

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes we mistake a problem for something else – as Gideon’s people did when they thought the problem was enemy invasions; in fact it was the breakdown of their covenant relationship with God. Another problem often follows – we want to save ourselves without reference to God. The story of Gideon addresses that issue.

WHAT GOD DID

God rescued his people from their enemies. Neighbouring tribes had occupied their territory during seven successive harvests and reduced them to poverty.

This was an act of mercy on his part, one of many. "He pitied us in our low estate" is a refrain in the Bible. It is what he did through Jesus' healing miracles. It is what he did in sending Christ to save sinners. He is "full of pity".

It was also an act of covenant faithfulness. The people were in covenant with him. He had committed himself to be their God. He could not go back on his word and abandon them.

It was an act of grace. They had broken his covenant and served other gods. They had forfeited any right to his help. But in his love and pity he came to their rescue.

It was God's doing and it was effective. Israel had no leader and no strength. All was hopeless until God led Gideon. That reminds us of humanity's condition. Without God we cannot overcome evil or death, and we cannot find the peace of forgiveness. But when he acts he does so in a thorough manner. Israel's enemies were driven out, and there was peace for many years.

The battle was a mix of divine power and human tactics. It began with a surprise attack at the start of the middle night watch. People were startled out of deep sleep while outgoing sentries would still be walking through the camp creating the impression that invaders had already entered. In the darkness there would have been panic, and it is not surprising they fought each other. Gideon's men stood outside the camp until the Midianites began to flee.

There was also a sense in which the rescue was incomplete. Their idolatry had been the cause of the trouble, and that resumed in a few years. God's covenant included the promise of Messiah and he had not arrived. It hinted at death being overcome but death still reigns. God's rescue of his people through Gideon pointed forward to the comprehensive salvation he had promised.

HOW HE DID IT

God's first act was to call a man to lead the people and to equip him for that task.

Gideon was so aware of his weakness that he hesitated to respond. Only God's repeated encouragement led him to do it.

That is a pattern in God's work of salvation. Moses hesitated for the same reason. The gospel comes to us because Jesus of Nazareth was crucified in weakness.

God prepared the leader he had chosen. He gave a task that jeopardised his relationship with family and community and put his life at risk. The task might have seemed pointless (though there was good reason for it). God was training Gideon to obey. That is an integral part of a relationship with God - he leads in his grace, wisdom and power; we must trust and obey.

Unlike a normal training process God did not leave him to himself but gave him the Holy Spirit. Both those features are seen in Christ. He "learned obedience"; and he was "filled with the Spirit".

God also reduced the size of Gideon's army. Anyone who was afraid was told to go home. That reduced it from 32 to 10 thousand. God reduced it further - down to 300.

God also encouraged Gideon before battle started. He told him to approach the enemy camp. There he heard a soldier interpret a dream another soldier had and realised that morale in the enemy camp had plummeted.

God did the same thing for our Lord Jesus. In the Garden of Gethsemane he sent his angel to strengthen Jesus. In both cases the initial and decisive battle took place in their mind - would they or not?

WHY HE DID IT THAT WAY

When God reduced the size of Gideon's army he said, "Lest Israel boast against me and say, 'My own hand has saved me'."

It is a sad reflection on humanity that we take credit to ourselves when it is obvious that God saved us in our weakness. Gideon's people would have forgotten their hopelessness and claimed they had done it all. Pride is unpleasant and God hates it. It is false. It is a lying spirit, but the only people it misleads are those who are guilty of it.

If this were between fellow human beings we might think it was petty to demand the credit for something - a sign of weakness. But this is God - there is no suggestion of weakness -and this situation is different. It is only right that we give honour where honour is due, and we have no excuse for not doing so.

Giving glory to God is also good for us. Israel's problem was disloyalty - they had abandoned God for idol worship. They needed to acknowledge their guilt and God's faithfulness before their relationship could be restored. If they had taken the credit they would have rejected God again. Pride always prevents relationship.

To relate to God we need to be realistic. Humility and gratitude are of the essence.

CONCLUSION

This has obvious lessons for the Christian life.

We need to confess our sin and acknowledge our need of his salvation.

We need to accept his way of salvation through the crucified Saviour.

We need to accept that our only hope is in his mercy.

And we need to accept the mercy he offers.

Then we will walk humbly with our God and he will bless us.