Gideon

Bible Stories Anthology — Judges 6–8

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

Three Hundred Men and a Broken Jar

Every year, as soon as the wheat was ripe, they came. Camels by the thousand, tents, herds, whole families of raiders out of the eastern desert, spreading over the fields of Israel like locusts until nothing green was left. For seven years Israel hid in caves.

In one of those years a young farmer named Gideon was threshing a little wheat in the bottom of a winepress, where no one would see it, when a stranger sitting under an oak tree greeted him: *The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valour.*

Gideon did not feel like a mighty man of valour. He was the least son of the weakest family in his tribe, and he said so. He argued, he asked for a sign, and when he obeyed he did it at night because he was afraid. He asked God for proof with a fleece of wool — and then asked again.

God answered every one of his fears. Then He took the army Gideon gathered — thirty-two thousand men — and cut it down to three hundred, so that no one could ever say Israel had saved itself. In the middle of the night those three hundred surrounded a camp of more than a hundred thousand, each man with a ram's horn in one hand and a clay jar with a torch hidden inside it in the other. At a signal they smashed the jars, the lights blazed out of the dark, the horns blew, and three hundred voices shouted, *The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon!* The enemy army woke in terror and turned its swords on itself.

The New Testament remembers Gideon among the heroes of faith who **"out of weakness were made strong"** (Hebrews 11:34). His story is about exactly that.

The Setting

When. The time of the judges, after Joshua's death and before Israel had a king. By the reckoning most often used with an Exodus about 1446 B.C., Gideon's day falls in the 1100s B.C., something over two centuries after the fall of Jericho. Jephthah, a later judge, speaks of about three hundred years between the conquest and his own day (Judges 11:26).

The cycle of the judges. The book of Judges tells the same story over and over, and it spells the pattern out at the start:

> **Judges 2:11** *And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD, and served Baalim:*
> **Judges 2:16** *Nevertheless the LORD raised up judges, which delivered them out of the hand of those that spoiled them.*
> **Judges 2:19** *And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they returned, and corrupted themselves more than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them, and to bow down unto them; they ceased not from their own doings, nor from their stubborn way.*

Israel turns to idols; enemies overrun them; they cry to God; God raises up a deliverer; the land has rest; the deliverer dies; and the cycle starts again, each time a little worse. The Hebrew word translated "judges," *shophetim*, means more than courtroom judges. These were leaders and deliverers raised up by God for a crisis. Gideon's story is the fourth great turn of that cycle, and it sits at the very centre of the book.

Who the enemy was. The **Midianites** were distant relatives of Israel, descended from Midian, a son of Abraham by his later wife Keturah (Genesis 25:1-2). Moses himself had married a Midianite and lived among them for forty years. With them came the **Amalekites**, descendants of Esau (Genesis 36:12) and old enemies of Israel from the wilderness, and **"the children of the east,"** the desert tribes beyond the Jordan. They were nomads, and they had something Israel's earlier enemies did not have in such numbers: the camel. A camel could carry a raider and his goods across the desert and far into the settled land faster than any farmer could gather to resist him. The Midianite invasions are among the earliest recorded uses of camels on this scale in war.

Where. Gideon lived at **Ophrah**, a town of the clan of **Abiezer** in the tribe of **Manasseh**, west of the Jordan. (The site of Ophrah is not known for certain.) The raiders crossed the Jordan and camped in the **valley of Jezreel**, the broad, fertile plain that runs from the Jordan valley toward the Mediterranean and cuts across the northern hill country — the richest farmland in the land and the natural highway for an invading army. At its eastern end stand **Mount Gilboa** to the south and **the hill of Moreh** to the north, with the valley between. At the foot of Gilboa is a strong spring, **the well of Harod** (today called Ein Harod). That is where the story's battle was decided.

The administration. The **Mosaic Law**. Israel had the Law, the covenant, and the tabernacle at Shiloh. But the people had mixed the worship of the LORD with the worship of Baal, the Canaanite storm god, and Asherah, the goddess of fertility — and Gideon's own father kept an altar to Baal.

The Story, Told Faithfully

Seven Years of Locusts

> **Judges 6:1** *And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD: and the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years.*

> **Judges 6:2** *And the hand of Midian prevailed against Israel: and because of the Midianites the children of Israel made them the dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strong holds.*

"The LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian." How are we to read that? Scripture explains its own words here. When Moses warned Israel what would happen if they turned to other gods, God described it this way: **"I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured"** (Deuteronomy 31:17). As this series understands it, and as the library's study *God: Deliverer, Not Destroyer* sets out, God "delivered them into the hand of Midian" by withdrawing the protection Israel had thrown away. Hebrew often says God *does* what He *allows*, an idiom of permission. Israel had chosen the gods of Canaan; those gods could not protect them.

"Dens which are in the mountains, and caves, and strong holds." The hill country of Manasseh is full of caves. God's people, who had been promised houses they did not build and vineyards they did not plant, were living like hunted animals.

> **Judges 6:3** *And so it was, when Israel had sown, that the Midianites came up, and the Amalekites, and the children of the east, even they came up against them;*
> **Judges 6:4** *And they encamped against them, and destroyed the increase of the earth, till thou come unto Gaza, and left no sustenance for Israel, neither sheep, nor ox, nor ass.*
> **Judges 6:5** *For they came up with their cattle and their tents, and they came as grasshoppers for multitude; for both they and their camels were without number: and they entered into the land to destroy it.*
> **Judges 6:6** *And Israel was greatly impoverished because of the Midianites; and the children of Israel cried unto the LORD.*

"When Israel had sown." The raiders timed their coming to the harvest. Israel did the work of ploughing and sowing all year, and the Midianites took the crop. They drove all the way to **Gaza**, on the Mediterranean coast in the far southwest — they swept the whole breadth of the land.

