sometimes our efforts to do right are rewarded with this sense of renewal and understanding. Sometimes they are not apparently rewarded. Both conditions are under the Lord's providence. Gideon wanted to be sure the Lord was leading him, whatever the appearance. We need this same assurance to protect us against discouragement.

Gideon naturally called out a large army to battle, as we sometimes use time and effort in thinking just what we are going to say and do in the face of some expected attack upon our principles. The Lord told His Apostles: "But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost." (Mark 13:11) If we constantly read and meditate upon the Word of God and are determined to obey it, we shall be enabled to meet temptation with the Lord's words rather than with our own.

From Gideon's army the Lord removed first all who were fearful, and then all who were slothful and self-indulgent. Our answers to the tempter should not be given fearfully or with hesitation. Gideon was given an experience to encourage him. We all have had the experience of seeing in people we know the triumph of simple goodness over the superficial reasonings of the self-assured. These experiences, like Gideon's overhearing the story of the dream of the cake of barley bread which overturned the Midianite tent, are granted us by the Lord to strengthen our faith.

And Israel was saved not by its own weapons. The three hundred were divided into three companies, picturing effort on all three planes of life; so they appeared on three sides of the enemy at once. And the attack was made with the lamps and trumpets, just as we can be led in our temptation battles by the sudden flashing of truth out of the letter of the Word and the proclamation of the determination to obey the Lord. These were the "sword of the

Lord and of Gideon,” before which the enemy was confounded. It is a matter of experience that nothing so confuses one who is using selfish and worldly arguments as an unexpected quotation from the Word and the simple determination to obey it.

Adult

There are any number of interesting discussion topics in this story: the characteristics of the period of the Judges, the altar to Baal, the dew on the fleece, and the Midianite’s dream, as well as the immediately obvious ones.

The division of the Holy Land by lot among the tribes pictures the well-rounded spiritual life, and also the well-rounded spiritual society, in which good men and women of all types and gifts have their proper places and work together harmoniously in the Lord’s service.

But the Israelites in their new prosperity forgot their duty to the Lord. So long as Joshua lived or any of the elders who had been eyewitnesses of the miracles which the Lord had performed for their salvation, they remained faithful; but as soon as these were gone, they began to have dealings with the evil peoples of the land, to intermarry with them, and presently even to worship their idols. Our first efforts to lead a spiritual life have a certain zeal which carries us along. Joshua—the truth fighting—is alive in us, our leader; the many instances in which the Lord has helped us in temptation are fresh in our memories. Then we gain a measure of victory; we taste the satisfaction of living from spiritual motives; we feel that we are settled in the right way and may relax our vigilance. We forget that we have not completely destroyed the enemies which we have subdued, but have merely, as it were, put them to tribute. And while we rest on our laurels, confident in our new-found security and peace, these enemies begin to stir again and to gain strength. This is the period of the Judges. The keynote of this period is found in Judges 17:6: “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.”

In the story of Gideon, we have again impressed upon us—though

in a new form, the lesson of the necessity of humility, obedience, and courage. The enemy this time is Midian. Swedenborg links Midian in a good sense with those of his own day who were brought up in the doctrine of faith alone and believed it because it was taught them by the church, and yet were in a good state of life. In a bad sense the Midianites, he says, are those who are in “truth which was not truth because there was no good of life.” Sometimes, after a period of apparent security in our relations to the Lord, we are suddenly overwhelmed by an attack from without. This may perhaps take the form of ridicule from some person who seems to know a great deal more about the Bible than we do and uses the very stories which we have loved and revered against us as weapons to break down our faith, appealing to so-called “common sense” to support his attack. Thus our childhood’s knowledge is made to raise doubts in our minds. Those of us who have skeptics among our acquaintances become very familiar with the attacks of the Midianites.

The angel of the Lord came to Gideon as he was threshing wheat in the winepress to hide it from the Midianites. Gideon was of the tribe of Manasseh, the tribe which represents love of the neighbor coming from its true source, the Lord, and expressing itself in the outward life. Gideon acknowledged himself to be the least in the tribe, but he was found trying to preserve some wheat—some genuine good—from the Midianites. Even a very small amount of such genuine love can be used by the Lord to destroy the Midianites “as one man” if we will be faithful and brave. Gideon received the sign of fire from heaven consuming his offering as a proof that the Lord’s power would be with him. His first act after that was to destroy the altar of Baal (Baal, like Babylon, represents the love of dominion from the love of self) which had been set up by his own father. Next he built an altar to the Lord in its place. After this he received the further signs of the dew on the fleece and on the ground, which picture the fact that the Lord is with all our genuine efforts to be good, whether these efforts seem to succeed or not. When we are attacked by the Midianites, the first thing

necessary is the admission of our own weakness and need of help from the Lord. The second is that we see that what stands in our way is the altar to Baal in our minds; that is, when we find it hard to meet and overcome ridicule and worldly reasoning, it is because we really care more about what people around us think of us than we do about what the Lord thinks of us. Once we see and overthrow this altar, the Lord can show us the truths we need for our defense. If we can bring ourselves to think of ridicule as a test of our sincerity and courage, the battle is half won, and if we can be armed with truths from the Word with which to meet ridicule, we can go the rest of the way.

