

custome "it aiter, el cant find any oysters in this oyster flat" S.M. Oct. 22, 78 P.M. - WXPRI
waiter - "well, you wouldnt expect to find any angels in an angel food cake, would you?"

PRAYING FOR PROOF

Judges 6:12-17

INTRODUCTION: a minister spoke to a deacon & said, "I'm told you went to the ball game instead of church this morning". That's a lie, said the deacon, "and here's the fish to prove it!"

Our message tonight concerns a certain farmer named Gideon. He was, at the time, beating out his wheat in a wine press. The dust was thick about him. But so were his doubts. He was depressed and he was discouraged. But he was made a deliverer. His name has come down to us as a hero of faith.

Heb. 11:32 - ~~What more shall I say,~~ for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson - who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, and out of weakness - was made strong. Waxed valiant in flight, and turned to the armies of aliens.

If there was time enough, no doubt the writer of Hebrews who wrote the roll call of the ages, surely there is not enough time for us tonight to consider this thrilling story.

God in his divine purpose, finds men, calls men, and he uses men and this story is the result of God's search for a man willing to give himself to full time Christian service.

It is a story of Gideon and his response to God's will, and it is something that can happen to each of us. It can happen to you.

It was dramatic in the way God appeared to Gideon - and his appearance may not be that way to you. It may not be sudden. It may not come as a blinding light as it did to Saul on the way to Damascus. It may not be sensational at all. And yet, it may come quietly, and it may come from prayer. It may come from a Nominating Committee. It may come from someone seeking to enlist a volunteer.

It could come through some sign or some interested friend, or some touch of a messenger from the Lord.

It could come from the depths of your own heart as you seek God's will and respond in your own life.

God's call is not always expected. Sometimes we cannot explain why God works as he does - performing miracles in mysterious ways.

You remember the call of God to Samuel - he was but a child, a young boy. You remember the call of God to David. He was chosen when he was just a shepherd lad. He was the least likely to serve. And you remember God's urgent call to Elijah at Ahab's court. And you remember the call he gave Isaiah in the temple. And no one ever forgets the call where there was a burning bush involved - why Moses said, I stutter, I cannot speak. I cannot lead these people. He had his excuses, but God's call came. And you remember the call that God sent even to his son.

It was a time of (national distress) a time when people did not honor God.

It was a time when they really (needed a judge) Rather than a (preacher) prophet, or leader. And Gideon was called as God's man.

One of the greatest (problems today), in a time like Gideon's is that many of us have not found ourselves.

There are (some) of you who have (no) purpose at all in life, you have no goals whatsoever. And you are not interested in God's will for your life. And so what you do is, you go around in circles - rather than doing what God has in mind for you to do.

That is (why) some of you cannot and are (not) faithful and (loyal) to the church. You have (no) earthly idea what God expects.

But when the (call) first came to Gideon, we are (not) impressed that he was a great man of faith. In fact, we think of him as a man who must have been sort of a doubter. But he is a very clear headed men, and he possesses some very good common sense. And he will face the evil. And the God of whom Gideon had learned from the history of his own people, was a God of might. He was one who had been able to (put) his hand on a certain shepherd, named David - and another shepherd named Moses, and do the impossible task. What about the deliverer from bondage. One man with a (rod) in his hand. And God in his heart, marching on Egypt. And leading out the slaves. Walking across the Red Sea on dry land. And then on to the inheritance without even the might of a great army.

But those wonderful and glorious days were past. Now Israel is shamed and a defeated people, in a land that God had given them to possess. They were mere play things for the evil nations. They robbed, cheated, they were murdered, the crops were burned. And Gideon now is at the threshing floor in fear of the enemy. He is probably working at night. And he is doing this in order that the little bit of harvest of the grain may not be stolen or carried away.

And suddenly, a stranger comes on the scene, and Gideon can hardly see the stranger for the dust. He heard the words that the stranger spoke. The Lord is with Thee.

There are several things about this man and his praying for proof that we need to see.

I. COURAGEOUS

And then he was confused, and then contrite, and then he was certain. Let us think just a moment how courageous this man must have been. And what was Gideon's reaction. Did he begin to sing, did he burst forth with joy. Was that the answer - that Gideon responded. Now here is a brave man, and he is a courageous man.

