

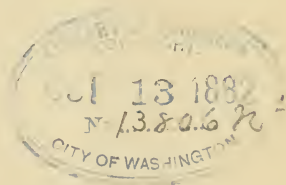
# HALF HOURS

WITH THE LESSONS OF 1883

CHAPTERS ON THE BIBLE TEXTS CHOSEN FOR  
SABBATH-SCHOOL STUDY DURING 1883

IN CONNECTION WITH

THE INTERNATIONAL LESSON SERIES



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## GIDEON'S ARMY.

BY THE REV. SAMUEL J. NICCOLLS, D. D.

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Aug. 26.—Judg. 7 : 1-8.

THIS portion of Scripture is part of the story of the great deliverance which the Lord brought to Israel through the hand of Gideon. As such, it has more of religious than military significance. While it speaks of the uprising of the people and their preparation for war, most of all it reveals to us how God works in behalf of his Church. It is written to set forth, not the excellency of human valor, but the power and greatness of faith in God.

The central figure in the story is Gideon, the son of Joash. Like most of the heroes and reformers who have been raised up for the deliverance and advancement of the Church, he comes to his work from obscurity. He is the son of a poor family and of a divided tribe, without renown in Israel. His low condition and humble origin were well symbolized by the barley cake in the Midianitish soldier's dream. The divine call came to him when he was secretly threshing wheat in his father's winepress, for fear of the Midianites. This thresher of wheat was then very unlike the dauntless leader who afterward, with his three hundred followers, scattered the hosts of Midian like chaff before the wind. Doubt-

less, in common with his oppressed countrymen, he chafed under the bitter yoke of the oppressor. His own brothers had been murdered by the Midianites, and, like a true Oriental, he felt that there was left to him the sacred duty of avenging their blood. But, while chafed and indignant, he is also sullen, dispirited and without faith. He has no consciousness of a mission, no thought of doing anything great for his country. His reply to the angel of the Lord shows this: "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." And yet this despairing and skeptical man is the one who became so bold and mighty that his very name struck terror to the hearts of his enemies. This man, who as yet had no higher purpose than to thresh and hide his grain, became that patriot and hero who, when Israel begged him to become their king, replied in the memorable words: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. The Lord shall rule over you." The secret of the wonderful transformation is easily told. It was *his faith in God*. He received the testimony sent to him and believed that he had a mission from Jehovah. The words of the angel, "Go in thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?" were his commission. By them "he was strengthened with all might in the inner man." His faith produced his marvelous valor.

His first act after receiving his call shows that he understood the spiritual character of his mission. Idolatry was the cause of Israel's affliction, and it must be removed before they could hope for deliverance. So

Gideon began as a religious reformer. Hard by his native city stood an altar of Baal. How could he fight the battles of Jehovah and leave it unmolested? Going by night with a few of his household servants, he tore it down, cut down the grove and built there an altar to Jehovah. It was a brave deed, as nobly done as that of Luther when he defied the pope by burning the papal bull before the people, but it nearly cost Gideon his life. The next day the excited idolaters gathered around his father's house, clamoring for the blood of the bold reformer. He was saved by the ready wit of his father, and on that day he received his nickname, which afterward became his title of honor. They called him Jerubbaal; that is, "Let Baal plead"—"Let him if he can, since he was insulted, avenge his cause." Henceforth Gideon is Baal's antagonist. The influence of that one heroic act of his was wider than he dreamed. It kindled hope in the hearts of others and aroused their failing faith. One brave man standing against all odds on God's side becomes a power among his fellows.

Very soon there was larger work for Gideon. The Midianites came on their annual excursion of plunder, crossing the great plain of Esdraelon like devouring locusts for multitude. But instead of finding, as usual, a frightened people hiding like rabbits in caves and dens, they were confronted by a nation in arms. Gideon had blown his trumpet and the surrounding tribes had eagerly responded to his call. Thirty-two thousand men were marshaled under his banner; his faith and courage had created an army. Such was the man who with his soldiers encamped at the well Harod on the slopes of Gilboa, in full view of the Midianites in the valley to the north of them.

In the account which follows of the sifting of Gideon's

army and his preparation for the impending battle we have one of those striking historical parables in which the word of God abounds.

*First.* It shows us that the Lord tests the faith of his servants before he gives them the victory. Hitherto his dealings with Gideon had been such as to quicken and enlarge his faith by signs and wonders. But there is a higher and nobler degree of faith than that produced by miraculous signs. Jesus said unto Thomas, "Because thou hast seen me thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." Before Gideon's faith could be crowned with victory he must be able to trust God against all appearances.