"They came as grasshoppers for multitude." The word is *arbeh*, the locust, the same word used of the plague of locusts in Egypt. The comparison is a **simile**, a comparison using *like* or *as*, and it is exact: a locust swarm eats every green thing and moves on. So did Midian.

"Israel was greatly impoverished." The Hebrew is *dalal*, to be brought low, made weak and thin. Seven years of stolen harvests had starved them.

"And the children of Israel cried unto the LORD." It took seven years.

A Prophet Before a Deliverer

> **Judges 6:7** *And it came to pass, when the children of Israel cried unto the LORD because of the Midianites,*
> **Judges 6:8** *That the LORD sent a prophet unto the children of Israel, which said unto them, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, I brought you up from Egypt, and brought you forth out of the house of bondage;*
> **Judges 6:9** *And I delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians, and out of the hand of all that oppressed you, and drave them out from before you, and gave you their land;*
> **Judges 6:10** *And I said unto you, I am the LORD your God; fear not the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but ye have not obeyed my voice.*

Before God sent a deliverer, He sent a word. The prophet is unnamed, and his message is short: *I brought you out. I delivered you. I gave you the land. I told you not to fear the gods of this land. You have not obeyed.* The Midianites were the symptom. The disease was idolatry, and God named it before He healed it. There is no record that the people answered. But God did not wait for them to deserve help before He sent it.

The Winepress and the Oak

> **Judges 6:11** *And there came an angel of the LORD, and sat under an oak which was in Ophrah, that pertained unto Joash the Abi-ezrite: and his son Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress, to hide it from the Midianites.*

"Gideon threshed wheat by the winepress." Wheat was normally threshed on a threshing floor — a flat, open place on a hilltop where the wind could carry away the chaff when the grain was tossed into the air. A winepress was the opposite: a pit cut into the rock, low and enclosed, where grapes were trodden. Threshing wheat in a winepress was slow and clumsy, and the chaff would not blow away. But no Midianite scout on the hills would see it. That picture tells you everything about Israel in those years: a man hiding in a hole to beat out a few handfuls of his own grain.

Gideon's name. *Gideon* comes from the Hebrew *gada'*, to hew or cut down, as a man cuts down a tree. He was about to live up to it.

"There came an angel of the LORD, and sat under an oak." God's messenger did not arrive in thunder. He sat down under a tree and watched.

> **Judges 6:12** *And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him, and said unto him, The LORD is with thee, thou mighty man of valour.*

"Thou mighty man of valour." The Hebrew is *gibbor hechayil*, a mighty man of strength, a champion. It is a startling greeting for a man hiding in a winepress. As this series understands it, God addressed Gideon not as he saw himself but as God would make him. God calls things that are not as though they were (Romans 4:17). The greeting was a promise.

"The LORD is with thee." This is the heart of the whole story. Everything else follows from it.

"If the LORD Be With Us, Why?"

> **Judges 6:13** *And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt? but now the LORD hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites.*

Gideon's answer is honest, and it is the question of every discouraged believer. *If God is with us, why is all this happening? Where are the miracles we heard about?* He had heard the stories of the Red Sea and the manna from his father's generation. He had never seen anything like them.

"Oh my Lord." The Hebrew here is *adoni*, "my lord," the ordinary polite address to a man. Gideon did not yet know who he was talking to.

"The LORD hath forsaken us." Gideon was half right. The prophet had just told Israel why: *ye have not obeyed my voice*. God had hidden His face because they had turned from Him. But God had not stopped caring, and the proof was sitting under the oak.

> **Judges 6:14** *And the LORD looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?*

"And the LORD looked upon him." The text moves from "the angel of the LORD" to "the LORD." It is the same pattern this series has met at Peniel and at the burning bush: the angel was God's messenger, speaking God's words with God's full authority, so that what he said, God said (compare **"my name is in him,"** Exodus 23:21).

"Go in this thy might." What might? Gideon had just said he had none. The only might in view was the one just spoken: *the LORD is with thee*. That was his strength.

"Have not I sent thee?" A question that expects the answer *yes* — the figure called **erotesis**, a question asked not for information but for emphasis. The same words, "Have not I commanded thee?", had been spoken to Joshua (Joshua 1:9).

> **Judges 6:15** *And he said unto him, Oh my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house.*

"Oh my Lord." In the Hebrew text as it has been handed down, this second "my Lord" is pointed as *Adonai*, the title used of God, where the first was *adoni*. Gideon was beginning to understand.

"My family is poor in Manasseh." The word for "family" is *eleph*, a clan, literally a "thousand." Gideon's clan was the weakest in his tribe, and he was the least in his father's house. He listed every reason he was the wrong man. Moses had done the same at the bush.

> **Judges 6:16** *And the LORD said unto him, Surely I will be with thee, and thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man.*

"Surely I will be with thee." In Hebrew these are exactly the words God spoke to Moses at the burning bush: *ki ehyeh 'immak*, **"Certainly I will be with thee"** (Exodus 3:12). God gave Gideon the same answer He gave Moses. The question was never whether Gideon was strong enough. It was whether God was with him.

"As one man." A **simile**: the whole Midianite army would fall as easily as if it were a single man.