V. 12 - The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour. Now those were strange words to Gideon's ears. He felt anything but courage. But the clue comes in V. 14 and God tells him, go in this night of yours and deliver Israel. Do not I send Thee.

When a man is sure of his calling, when he is positive of the presence of God, he is not fearful of the multitudes. And not even Hell could stop him.

Gideon did not want to rush out - he was a very timid man, but he was waiting to find God's way for his life. He needed a sign, and when he got it, suddenly he had the courage. He went forth as a prophet.

God saw Gideon both as he was, and as he could be. With divine insight, God looks at the finished product. When you and I look at something, we look at the raw materials. God looks at us in the same way, as he looked at Gideon. He sees what we are now. And God sees what we could be by his grace. God's will for Gideon was not that he had not purpose in his message, but it was that God had for Gideon a universal message. He wanted to restore the lost faith in Israel. He wanted to return the freedom to God's people. And his will for Gideon's life is his will for all men's lives. That they will find the will of God and do it.

Even today, that is God's great mission in this world. That men will find God's will and will do it. And it takes men who are courageous to do it. Now we skip along.

This tall, powerful young man, was called to rise and become the deliverer of the nation. Another point here is that history teaches that a man of obscure birth is no road block to noble service. It was no honor or dishonor - to say that my family is poor. I am not of that quality.

II. CONFUSED

Now in V. 13 - Gideon begins to pray with some questions. And his questions - if the Lord be with us, why then is all of this befallen us. And where be all these miracles which our Father told us of. And as he prayed, he was saying, Lord, are you with us. I find it hard to believe that you are with us.

Now it was not impossible for Gideon to feel this way, nor should we blame him because he admits his confusion. And he raises these questions - if the Lord is for us, why then has all of this befallen us. Quite often, almost weekly, we face this question. So and so is such a good Christian, why then is all of this happening, to this person.

Have you ever asked that - have you ever wondered about it. You may not have said it a loud. But sometimes, I suppose in the secret of your subconscious thoughts, you have said - Lord, it seems to me that things are in a mess. And if you are God, and if you are with me, and I am doing the right thing - and the things that please you, how do I explain the circumstances that are not right.

Gideon was confused. If God was really all powerful, why did they seem to exercise so much power.

Gideon was full of questions - and these questions had no real answers.

When God appeared to him, he was threshing wheat in the sunken wine press. He was in a hole that was designed to catch the juice of the grapes. Usually this

was a lower place than the threshing floor. The men and animals would trample the wheat. And then push the wheat into the air, and the chaff would blow away while the wheat fell. Gideon was used to threshing wheat in open view. Now he was hiding. His conquerors. He was a little bit ashamed of himself. He watched the enemies take the mountain tops and hide in the valley.

Alright, Lord, he said - if you are with us, then why are they up on the mountain and we are down here. How can I know for sure.

He was having a hard time of it. We are having to lie, it seems. We are having to steal from ourselves in order to feed our children. Lord, why is this happening.

Doesn't he have the right to ask. He is no skeptic. He is asking questions - not just to make trouble. He is a very cautious man. But he is bewildered by the unfolding events. I think the message is relevant to us. Perhaps, you have thought the same thing. Your emotions have run deep. Here is a man who is searching the ways of God. He is hiding in the caves - he is really fighting for truth. God has come to him and ask him to do something. He is saying, God, why?

There are some why's that are going to go unanswered. Gideon wondered - aren't there other men in Israel that you could be using. Why isn't he using the professional soldier. Why does God come and pick on a farmer. Haven't you asked that question. Why doesn't the preacher do it. Why doesn't somebody on the staff do it. Why don't some of our best Sunday School teachers do it. Why don't our Deacons do it. There are many, many others who can do it better than I.

That question comes up about every work in the church. And Gideon exercised his questions. Well, it really was not an excuse - it was a searching of his own heart. Because when a man sees an angel face to face, he does not really trifle with things - he begins to get down to the business, about things.

Now he refused to shut his eyes - I think the thing is, he failed to see that the fault was not with God. But was with himself and with his people, his parents, and the other leaders.

Where he went wrong was, he failed to see that they were making it impossible for God to do what God was eager to do and willing to do in their nation. Instead of their waiting on God, God was having to wait on them.