It is the hard lesson which all his faithful followers must learn if they would be largely used in the Lord's service. Doubtless it was a source of satisfaction to Gideon to find his summons to the tribes so promptly answered, nor would it be strange if he began to look upon his unexpected success as an evidence that the Lord was with him. True, his army was greatly inferior in numbers to the hosts of the Midianites, but still, thirty-two thousand men full of enthusiasm made a force not to be despised. What a trial, then, it must have been to see his little army suddenly shrivel to one-third of its original size! When, in accordance with the old Mosaic law, he made the proclamation, "Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return and depart early," two-and-twenty thousand of the people proved cowards and returned to their homes. It was a wholesale desertion in presence of the enemy. No wonder that the well of water around which they had been encamped was called, as a memorial of their baseness, the "well of trembling." Cowardly desertion from the ranks of Christian service in time of need is one of the sorest trials to true faith. Many brave leaders, striving to arouse

the people of God to do battle and stand steadfast for truth and righteousness, have met this same difficulty. After the transient enthusiasm excited by the first bold call is over, and when the real struggle is at hand, multitudes show that they have no heart for the fight.

Conquering faith rests only upon the word of God, and therefore it stands undismayed by outward appearances. It was such a faith that upheld Gideon in this dark emergency.

But the trial of his faith is not yet ended. Bad as the situation is, his cause is not yet hopeless. Ten thousand picked men who had courage enough to withstand the demoralizing effects of the wholesale desertion of their comrades, ten thousand men resolved to conquer or die, is a host not to be despised. Such a force, led by a mighty man of valor, could sweep down the mountain-side and through the camp of careless and undisciplined Midianites like a destroying thunderbolt. But again sense is confounded and all ground of confidence in man taken away. The ten thousand are sifted until only three hundred remain, and with these Gideon must fight the Lord's battle. How arbitrary and unreasonable the command to dismiss the ninety-seven hundred seems to human reason! They had volunteered to remain; to retain them gave at least a hope of success. But to send them home and to retain only three hundred seemed an act of madness. It was to invite defeat and extermination. What kind of generalship was this, that first rallied an army in the presence of the enemy and then dispersed it, keeping only a little remnant of three hundred? Surely these were hard commands for Gideon to obey. All human probabilities are against him. On his side he has nothing but the word of God. Nothing but that? But that word is everything to Gideon. His faith

rises to its highest and noblest degree. Like Abraham, considering not the difficulties in the way, he believed and obeyed God. He had first asked of God signs and tests to confirm the message sent to him. These had been given, and he had full and sufficient warrant for believing that God would deliver Israel through his hand. So God, in turn, tries his faith, and most gloriously does it come through the fiery ordeal. His steadfastness points us to the true ground of success in Christ's work. We must base our confidence, not in numbers, nor in enthusiasm, nor in the instrumentalities we employ, but solely on the word of promise which our Lord has spoken.

*Second.* This incident shows us how God works to humble pride and conceit, and to lead men to look to him alone for salvation. The reason for the winnowing of Gideon's army is given in these words: "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." If the twenty-two thousand cowards who basely deserted had been led to a miraculous victory, what boasting there would have been concerning their own valor! They would have claimed the glory as theirs, not Jehovah's. Full of conceit, pride and unbelief, man is ever trying to rob God of the honor due him. This disposition to glorify self shows itself in the Church in manifold ways. God warns his people against it, lest they should forget Him who alone saved them, and say in their heart, "My power and the might of my hand hath gotten me this wealth."

Nor is this evil disposition a thing of the past. Too often do we hear the Church boasting of its wealth, power, intelligence, culture and numbers, as though they were the forces that would make it irresistible in the conquest of the world. And thus that which to human view makes



the triumph of Christianity probable, stands as an actual hindrance to its predestined victory. "The people are too many" for God to give them the victory. When numbers lead us away from absolute trust in God as our only Saviour and Deliverer, whenever they lead us to forget that we can conquer only through the efficacious energy of divine grace, they are a hindrance, not a help. But while Christ will certainly lead his followers to final victory, it will be in such a way as to humble man's pride, expose and condemn his cowardice, and show beyond a doubt that salvation is of the Lord. It is not that God would rather have few than many battling on his side; but he often uses the few rather than the many to show that the power is his. For man's good he works by despised instruments and obscure agencies. Men believe in numbers; they glorify brute force and material greatness; but God is ever working in such a way, by scattering our fancied power and wealth, as to lead us to put our trust in him. The Napoleonic maxim, that "God is on the side of the heaviest artillery," is contrary to both Scripture and experience. The brave Jonathan had a truer insight into the nature of the divine government when he said, "There is no restraint to the Lord, to save by many or by few." History shows us that the greatest achievements for religion, liberty and humanity have been those accomplished by God's feeble minorities. They have won the battle against overwhelming numbers, that God's name might be honored and faith in his word vindicated.