The Present Under the Oak

> **Judges 6:17** *And he said unto him, If now I have found grace in thy sight, then shew me a sign that thou talkest with me.*
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> **Judges 6:18** *Depart not hence, I pray thee, until I come unto thee, and bring forth my present, and set it before thee. And he said, I will tarry until thou come again.*
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> **Judges 6:19** *And Gideon went in, and made ready a kid, and unleavened cakes of an ephah of flour: the flesh he put in a basket, and he put the broth in a pot, and brought it out unto him under the oak, and presented it.*

"Shew me a sign that thou talkest with me." Gideon wanted to know whether this was really God speaking.

“A kid, and unleavened cakes of an ephah of flour.” An ephah was about half a bushel of flour — enough bread for a crowd. In a land where the enemy had taken nearly everything, this was a lavish gift from a poor man’s table. Middle-eastern hospitality required that a guest be fed, and Gideon gave the best he had, just as Abraham had done for his three visitors (Genesis 18:6-8).

> **Judges 6:20** *And the angel of God said unto him, Take the flesh and the unleavened cakes, and lay them upon this rock, and pour out the broth. And he did so.*
>
> **Judges 6:21** *Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. Then the angel of the LORD departed out of his sight.*

“There rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh.” The meal became a sacrifice. God accepted Gideon’s gift the way He accepted the first sacrifices at the tabernacle, when **“there came a fire out from before the LORD, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering”** (Leviticus 9:24). The sign Gideon asked for was given in fire.

> **Judges 6:22** *And when Gideon perceived that he was an angel of the LORD, Gideon said, Alas, O Lord GOD! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face.*
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> **Judges 6:23** *And the LORD said unto him, Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die.*
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> **Judges 6:24** *Then Gideon built an altar there unto the LORD, and called it Jehovah-shalom: unto this day it is yet in Ophrah of the Abi-ezrites.*

“Alas, O Lord GOD! for because I have seen an angel of the LORD face to face.” Gideon was terrified. Israel knew what God had told Moses: **“there shall no man see me, and live”** (Exodus 33:20). But Gideon had seen God’s messenger, not God, and God Himself answered his fear.

“Peace be unto thee; fear not: thou shalt not die.” *Shalom lecha.* The Hebrew *shalom* means far more than the absence of war: wholeness, soundness, well-being, everything made right.

“Jehovah-shalom.” *The LORD is peace.* In the middle of an enemy occupation, with the Midianites still camped on his fields, Gideon named his altar for the peace God had given him. It is one of the great names of God in the Old Testament. The peace came first; the victory came later.

Tearing Down His Father’s Altar

> **Judges 6:25** *And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Take thy father’s young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old, and throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down the grove that is by it:*
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> **Judges 6:26** *And build an altar unto the LORD thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place, and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shalt cut down.*

Before God would deal with Midian, He dealt with Baal. The trouble had started with idolatry, and the deliverance started by pulling it down — in Gideon’s own family.

“The altar of Baal that thy father hath.” Gideon’s own father, Joash, kept the town’s altar to Baal. The man God chose came from a home that had turned from Him.

“The grove that is by it.” “Grove” is the Hebrew *asherah*: not a stand of trees, but a carved wooden pole or image of the goddess Asherah, set up beside Baal’s altar. Gideon was to cut it down and use it for firewood.

“The second bullock of seven years old.” Seven years old — as old as the Midianite oppression. As this series understands it, the detail is not accidental: the bull that had grown up through all seven years of Israel’s punishment was to be offered to the LORD on the ruins of the idolatry that had caused it.

“In the ordered place.” Gideon was to build the altar properly, in order, as the Law required.

> **Judges 6:27** *Then Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as the LORD had said unto him: and so it was, because he feared his father’s household, and the men of the city, that he could not do it by day, that he did it by night.*

“Because he feared … he did it by night.” Scripture does not hide it: Gideon was afraid. But he obeyed. Courage is not the absence of fear; it is doing what God says while afraid.

> **Judges 6:28** *And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was cast down, and the grove was cut down that was by it, and the second bullock was offered upon the altar that was built.*
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> **Judges 6:29** *And they said one to another, Who hath done this thing? And when they enquired and asked, they said, Gideon the son of Joash hath done this thing.*
>
> **Judges 6:30** *Then the men of the city said unto Joash, Bring out thy son, that he may die: because he hath cast down the altar of Baal, and because he hath cut down the grove that was by it.*

The men of an Israelite town demanded the death of an Israelite for destroying an idol. That is how far Israel had fallen. The Law said the idolater was to die (Deuteronomy 13:6-10); the town wanted to kill the man who tore the idol down.

> **Judges 6:31** *And Joash said unto all that stood against him, Will ye plead for Baal? will ye save him? he that will plead for him, let him be put to death whilst it is yet morning: if he be a god, let him plead for himself, because one hath cast down his altar.*
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> **Judges 6:32** *Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, Let Baal plead against him, because he hath thrown down his altar.*

Joash — the owner of the altar — stood up for his son. **“Will ye plead for Baal? … if he be a god, let him plead for himself.”** It is biting **irony**: a god who needs men to defend him is no god at all. Something had changed in Joash that night. As this series understands it, his son’s obedience had shaken him out of his idolatry.

“Jerubbaal.” *Let Baal contend* (or *plead*). The name was a challenge: *let Baal fight him, if he can.* Baal never did. The name stuck, and every time it was spoken it mocked the god who could not defend his own altar.