Now there are many today that are in the grip of the same kind of confusion and torment because in our modern world, people are simply given to the conclusion - either Christ cannot do what the New Testament claims he can do or we are not giving him a chance. And some of us are blundering along, just as Gideon. We are laying the blame on our Lord instead of laying it on ourselves.

Listen - the confusion we confront on every hand, we proclaim as a failure of God, but you know what it is - it is a failure of man, to give God a chance.

We are perplexed often by the slow progress of the church. How far it is from being ideal. How lacking, oft times, the church is in brotherly love. In winsomeness in winning power - and yet it is intended to be the glorious church without spot or blemish. By any such thing, unspotted in its purity. Glorious in its unfailing faith.

And we sing, like a mighty army moves the church of God.

But when we actually look at the conditions, we are grieved and we are disappointed. And we wonder sometimes, if Christ spoke the truth when he said - he would build his church, and the gates of Hell should not prevail against it. Again and again, it seems that the forces against the gates of Hell do prevail. And we wonder if the church has been conquered by evil.

The fault is not with Jesus Christ. The fault is within the church.

It is because people will not let people have their way within their lives. So often, outside of the very door of the house of God, Jesus is still standing as in the book of Revelation. Saying, be-hold - I stand at the door and knock. One thing for certain about the future, changes will occur. And as we think about the year 2000 A.D. coming up - things in the future are going to be surprising. And our church is undertaking through her leaders, to bring about a great change. And to exert prayerful consideration as to what God wants of Southern Baptists in 2000 A.D. What does God want of every denomination. What is the objective for that year. That we shall somehow proclaim this Gospel. And provide influence around the world. We must join in that commission to the uttermost part. And that the church will be called from darkness into his marvelous light. The church has been sent to proclaim as I Peter 2:9-10 says. The church must hasten to the ends of the earth. And every time the church sits at the Lord's table - it proclaims the Lord's death until he comes. And is a reminder of this pilgrim life. The Lord's table reminds Christians as the oneness of the church. And of her mission.

Now we have been failing in our mission to become something that we can do when

we have the time to do it. We can provide funds, when we have money left over. The church will fail in these two things - (because) the Devil has a way, and if we wait, who will set things right. To the contrary. God is at work in this world. And Christians need to join him in that reconciliation.

Now we need the missionary zeal, and the church needs that sign of miracles again. Paul, as a missionary, stated very clearly that they were to evangelize the entire world. The church is God's instrument to reach out in the world.

III. CONTRITE

Not only was Gideon a courageous man. And confused at some points. But he was a man who was very contrite of spirit.

V. (15) - He says, "oh my Lord where with shall I save Israel." (What) can I do, (what) do I have, (what) preparations - armies, weapons, training, what experience. (How) do I know that the people will follow me. (The thing) about it that Gideon did not know, was that's God's anointed man would find some following.

In all of his humility he said, Lord, you understand where I came from. (You) understand who I am, my family. They are very very poor. They never distinguished themselves and they never had any honor. And they have never been singled out for anything. They have lived, they have died, they have been buried. And nobody knows where they are buried. Or even remembers their names. Or why they lived. Lord, why

do you call me. I am the least of my father's.

He went on to say, my family is the poorest in Manasseh. Now when you speak of Judah, you speak of courage. When you speak of Levi, you speak of service. But who knows anything about the tribe of Manasseh.

God was dealing with a farmer here - he was not a soldier. But he was a true man. He was contrite. You might say he was least in the family. And Gideon kept thinking about this - that God wanted a common ordinary man, for this uncommon extra-ordinary job.

"That sounds like amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. Isn't it amazing that God should chose us. We need to think twice before we turn down any opportunity of service."

And the remarkable thing was, that the very idea, that Gideon was to be the leader here. He asked God for a sign. Facing this great mission of his life, he had to have an assuring token that God was with him. Well, the method was peculiar but it found favor with Heaven and brought a complete revelation before us in the Bible as we speak about super-natural things, taking place in the life of a man.

For Gideon had gone out and had taken care of those idols that his daddy had helped to set up. Now remember the Midianites had been their ~~times~~ 135,000 strong. And they took up their confident position in the valley of Jezreel and awaited their opportunity. Now Gideon wanted to call for arms. And he could only find 32,000 that was not much. Maybe 1/4 the size of the enemy.