It is obvious, even in the letter, that the victory of Gideon teaches the lesson that the power to conquer in temptation comes from the Lord and not from ourselves. The details of the victory suggest the means by which the Lord's power is made effective in us. In addition to his own tribe, Gideon summoned men from the three northernmost tribes—representing truth to fight against falsity. Then all those who were afraid were sent home; we must put aside fear of failure and fear of consequences when we enter upon the Lord's battles. Finally only those who stooped and drank hastily at the spring, lapping water from their hands as a dog laps, were chosen to win the victory. This suggests that the battle with the Midianites calls for speed and zeal and our quickest wits to select hastily the truths which will answer our present external need for arguments. The army was divided into three parts, picturing attack on all three planes of heart, mind, and conduct; and it was placed so as to surround the enemy and made use of no ordinary weapons of warfare. The ordinary campaign of argument and reasoning cannot be used against those who employ ridicule or against the influence of such attacks in our own minds. These enemies must be attacked suddenly, upon all sides, and with weapons which are not generally thought of as weapons. Trumpets represent the power of the Lord speaking through the Word, and the torches within the pitchers are the truth which is hidden within the letter of the Word, truth which can flash out suddenly from an

apparently dark or obscure verse.

The Midianites were thrown into confusion and destroyed each other in the darkness. The attack of those who ridicule faith in the Lord and the Word as childish can often be routed by a bombardment of simple quotations from the Scriptures which come from different angles of thought. Such an attack is always unexpected. The Lord's truth shines forth where they were convinced all was darkness; His power is manifest in one they thought an easy prey. They are thrown into confusion, and if they try to answer they destroy their own strength by self-contradiction.

We have the Lord's own example to follow here. Three times He answered the tempter by a simple quotation from the Scriptures, and again and again He put the scribes and Pharisees to rout in the same way. Study Matthew 22:23-46 for a wonderful illustration of this method. If we will think about what we read in the Word and memorize striking verses, we can all arm ourselves with Gideon's lamps and pitchers and trumpets. Verses like the following come to mind:

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. (Psalm 14:1)

For lo, the wicked bend their bow, they make ready their arrow upon the string, that they may privily shoot at the upright in heart. (Psalm 11:2)

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, saith the Lord. (Isaiah 55:8)

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Explained, n. 455⁹: “‘Midian’ here means those who do not care for truth, because they are merely natural and external: therefore Midian was smitten by those who ‘lapped the waters in the hand with the tongue like a dog’; these mean such as have an appetite for truths, thus who from some natural affection seek to know truths, a ‘dog’ signifying appetite and eagerness, ‘waters’ truths, and ‘lapping them with the tongue’ to have an appetite for and eagerly seek. So it was by these that Midian was smitten. Anyone can see that such things would not have been commanded unless they had been significative.”

Arcana Coelestia, n. 8815: “The Divine truth which passes through heaven is also represented by . . . the trumpets with which the three hundred men who

were with Gideon sounded round about the camp of Midian, Amalek, and the sons of the east (Judges 7). The reason why the trumpets produced this effect was that they represented the truth Divine through the heavens, which is such that it perfects the good, but destroys the evil; the reason why it perfects the good is that these receive the Divine good which is in the truth; but that it destroys the evil is because these do not receive the Divine good which is in it. . . . ‘Midian, Amalek, and the sons of the east,’ round about whose camp the three hundred men of Gideon sounded the trumpets, signified those who were in evils and in the derivative falsities.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. From what book of the Bible is our lesson for today? *Judges*
- J. Who were the Judges? *temporary local leaders*
- J. In what way were the Judges different from Moses and Joshua as leaders?
not great leaders of entire people
- J. What was the trouble with the people in the period of the Judges?
forgot God
- P. Which Judge is our lesson about today? *Gideon*
- J. From what tribe did he come? *Manasseh*
- P. What enemy was attacking Israel? *Midian (also Amalek)*
- J. What was the first thing Gideon did after he was called? *humbled himself*
- J. What assurance did he ask of the Lord? *fleece*
- J. From what tribes did he gather his army? *Asher, Zebulun, Naphtali, Manasseh*
- P. Why did the army have to be reduced in numbers? *God to give victory*
- P. Who were first sent home? *fearful*
- P. What was the second test? *water drinking*
- P. How large was the army finally? *three hundred*
- P. What did they have instead of weapons? *lamps, pitchers, trumpets*
- J. How was the attack made? *surrounded enemy, broke jars, shouted*
- J. What was the result? *confusion, victory*
- I. What do the Judges represent? *particular truths needed in time of trouble*
- S. What do you think are the important lessons taught in this story? *trust the Lord, get rid of fearful thoughts, be prepared to face ridicule, ask the Lord what is right*