The Spirit of the LORD Came Upon Gideon

> **Judges 6:33** *Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the children of the east were gathered together, and went over, and pitched in the valley of Jezreel.*

> **Judges 6:34** *But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet; and Abi-ezer was gathered after him.*
>
> **Judges 6:35** *And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh; who also was gathered after him: and he sent messengers unto Asher, and unto Zebulun, and unto Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.*

"Went over, and pitched in the valley of Jezreel." The raiders crossed the Jordan again for the harvest, and camped in the best farmland in Israel.

"The Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon." The Hebrew verb is striking: *lavash*, to clothe or to put on a garment. Literally, *the spirit of the LORD clothed itself with Gideon.* God's power put Gideon on the way a man puts on a coat. This is a **metaphor**, and it says something important: the strength that followed was not Gideon's own. Under the Law, God's spirit came *upon* particular people for particular work — Othniel before Gideon (Judges 3:10), David later (1 Samuel 16:13).

"He blew a trumpet; and Abi-ezer was gathered after him." The first to answer were Gideon's own clan — the same people who had wanted him dead a few days before. Then the call went out to Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali, the northern tribes nearest the valley.

The Fleece

> **Judges 6:36** *And Gideon said unto God, If thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said,*
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> **Judges 6:37** *Behold, I will put a fleece of wool in the floor; and if the dew be on the fleece only, and it be dry upon all the earth beside, then shall I know that thou wilt save Israel by mine hand, as thou hast said.*
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> **Judges 6:38** *And it was so: for he rose up early on the morrow, and thrust the fleece together, and wringed the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water.*
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> **Judges 6:39** *And Gideon said unto God, Let not thine anger be hot against me, and I will speak but this once: let me prove, I pray thee, but this once with the fleece; let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew.*
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> **Judges 6:40** *And God did so that night: for it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground.*

This is the most famous part of Gideon's story, and it is often taught the wrong way. It is worth reading slowly.

"As thou hast said." Twice Gideon says it. He was not asking what God wanted. God had already told him plainly, twice (6:14, 16), and had confirmed it with fire from the rock. Gideon knew God's will. The fleece was not a request for guidance. It was a request for reassurance, because he was afraid to act on what God had said.

"In the floor." The threshing floor, the open place where dew would fall evenly.

"A bowl full of water." The first sign was clear. But Gideon may have thought of an objection: wool naturally soaks up dew, and a fleece can stay wet after the ground has dried. So he asked for the reverse, which was much harder: the fleece dry and all the ground around it wet.

“Let not thine anger be hot against me.” Gideon knew he was pressing God. Israel had been warned, **“Ye shall not tempt the LORD your God, as ye tempted him in Massah”** (Deuteronomy 6:16), where their fathers had demanded proof that God was with them.

“And God did so that night.” God did not rebuke him. He answered, again. That is the lesson of the fleece: not that believers should test God with signs, but that God is patient with a frightened servant who wants to obey. He knew Gideon’s frame. Later, before the battle, God would offer Gideon one more reassurance without being asked (7:10-11).

Should believers “put out a fleece”? The story itself gives the answer. Gideon’s fleece was a sign of his hesitation, not a model of faith; he already had God’s word. Believers today have far more than Gideon had: the whole written word of God, **“profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”** (2 Timothy 3:16), and the gift of holy spirit within. God’s will is found by knowing His word and renewing the mind to it — **“that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God”** (Romans 12:2) — and by asking in faith: **“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not … But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering”** (James 1:5-6). Setting up a test — *if the phone rings, I’ll take the job* — is not faith, and it puts God’s will at the mercy of chance. What the fleece does show is that God understands fear, and does not throw away a servant who struggles to believe.

Too Many

> **Judges 7:1** *Then Jerubbaal, who is Gideon, and all the people that were with him, rose up early, and pitched beside the well of Harod: so that the host of the Midianites were on the north side of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley.*
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> **Judges 7:2** *And the LORD said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me.*

“The well of Harod.” Harod comes from *charad*, to tremble. Israel camped at the “Spring of Trembling.” In the very next verse God tells the *fearful* — *chared*, the same root — to go home. The wordplay is a **paronomasia**: at the Spring of Trembling, the trembling were sent away.

“Too many.” Gideon had thirty-two thousand men. The enemy had about a hundred and thirty-five thousand (8:10). Every general in history would have said Gideon had too few. God said he had too many.

“Lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me.” Here is the reason, stated plainly, and it is the key to the whole story. If thirty-two thousand men won, Israel would boast of its own strength. God meant to win in a way that left no room for boasting.

> **Judges 7:3** *Now therefore go to, proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early from mount Gilead. And there returned of the people twenty and two thousand; and there remained ten thousand.*

“Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return.” This was the Law. Before any battle Israel’s officers were to say, **“What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren’s heart faint as well as his heart”** (Deuteronomy 20:8). Fear spreads.

"Mount Gilead." Gilead is east of the Jordan, but this camp was west of it, at the foot of Gilboa. Some think the name was also used for a hill near Gilboa; others that the phrase was a set formula for sending men home. The text does not explain it.

"There returned of the people twenty and two thousand." More than two out of three went home. Gideon had himself been afraid, and he could hardly blame them.