But his humility took him further. As he prayed about this conflict and how to go into it, here at this time, he asked for a famous sign of the fleece. And God graciously granted his request. And the dew was on the fleece, and all the earth around was dry. This greatly impressed him. But it did not quite satisfy. And so he approached God again in prayer, and he said, Lord, I will make only this one more request. Let the fleece not be dry, and let the ground all around be covered with dew. And that very night, God gave him this double assurance. That was enough for Gideon - not once after that, did he even flicker. We have known men like that. With Gideon, who have asked God for something, and on the basis of that - they have made a decision for life.

Rev. Moore, the late Supt. of the Ky. Baptist Children's Home, accepted that position as a result of a sign given in answer to prayer. No one familiar with the work of this great servant of God, will question for a moment, the wisdom of that decision.

Now the Lord kept close to Gideon in those days of preparation. And it was marvelous how that God told him that the army was too big for him to give the enemy into his hands. Less the army would take the credit and the victory would not be entirely God's.

Now human nature does not apply that kind of psychology to things.

Because the man or the leader of some group or organization wants his name at the top. And usually, it is.

It is not often that we find people like this. You know, we are disappointed with ourselves. A woman said sometime ago, you know, I thought before I became a Christian, and entered the church - that if ever I should become a Christian, I would become the right sort of Christian. I would be willing to go anywhere and do anything to which my Lord should call me. And then she sighed with disappointment and said, but I have found that I am very much like the rest of them. And what she implied was I have found that after all, the business of being a Christian is a very dull, drab, and common-place affair. And I have found though Christ promises much, he really does very little. Here again, let me persuade your heart and mine, that the fault is not with our Lord. He is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask. He is able to make us conquerors. He is able to make us winsome. Not only is he able, but he is eager for us to do it. And he yearns for us to give our best. Did not God spare not his own son, but offer up for him freely. That he might give us all things. And here was Gideon, he was concerned - he had not given God his best. And he was searching for the sign. For God to give him the go ahead.

Well, God said apply a fear test to your army. Let those that are afraid, turn back. And Gideon gave the invitation. And 22,000 returned. Can you beat that. What must have been his thoughts. God came nearer and said, Gideon prayed - there are still too many men. Let's make a practical test to see who is alert and efficient. Sort of an old-fashioned intelligence test. And so this was based on their conduct. And he led them to a stream of water. And it resulted in only (300 passing that test.)

God told Gideon while he prayed, that now they were ready for the Midianites. And just as soon as he could go down in the valley, that he could take them. The very idea of his going out to meet a 100,000 men with 300 men. With pitchers and lanterns. How many people would have said, the man has gone clean mad. He is out of

his mind.

If we lean upon ourselves, we will have faith. But if we lean upon the arm of God, we will see how swiftly God will give us victory. God wants the glory and no flesh shall glory in his stead. Look at what he said to Gideon. He called an army of 32,000. The Lord said you have too many. If I give you the victory, you will brag about it. You cannot work with so many, because I must have the glory. So the fearful depart. And whosoever is fearful let him return and depart. Early from Mt. Gilead, and the 32,000 went and there remained 10,000.

I can imagine at this point, he was a little scared with only 10,000 left. But the Lord came again, and said you have too many. If I work with them, you will take the glory. So he brought the people to the water. Everyone that lappeth the water with his tongue as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself. To everyone that bows down upon his knees to drink, 300 lapped. And 9700 were turned out of the line. I can imagine they were like many Christians. What can God do with those who were like Gideon's army. Who were full of fear and doubts. Look at the reduction. 300 men with the Almighty God. 300 men with God on their side, and the power of God on their side. Why they could move any city. They could destroy any force and with a little spying expedition, why they found out there were great numbers of camels and soldiers. And that was not too good.

So God told him through prayer, to divide up into three companies, 100 each. And he armed these men with a trumpet, and empty pitcher, a lantern, lamp, or torch. And furthermore, he told them to watch him and do as he did. When he blew his trumpet - they should blow theirs and shout. The sword of the Lord and of Gideon.