*Third.* This passage also shows us that God does not despise or ignore human agency in carrying on his work; on the contrary, he selects that which is best adapted for his service. It would be strange, indeed, if in his choice of men for his service he honored incompetency, ignorance, cowardice and presumption. But it is not so. All

through this sifting of Gideon's army, which at first sight seems arbitrary, we can discover the action of superior wisdom. The first step was to get rid of the fearful and cowardly. The wise command of the Mosaic law for the day of battle was that the captain of the host should make proclamation, saying, "What man is there that is fearful and faint-hearted, let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren's heart faint as well as his heart." Cowardice is infectious as well as courage. Better a small number without fear than a great host half of whose numbers are infected with cowardice. The greatest captains in history have recognized this. So in critical moments, when none but the brave could be used, Alexander, Cæsar, Napoleon and Wellington have given leave to all who had not courage for the conflict to retire. God will not honor cowards in his service. Those whom he leads to victory must be true volunteers.

It is a sad reflection that there are multitudes in the visible Church who are a hindrance rather than any real help or spiritual power. The enthusiasm which led them to enlist in the service of Christ has died out, and they even regret that they entered his service. If in some honorable way they could be absolved from their vows, they would gladly accept the release and go back to their old life. Here is a question for our consideration: Is it the overwhelming majority of any particular Church or the small minority that is ever ready to volunteer its services for Christ? There were twenty-two thousand of Gideon's army of thirty-two thousand whom God could not use, for their hearts were not wholly joined to him.

But as God is searching for men of his own heart, the winnowing process is still continued. The ten thousand who remain are not lacking in courage, but his service demands other qualities. Courage is not all the

Christian soldier needs; there must be also prudence, watchfulness and self-denial. It was to discover these qualities that the second test was instituted. The whole army was led down in the sight of the enemy to the fountain of Harod to drink. Little things often furnish the best indications of character. So here ninety-seven hundred, either in the spirit of reckless bravado or of self-indulgence, flung themselves down on the ground and abandoned themselves to the luxury of quenching their thirst. They were careless of danger and unthinking of surprise. It was an unsoldierly attitude. Only three hundred stood erect and lapped the water from their hands. They showed that duty, and not self-indulgence, was uppermost in their minds. These were the men whom God chose as his instruments. They were men of faith, courage, prudence, watchfulness and self-denial. By such men, be they few or many, God conquers. There has always been, there is now in his Church, such a minority. They are men and women of unfaltering faith, earnest prayer, and loyally devoted to Christ. They can be depended upon in emergencies. Their object is not to indulge themselves in the good of this world, but to do some good in it. They are ready for labor and count their time, their property, their all, not their own, but God's. "God looks upon them with delight." As they honor him, he honors them. They are the true conquerors of the world, the pioneers in every glorious cause. They shall walk with their Lord in white, for they are worthy.

We see, then, that God does look to quality in his chosen servants. He cares far more for it than for numbers. The Church to-day needs better men, rather than more men, in order to conquer the world. Let what we have become, as they all might through God's grace, men of courage and faith, bold and outspoken in Christ's cause, self-sacrificing,

watchful and prudent in his service, and no power of earth or hell can stay their triumph.

Poetry and eloquence for long centuries have delighted in proclaiming the glory of the brave Leonidas and the three hundred Spartans, whose heroic valor and death-defying patriotism made the pass of Thermopylæ a shrine and an altar for Greece. Their equals in courage and patriotism, and their superiors in faith, were Gideon and the immortal three hundred who remained on Mount Gilboa while their comrades bade them farewell and marched to their homes. It was no ordinary daring they displayed when, armed with pitchers and trumpets, they went forth to meet the multitudes of their foes. It was the boldness of faith in the divine word. "One, with God on his side," said the old German Reformers, "is a majority." Thus the three hundred outnumbered the hosts of Midian, for God was with them. It is grand to stand with God's minorities. Better be with them than with the myriads of his enemies. Better be with them than with the large majority of cowardly, half-hearted Christians whom he cannot use. Fear not, little flock, outnumbered and despised by the world. Stand steadfast. "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."