Lapping Like a Dog

> **Judges 7:4** *And the LORD said unto Gideon, The people are yet too many; bring them down unto the water, and I will try them for thee there: and it shall be, that of whom I say unto thee, This shall go with thee, the same shall go with thee; and of whomsoever I say unto thee, This shall not go with thee, the same shall not go.*
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> **Judges 7:5** *So he brought down the people unto the water: and the LORD said unto Gideon, Every one that lappeth of the water with his tongue, as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise every one that boweth down upon his knees to drink.*
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> **Judges 7:6** *And the number of them that lapped, putting their hand to their mouth, were three hundred men: but all the rest of the people bowed down upon their knees to drink water.*
>
> **Judges 7:7** *And the LORD said unto Gideon, By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you, and deliver the Midianites into thine hand: and let all the other people go every man unto his place.*

"The people are yet too many." Ten thousand was still too many.

"I will try them for thee there." "Try" is the word used for refining metal, *tsaraph*: God would sift them.

How they drank. Three hundred scooped water up in their hands and lapped it from their hands as a dog laps; the rest, over nine thousand, knelt down and put their faces to the water. Many teachers have said the three hundred were chosen because they were more alert, keeping their eyes up and their weapons ready while they drank. That may be so, but the text never says it. The Jewish historian Josephus, writing in the first century, took the opposite view — that the three hundred were the less soldierly men, and that God chose them to make the victory more plainly His. The only reason scripture gives is the one in verse 2: God was making the army small, so that the victory would be His. As this series understands it, the test did not pick the best soldiers. It picked the number.

"By the three hundred men that lapped will I save you." Three hundred against a hundred and thirty-five thousand — about one Israelite for every four hundred and fifty of the enemy.

> **Judges 7:8** *So the people took victuals in their hand, and their trumpets: and he sent all the rest of Israel every man unto his tent, and retained those three hundred men: and the host of Midian was beneath him in the valley.*

"The people took victuals in their hand, and their trumpets." The three hundred took the food and the rams' horns of the men who were leaving. That is how three hundred men came to have three hundred trumpets. An ancient army usually had only a few trumpeters, each leading a large company; three hundred horns would sound like three hundred companies.

A Barley Loaf in the Night

> **Judges 7:9** *And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Arise, get thee down unto the host; for I have delivered it into thine hand.*
>
> **Judges 7:10** *But if thou fear to go down, go thou with Phurah thy servant down to the host:*
>
> **Judges 7:11** *And thou shalt hear what they say; and afterward shall thine hands be strengthened to go down unto the host. Then went he down with Phurah his servant unto the outside of the armed men that were in the host.*

"I have delivered it into thine hand." Past tense, before the battle: the prophetic past, **heterosis** of tense. God speaks of what He will do as already done.

"But if thou fear to go down." God knew. He did not scold Gideon for his fear; He made provision for it. This time Gideon did not ask for a sign. God gave him one.

"Shall thine hands be strengthened." An **idiom**: *you will be encouraged*.

> **Judges 7:12** *And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude.*

From the slope of Gilboa, Gideon and his servant looked down on the camp: tents across the valley floor, and camels **"as the sand by the sea side for multitude."** That is **hyperbole**, an exaggeration for effect — and it gives exactly the impression Gideon must have had.

> **Judges 7:13** *And when Gideon was come, behold, there was a man that told a dream unto his fellow, and said, Behold, I dreamed a dream, and, lo, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the host of Midian, and came unto a tent, and smote it that it fell, and overturned it, that the tent lay along.*
>
> **Judges 7:14** *And his fellow answered and said, This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel: for into his hand hath God delivered Midian, and all the host.*

"A cake of barley bread." Barley was the poor man's grain, cheaper than wheat, the food of peasants and animals. A rolling barley loaf was a fitting picture of Israel — a nation of poor farmers — and of Gideon, the least son of the weakest clan, who had been beating out wheat in a winepress. **"Tumbled"** means rolling, turning over and over. **"A tent"** — the home of the nomad. The dream set the farmer's bread against the nomad's tent, and the bread won.

"This is nothing else save the sword of Gideon." The enemy soldier knew Gideon's name. Word had spread through the Midianite camp that the God of Israel had raised up a man. The interpretation came from the mouth of an enemy — and God arranged for Gideon to be standing in the dark at exactly the right tent at exactly the right moment to hear it.

> **Judges 7:15** *And it was so, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream, and the interpretation thereof, that he worshipped, and returned into the host of Israel, and said, Arise; for the LORD hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian.*

"He worshipped." Before he did anything else, there in the dark at the edge of the enemy camp, Gideon bowed and worshipped. Then he ran back up the hill. The man who had asked for sign after sign now

said, with no hesitation at all, **"Arise; for the LORD hath delivered into your hand the host of Midian."** He had become what God had called him under the oak.

Trumpets, Jars and Torches

> **Judges 7:16** *And he divided the three hundred men into three companies, and he put a trumpet in every man's hand, with empty pitchers, and lamps within the pitchers.*
>
> **Judges 7:17** *And he said unto them, Look on me, and do likewise: and, behold, when I come to the outside of the camp, it shall be that, as I do, so shall ye do.*
>
> **Judges 7:18** *When I blow with a trumpet, I and all that are with me, then blow ye the trumpets also on every side of all the camp, and say, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.*

"Three companies." Three bands of a hundred, to come at the camp from three sides.

The weapons. A ram's horn (*shofar*) in one hand. In the other, an **empty pitcher** — a clay jar, the Hebrew *kad*, the same kind of jar Rebekah carried to the well (Genesis 24:14) — with a **lamp** inside. The lamp was a *lappid*, a torch: the same word used of the **"burning lamp"** that passed between the pieces when God made His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:17). The jar hid the flame until the moment it was broken.