IV. THE CERTAINTY

The sword of the Lord and of Gideon. Everything was in readiness. It was the middle of the night. And his 300 led the attack. And blew their trumpets, broke their pitchers, and other companies joined. And they had their trumpets in their right hands, and all of them shouted. (The sword of the Lord and of Gideon) The battle cry must have influenced the Midianites. They were asleep. They were confused, and Gideon and his men stood - every man in his place. And the enemy fled and panicked and the Lord set every man's sword against his fellow. So that they slew one another. While a remnant attempted to escape. Gideon's little band in hot pursuit. The greatness of the victory is measured not so much by his conduct in battle. But his behavior after the victory. In this respect, Gideon did not disappoint. A great many people sought to make him king. And to establish his sons as successors.

Here is the contrite man - I will not rule over you. And neither will my sons rule over you. The Lord shall rule over you. They were noble words. And that insured the certainty of this man's prayer being answered.

Victory does not come because of the largest army. But because, even in our churches - a little small group can work for the kingdom cause. And sustain the church on the victory. Sometimes we sorrow because there are just a few who will attempt to do the work. Only a handful will come to a prayer meeting. And just a very small group that register some interest. God does not hate this - no matter how small the company. The victory is personal and public.

Listen, Gideon listened to God. And he dared to ask God for proof of his

promises. What an invitation to all of us, to put our trust in him. He trusted him with his power, and with his prayers.

Yes, God did show him a sign. And gave him a sign, that certainly was powerful.

Henry Weldon was a student at Burlison College. He conducted a revival in the country church. One day, a small group had assembled. Just a little group. The weather was threatening. Instead of preaching, he called for testimonies and prayer requests. He had noticed that a man had been plowing in a field near the church. And he had slipped into the church when the sudden rain storm had arrived and he was unseen by anyone else. In that meeting, a woman stood up, and after a struggle to regain her composure, she said, I have been asking this church every summer for 40 years to pray for my husband. He is a good man and a good husband, but he isn't a Christian. I haven't the courage or the faith to ask you again. It must be that God does intend to save him. Although I have prayed for him daily. She sat down then and there was a sudden commotion in the back of the church. The man who had come in out of the rain, dressed in his work clothes, unshaven, came stumbling down the aisle. Wife, don't say that! For 40 years I have depended upon your prayers as my only hope! I always intended to make my peace with God, someday - but if you lose faith. Please pray for me and the rest of you pray for me now that I might be saved today. They did and he was - after 40 years.

Ask, and it shall be given unto you. Seek, and ye shall find. Knock, and it shall be opened unto you. Luke 11:9.

Yes, after Israel had been many years in bondage, this man prayed for proof.

And God answers his prayer.

A few years ago, there was a man who lived near a church. He was a skeptic. The preacher called on him, and talked with him. He liked to argue about the Bible and things. So they talked about an hour. And he invited him to join with him in prayer. Then the preacher went home feeling that he was a failure. Not many days later, he came to church. And at the close of the sermon, the preacher went back and said a word to him. We talked about these matters - will you act upon them. And he said, turning to a post - I would as soon confess my sins to this post, as to confess them to Jesus Christ. Well, the preacher replied, I will not argue with you about that. But I am asking you a question - are you satisfied with life as you are living it?

Well, there was a struggle. He said, I am satisfied. Well, the preacher said, I have nothing more to say. And they went on their way.

There was another day, this man came, and when the invitation was given, he came forward. He said, I have come to do what you suggested, I am surrendering to Christ. The service closed and a number shook his hands. He said, don't misunderstand now - don't think that I am a Christian, I am a stranger to Jesus Christ. But what I say is this - I have done what you told me to do. I have surrendered to Christ. But I do not know him. Alright, the preacher said - that is all I ask. For that is all that God asks. A few days later, the man's wife told the rest of the story. When reaching home, he said to his wife, can you pray. I will do my best, she replied. So they knelt in prayer together. And they had hardly begun to pray, when this man who declared himself a stranger to Christ, took the lead of the prayer. And when he arose from his knees, he had light in his face that was never seen in land nor sea.

The next ~~time~~ he met the preacher, his doubts had vanished. And he was able to say - (I know whom I have believed.)

Maybe it is time for some of you to pray for proof, to get the certainty in your life. The outcome that you need of divine presence, that gave Gideon the courage to go to the task. A man without faith cannot make it. His idols will multiply. A man of faith realizes God is what counts and not numbers. So Gideon selected - put God first, and brought about a great deliverance to God's people. Hence, he is put among the worthies - and the writer had not time to tell all that he would like to tell about Gideon.