

SUNDAY SCHOOL NOTES: 17 September 2017 – GIDEON WITH GOD

After conquering the cities of Jericho and Ai, the Israelites took over most of Canaan. The book of Joshua explains that the different tribes were each given some land. However, in certain places the Israelites lived alongside the people who had lived there before. Sadly, this meant that God's people began to be influenced by these idol-worshipping tribes, and gradually idol worship became part of the way of life for the Israelites in Canaan.

When Joshua died, the leaders who had seen how God had provided for them through Joshua remained faithful, even though their leader was gone (Josh 24:31). But when those men died, the Israelites turned their backs on God and began to worship idols. God had warned them that there would be consequences if they did this. And there were! Instead of being victorious in battle, the Israelites were often defeated and struggled because other people stole their crops and cattle.

When their situation became really bad, the Israelites would suddenly remember God and pray for help. In pity, God would provide them with new god-fearing leaders so that the Israelites were safe again. But as soon as that leader died, guess what happened? Yes, the people went off after the Baals (idols) again.

These leaders were known as Judges and we read their stories in the Book of Judges! We don't need to learn all their names, but let's hear about a few. The first judge was Othniel, the young nephew of Caleb who had been one of the two spies who knew that God would help them take the land over. The list of judges includes Ehud who was left-handed and Deborah and Samson. But the same pattern of behaviour continued. Israel was faithful under a godly leader and unfaithful as soon as that leader died.

At one time the Israelites suffered for seven years because of the power of the Midianites, a people who lived in the desert. As soon as there was grain, the Midianites would steal or destroy it so the Israelites were left starving. Eventually, although they owned the land, God's people were forced to leave their homes and live in caves. They desperately needed a judge to lead them for God.

One day a young man, Gideon, was secretly beating out a few precious ears of wheat in a big hollow, a wine press. He knew he might be attacked so he was probably very nervous. Suddenly an angel appeared in front of him – that was shock number one. Shock number two came when the angel spoke to him as a 'mighty warrior' and told him that the Lord was with him! He wasn't feeling or acting bravely at this moment. He probably felt quite embarrassed to be greeted like this so he answered back: 'How on earth can you say God is with us? He has clearly abandoned us or we wouldn't be in this state.' (Of course, the truth was they had abandoned God!)

God challenged Gideon to make a difference and to go in God's power and defeat the Midianites. Gideon was puzzled ; he came from a minor family, part of a small tribe, so no-one would expect *him* to claim to be a leader. He didn't want to make a fool of himself! Maybe this was just a dream. So he asked the angel to wait while he made him a sacrificial meal. When the meal was ready, the angel touched it with his rod and it went up in smoke, as a sacrifice. So this was no dream. Gideon realised there and then that God was real.

Then came his first assignment. He must use his father's oxen to break down the altar and the totem pole to the false god. This was not likely to make him popular with the people! So scared once again, Gideon, 'this mighty man of valour', did it at night! Sure enough the people were furious, but Gideon's dad protected him, although Gideon had sacrificed his second best ox!

The fact that he had done this meant people began to see him as a leader in God's name. When he saw that people were joining him to fight the Midianites however, he still wasn't convinced that he was meant to lead an army so he asked for another sign. He would put out a fleece that night and if there was dew on it, but not on the ground, he would know that God wanted him to go ahead. Sure enough, the next day he collected a whole basin of water from the fleece. But Gideon was still nervous, so he asked for another sign. That night he asked that the ground be wet and the fleece dry. And God probably appreciated his need for assurance and did what he asked.

So Gideon and his men got ready for battle.

But God wanted to make sure they were going to trust him, not their weapons or their strength. He told Gideon that there were too many soldiers and that he must allow any who were scared to go home. 22 000 left! Only 10 000 remained!

Still too many! Then God told him how to sift out the best men. They were all to take a drink from the river. God chose only those who lapped like a dog from their hands, presumably because they could jump up more quickly and put their hands on their weapons. But there were only 300 of these men to fight thousands of Midianites (Judg 7:12). God gave Gideon courage by letting him overhear a Midianite telling his dream of a tent being destroyed by a barley loaf!

Gideon was told to divide the men into 3 groups of 100 each – each team went to one side of the Midianite camp, carrying a trumpet plus an empty water jar with a flaming torch inside.

At midnight, just as the new guards came on duty, the 300 Israelites dropped the jars with a crash, revealing the flaming torches round the camp and blowing their trumpets for all their worth. They then shouted their battle cry. The Midianites in the camp woke up with a start and started to attack each other, thinking the enemy was in their camp. They then fled chased by this tiny band of Israelites!

Israel was so thrilled with this victory that they wanted to make Gideon their king. He refused because he knew that God was their leader.

Why did God chose this scared young man? We don't know! But God knew what he was doing, for Gideon ruled the people peacefully for 40 years. Gideon wasn't perfect – just as all the other people we hear of in the Bible weren't perfect - but God used him to do great things.

Next week we shall see the confirmands promise to follow God. Many of them are terrified at the thought of standing up and talking to the congregation at the Testimony evening, but God will be with them just as he was with Gideon. Who knows what he wants them to do for him? But, big or small in size and faith, this story reminds them that God will empower them to do his work. And that is true for us too.