"Look on me, and do likewise." Leadership by example. Gideon would go first.

"The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon." In verse 18 the word *sword* is printed in italics in the King James Version, because it is supplied by the translators; the Hebrew says simply *For the LORD, and for Gideon!* In verse 20, when the men actually shout, the word *sword* is in the Hebrew. Leaving a word out to be supplied by the hearer is the figure **ellipsis** — and in a battle cry, the shorter the better. Notice the order: *the LORD* first.

> **Judges 7:19** *So Gideon, and the hundred men that were with him, came unto the outside of the camp in the beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch: and they blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers that were in their hands.*
>
> **Judges 7:20** *And the three companies blew the trumpets, and brake the pitchers, and held the lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands to blow withal: and they cried, The sword of the LORD, and of Gideon.*
>
> **Judges 7:21** *And they stood every man in his place round about the camp: and all the host ran, and cried, and fled.*

"The beginning of the middle watch; and they had but newly set the watch." Israel divided the night into three watches (compare the "beginning of the watches," Lamentations 2:19, and the "morning watch," Exodus 14:24). The middle watch began around ten o'clock at night. The sentries had just been changed: the new guards had just come out of lit tents into the dark and could not yet see, and the men they had relieved had just gone to sleep. It was the moment of greatest confusion.

"Brake the pitchers." Three hundred clay jars shattered at once — a noise like a crash of arms — and three hundred torches blazed out of the darkness on three sides of the camp. Three hundred rams' horns blasted. Three hundred voices roared. To men waking in the dark, it sounded and looked like an army of tens of thousands pouring in.

"The lamps in their left hands, and the trumpets in their right hands." Notice what is missing. Their hands were full. Not one of the three hundred had a sword in his hand.

“They stood every man in his place.” They did not charge. They stood still, holding up their lights, and watched.

> **Judges 7:22** *And the three hundred blew the trumpets, and the LORD set every man’s sword against his fellow, even throughout all the host: and the host fled to Beth-shittah in Zererath, and to the border of Abel-meholah, unto Tabbath.*

“The LORD set every man’s sword against his fellow.” The only swords drawn that night were Midian’s own. In the dark and the panic, with a camp of several different peoples who spoke different languages, every man took the man beside him for the enemy. God did the fighting. The same thing happened again in Saul’s day (1 Samuel 14:20) and in Jehoshaphat’s (2 Chronicles 20:22-23). As Jehoshaphat was told, **“Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the LORD”** (2 Chronicles 20:17).

“Fled to Beth-shittah … Abel-meholah.” Down the valley eastward, toward the Jordan crossings and home.

The Pursuit

> **Judges 7:23** *And the men of Israel gathered themselves together out of Naphtali, and out of Asher, and out of all Manasseh, and pursued after the Midianites.*
>
> **Judges 7:24** *And Gideon sent messengers throughout all mount Ephraim, saying, Come down against the Midianites, and take before them the waters unto Beth-barah and Jordan. Then all the men of Ephraim gathered themselves together, and took the waters unto Beth-barah and Jordan.*
>
> **Judges 7:25** *And they took two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb; and they slew Oreb upon the rock Oreb, and Zeeb they slew at the winepress of Zeeb, and pursued Midian, and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side Jordan.*

Now the men who had gone home came back to chase a beaten enemy, and the tribe of Ephraim seized the fords of the Jordan to cut off the retreat.

“Oreb and Zeeb.” The names mean *Raven* and *Wolf*. Two Midianite princes were caught and killed, and the places took their names. Centuries later Isaiah still spoke of **“the slaughter of Midian at the rock of Oreb”** (Isaiah 10:26).

“The winepress of Zeeb.” The story began with Gideon hiding in a winepress from the Midianites. It ended with a Midianite prince killed in a winepress.

After the Victory

The story continues in chapter 8, and it should be told honestly, because scripture tells it honestly.

A soft answer. The men of Ephraim, a proud and powerful tribe, were angry that they had not been called to the battle, and **“they did chide with him sharply”** (8:1). Gideon answered: **“Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abi-ezer?”** (8:2) — *your leftovers are better than my whole harvest; you captured the princes; what did I do?* It is a **metaphor** drawn from the grape harvest, and it worked: **“their anger was abated toward him”** (8:3). **“A soft answer turneth away wrath”** (Proverbs 15:1).

The pursuit across the Jordan. Gideon's three hundred, **"faint, yet pursuing"** (8:4), chased the two Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, across the Jordan. The Israelite towns of Succoth and Penuel refused them bread, afraid Midian might still win, and Gideon punished them on his return. He caught the kings, and learned they had killed his own brothers at Mount Tabor. Of the great army, about fifteen thousand were left; **"there fell an hundred and twenty thousand men that drew sword"** (8:10).

A crown refused.

> **Judges 8:22** *Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian.*
>
> **Judges 8:23** *And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you.*

The people offered Gideon a crown and a dynasty. **"For thou hast delivered us"** — they had already forgotten who delivered them. Gideon refused: **"the LORD shall rule over you."** It was the right answer.

A snare.

> **Judges 8:27** *And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house.*

Then he asked for the gold earrings from the spoil — about seventeen hundred shekels of gold, over forty pounds — and made an **ephod**, a priestly garment, and set it up in his hometown. Perhaps he meant it as a memorial; perhaps as a way to ask God's guidance without going to the tabernacle. Scripture does not give his reason. It gives the result: **"all Israel went thither a whoring after it."** "Whoring" is the Bible's plain **metaphor** for idolatry — unfaithfulness to God pictured as unfaithfulness in marriage. The man who tore down his father's idol set up an object that became an idol. **"It became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house."**

Rest, and then the cycle again. "The country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon" (8:28). Gideon had many wives and seventy sons, and a son by a concubine in Shechem whom he named Abimelech — *my father is king* — a strange name for the son of a man who refused a crown. After Gideon died, **"the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baal-berith their god"** (8:33), and Abimelech murdered his brothers to make himself king (Judges 9). The cycle turned again.

The story does not flatter Gideon. He was fearful at the start and careless at the end. And still the New Testament names him among the heroes of faith. What made him great was not Gideon. It was the LORD who was with him.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

"As in the day of Midian." Gideon's victory became a byword in Israel for a deliverance that only God could have given. Isaiah reached for it when he prophesied the coming of the Messiah:

> **Isaiah 9:4** *For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.*

And two verses later, he says who will break that yoke:

> **Isaiah 9:6** *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called … The Prince of Peace.*
>
> **Isaiah 9:7** *Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.*

Gideon's victory was the pattern; the Messiah's would be the fulfilment. Isaiah even places it in the same country: the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, the "Galilee of the nations" (Isaiah 9:1), where Gideon's tribes answered his trumpet and where Jesus later grew up and began His ministry (Matthew 4:13-16).

A king who would rule. Gideon rightly refused a crown: **"the LORD shall rule over you."** God did intend Israel to have a king — His own anointed king. The angel told Mary of her son: **"the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end"** (Luke 1:32-33). Gideon's son Abimelech seized a throne by murder; God's Son received His throne from God.

Jehovah-shalom. Gideon's altar was named *The LORD is peace*. The peace God spoke to Gideon under the oak — *peace be unto thee; fear not* — was fulfilled in the Messiah. Jesus Christ died for our sins, was raised from the dead, and ascended to God's right hand; and **"having made peace through the blood of his cross,"** God reconciled all things by Him (Colossians 1:20). **"For he is our peace"** (Ephesians 2:14). Jesus said to His disciples, **"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you … Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid"** (John 14:27).

The weak things. God chose a man from the weakest clan and an army of three hundred, and gave them a victory no one could credit to them. The Messiah Himself came as the son of a carpenter's household in Nazareth, of which it was said, **"Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?"** (John 1:46). God's way of saving has always confounded the strong.

To the Grace Administration

Strength made perfect in weakness. The single lesson God stated in the story — *lest Israel vaunt themselves against me, saying, Mine own hand hath saved me* — is the lesson Paul learned and taught:

> **2 Corinthians 12:9** *And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.*
>
> **1 Corinthians 1:27** *But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;*
>
> **1 Corinthians 1:29** *That no flesh should glory in his presence.*

Salvation in this administration is the same: **"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast"** (Ephesians 2:8-9). God made sure no one could say, *mine own hand hath saved me.*

Light in earthen vessels. As this series understands it, the three hundred jars are a picture Paul's words fit exactly, though Paul does not mention Gideon:

> **2 Corinthians 4:6** *For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*
>
> **2 Corinthians 4:7** *But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.*

A believer is a clay jar with a light inside. The light is not ours, and the jar is nothing much. But when the jar is broken open — when we stop protecting ourselves and let the light out — the darkness cannot stand before it.

"The LORD is with thee." Everything in Gideon's life turned on that sentence. Believers have the same promise, spoken even more strongly: **"he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee"** (Hebrews 13:5). The question is never whether we are strong enough, but whether we will believe that He is with us.

Not by might. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the LORD of hosts" (Zechariah 4:6). The spirit of the LORD came *upon* Gideon for a season. In this administration the gift of holy spirit is given *within* every believer, to stay (Ephesians 1:13-14). **"For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God"** (2 Corinthians 10:4).

Knowing God's will without a fleece. Gideon had God's word and still asked for signs. Believers today have God's written word complete and the spirit within. The way to know God's will is to know His word, renew the mind to it, and ask Him in faith (Romans 12:2; James 1:5-6). God is patient with our fears, as He was with Gideon's. But He calls us to walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Tear down the idol first. Before Gideon faced Midian, he had to deal with Baal in his own father's yard. **"Little children, keep yourselves from idols"** (1 John 5:21). And the ephod is the warning at the other end: anything — even something meant as a memorial to God's goodness — can become a snare if it takes the place of God Himself.

To the Topic of Fear and Faith

- **God calls people as He will make them,** not as they see themselves.
- **"If God is with us, why?"** is an honest question, and God answers it.
- **Courage is obeying while afraid.**
- **God is patient with fear** — and He met Gideon's fear again and again.
- **Fear spreads;** faith does too.
- **God reduces what we lean on** so that the victory is His.
- **A great victory is followed by great danger:** pride, a crown, an ephod.

The Main Takeaway

When Israel's idolatry left them starving under seven years of Midianite raids, God called Gideon — the least son of the weakest clan, hiding in a winepress — a "mighty man of valour" and promised, "Surely I will be with thee"; Gideon tore down his father's altar to Baal, sought reassurance through the fleece, and then watched God cut his army from thirty-two thousand to three hundred, "lest Israel vaunt themselves against me"; with trumpets, broken jars and blazing torches, and not a sword in their hands, the three hundred stood still while the LORD turned the enemy's swords on itself — a

deliverance Isaiah remembered as "the day of Midian" when he foretold the Prince of Peace, and a lesson Paul learned: God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

- **The LORD is with thee** — that is the only strength that matters.
- **God calls the weak** so that no one can boast.
- **Deal with the idol first.**
- **God is patient with a fearful servant** who wants to obey.
- **The fleece shows hesitation, not a method;** God's will is known by His word.
- **Light in broken clay jars** — the power is God's, not ours.
- **After the victory, beware the snare.**

For Our Learning — The People

- **Gideon (Jerubbaal).** Son of Joash, of the clan of Abiezer in Manasseh; called by God to deliver Israel from Midian; judged Israel forty years; named in Hebrews 11:32.
- **The angel of the LORD.** God's messenger who sat under the oak at Ophrah, spoke God's words, and brought fire from the rock.
- **The unnamed prophet.** Sent to name Israel's sin before God sent a deliverer.
- **Joash the Abiezrite.** Gideon's father, keeper of Baal's altar, who defended his son and mocked Baal.
- **The men of Ophrah.** Wanted Gideon killed for tearing down Baal's altar.
- **Phurah.** Gideon's servant, who went down with him to the enemy camp.
- **The Midianite dreamer and his companion.** Enemy soldiers through whom God encouraged Gideon.
- **The three hundred.** Gideon's army, chosen at the spring of Harod.
- **Oreb ("Raven") and Zeeb ("Wolf").** Midianite princes, killed by the men of Ephraim.
- **Zebah and Zalmunna.** The kings of Midian, who had killed Gideon's brothers at Tabor.
- **The men of Ephraim.** Angry at being left out, calmed by Gideon's soft answer.
- **Abimelech.** Gideon's son by a concubine in Shechem, whose name means "my father is king."

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Nomadic raiding** at harvest time, with camels, tents and herds.
- **Hiding in caves and strongholds** in the hill country.
- **Threshing floors** on open, windy ground; **winepresses** cut into rock.
- **Hospitality to a guest:** a kid, broth and unleavened cakes from an ephah of flour.
- **The dread of seeing God** or His messenger (Exodus 33:20).
- **Naming an altar** to commemorate what God had done.
- **Household and town altars to Baal,** with an Asherah pole beside them.
- **Name-giving that carries a message** (Jerubbaal, "let Baal plead").
- **Calling out the tribes** with a trumpet and messengers.

- **Sending home the fearful** before battle (Deuteronomy 20:8).
- **Three night watches;** changing the guard.
- **Dreams as omens,** told and interpreted around the campfire.
- **Clay jars and torches;** rams' horns for signals.
- **Seizing the fords** to cut off retreat.
- **Gold earrings** worn by the Ishmaelite and Midianite nomads, and ornaments on camels.
- **The ephod,** a priestly garment used in seeking God's answer.
- **Many wives and concubines** among Israel's leaders.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Idiom of permission** — "the LORD delivered them into the hand of Midian" (6:1): God withdrew His protection and allowed it.
- **Simile** — "they came as grasshoppers for multitude" (6:5; 7:12); "thou shalt smite the Midianites as one man" (6:16).
- **Hyperbole** — "their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea side" (7:12).
- **Erotesis (rhetorical question)** — "have not I sent thee?" (6:14); "Will ye plead for Baal?" (6:31).
- **Irony** — "if he be a god, let him plead for himself" (6:31).
- **Metaphor** — "the Spirit of the LORD came upon [clothed itself with] Gideon" (6:34); "the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim" (8:2); "went a whoring after it" (8:27).
- **Paronomasia** — Harod ("trembling") and "whosoever is fearful" (*chared*) (7:1-3).
- **Heterosis of tense (prophetic past)** — "I have delivered it into thine hand" (7:9), before the battle.
- **Idiom** — "afterward shall thine hands be strengthened" (7:11): you will be encouraged; "they lifted up their heads no more" (8:28).
- **Ellipsis** — "For the LORD, and for Gideon" (7:18), with "sword" left to be supplied.

What the Bible Actually Says

- **Israel's oppression followed Israel's idolatry,** and God sent a prophet to say so before He sent a deliverer.
- **Gideon was threshing in a winepress,** hiding from the Midianites.
- **The angel called him "mighty man of valour"** before he had done anything.
- **"Surely I will be with thee"** repeats God's words to Moses at the bush.
- **Gideon tore down Baal's altar by night because he was afraid.**
- **Gideon's own father kept the altar of Baal,** then defended his son.
- **The fleece came after God had already spoken** — twice Gideon says "as thou hast said."
- **God cut the army to three hundred "lest Israel vaunt themselves"** — the only reason the text gives.
- **Scripture does not say the three hundred were chosen for alertness.**

- **The three hundred carried trumpets, jars and torches;** no swords are mentioned in their hands.
- **"The LORD set every man's sword against his fellow."**
- **Gideon refused to be king:** "the LORD shall rule over you."
- **Gideon's ephod became a snare** to him, his house, and all Israel.
- **Hebrews 11 names Gideon among those who "out of weakness were made strong."**

God's Will and Intent

- **God wants His people free from idols** — and deals with the root before the symptom.
- **God hears when His people cry,** even after seven years of their own making.
- **God chooses the weak** so that the glory is His.
- **God is patient with fear** and meets it with His word and His presence.
- **God fights for His people** in ways no one can take credit for.
- **God, not man, is to rule His people** — and He would send His own King.
- **God was preparing the way for the Prince of Peace,** Jesus Christ — crucified, raised, and ascended — through whom He has made peace with all who believe.