

One War Over and Another Begun

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AT THE METROPOLITAN TABERNACLE, NEWINGTON.

"And when Gideon perceived that He was the Angel of the Lord, Gideon said, Alas, O Lord God! For I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face. And the Lord said unto him, Peace be unto you; fear not: you shall not die. Then Gideon built an altar there unto the Lord, and called it Jehovah-Shalom." [Judges 6:22-24](#).

These Midianites were wandering Bedouins from Arabia and the East country round about the Holy Land. They were masters of the art of plundering and knew no hearts of compassion. They generally lived a hard life, themselves, and when they had an opportunity to feast on the spoils of others, they rioted without stint and left a famine behind them. Most fitly does the Scripture compare them to grasshoppers, for both in number and in destructive force they were like those terrible devourers. God had brought them upon Israel to scourge that nation because it had been so foolish and so ungrateful as to set up the gods of the heathen and to forget the one mighty God who was so especially and graciously their Patron and Defender. They were impoverished and ground down to the very last degree by these plunderers who left no food either for men or cattle.

The poor Israelites, creeping forth from their dens and caves, attempted to carry on the work of farming and sowed the land, but when the time came for reaping, the marauders came forth once more, took away their harvest and despoiled their pastures again. Then, as usual, Israel cried unto Jehovah and His ears were opened to their groaning. Their afflictions made them weary of their idols and caused them to say, "We will return unto our first husband, for it was better with us, then, than now." God in His great mercy raised up for them a deliverer, Gideon, a mighty man of valor, who distinguished himself in various skirmishes with the foe! His name was already a terror to Midian, for he who dreamed of the barley cake which smote the tent, and it lay along, said to his fellow— "This is none other than Gideon, the son of Joash."

Gideon's character has never been sufficiently admired—Scripture names, much less bright than his, have been preferred before him by the general ministry, yet he deserves far better treatment. He was a man gentle and yet strong, cautious and yet venturesome. He was a searching inquirer and an intense Believer. While he was a sort of foreshadowing of David, he had much of the afterglow of Joshua. He was a truly great man, though his later days were overshadowed by a grievous religious error and a sad moral fault. Despite his failings, he was one of the greatest of the heroes of faith. He was not in a hurry to venture upon a pitched battle, but waited his time, and then, by a sudden and unexpected attack, he

struck the whole host with panic so that they fled at once and Midian was smitten as one man.

The leaders fled—two of the minor ones, Oreb and Zeeb, the raven and the wolf—are first captured and, by-and-by, the greater generals, who had fled, first of all, are taken by the victorious band. The leaders were ahead of all the others in flight. In later days the destruction of their mighty ones became a proverbial curse, "Make their nobles like Oreb and like Zeeb—yes, all their princes as Zebah, and as Zalmunna."

Let us think for a while of Gideon in order that we may see that we, ourselves, are, or may be, somewhat parallels with him. We may not have to smite the Bedouin as he did, but unto a spiritual warfare God has called many of us. And though He intends to use us and to get unto Himself victory by us, yet it may be that at this moment we are in fear. We are now passing through the same mental processes as those which educated Gideon and we are being prepared, thereby, for future conflict and conquest. I shall begin by asking you to dwell, for a minute, upon Gideon's sigh for peace, for he loved not war, but pined for quiet. He called the name of the altar, "Jehovah-Shalom," which the margin reads, "The Lord Send Peace." You see, therefore, that deeper down in his spirit than any desire for warlike honor, there was a yearning after peace.

Gideon wanted not the spoils of princes. He only desired to plow, sow and reap in peace. And do you wonder at it, when the evils of war were all around? He had, for a long time, seen, in the cases of his friends and neighbors, the desolating effects of war—their property was taken from them, their bread was stolen out of their mouths, their children were slain—and they, themselves, made to hide away upon the tops of mountains or in caverns among the hills. Life became intolerable amid such privations and dangers. Gideon must have felt his heart swell with grief and indignation as he looked upon the remnant of Israel hunted like partridges upon the mountains—though once they had dwelt safely— every man under his vine and under his fig tree.

The Bedouin styled the valley of Jezreel, "the meadows of God"—how grievous to see those fat pastures trod down by the feet of the invaders! Ah, little can you and I imagine the horrors of war! We read of it and our sympathies are touched, but we know not the multiplied murders, the painful wounds, the desolating rapine and the fierce crimes which attend the track of armies. If we saw battle with our own eyes, we would, with burning fervor, cry, "Send us peace in our days, good Lord." Moreover, Gideon had not only seen war, but he sighed for peace because he was, himself, feeling the mischief of it. The dread of the conflict had come to his own mountain farm at Abiezer.

There he was, threshing wheat by the wine press, in an unusual place, in an inconvenient place—that he might hide a little grain for winter's food—from the Midianites who were eager to devour it. Yes, and when carnage smokes at your own door and rapine is at your own gate—when you, yourself, are straitened and are hiding for fear, then comes from the

deep recesses of the spirit the cry, "Oh, that God would send us peace, for this is a weary oppression; these ravens and wolves utterly devour us." The way of peace was sufficiently well known to Gideon—the Prophet of the Lord had indicated to the people that the only way of peace was for Israel to return to Jehovah, her God. The great sin of departure from the glorious living God was set before them and they could readily draw the inference that they would never have peace from their enemies till, first of all, they had made their peace with God.

They must surrender to their Sovereign, renew their loyalty and then He would drive out the foe from their land. They must confess their transgressions and renew their covenant and then they would obtain deliverance. Then would the ancient promise be fulfilled, "One should chase a thousand, and two put ten thousand to flight." Gideon probably knew this before the Prophet came—it was deeply imprinted on his thoughtful spirit and, as he was a man of faith in God, he did not doubt but that if Israel returned to Jehovah, then peace would follow. While Gideon is meditating and working, an angel appears to him and gives him the assurance that with him, at least, God was at peace.

The Covenant Angel said to him, "Jehovah is with you, you mighty man of valor." I think his spirit ought greatly to have rejoiced at that assurance and, perhaps, it did, for what better thing can happen to any man than to receive such a token for good? If God is for us, who can be against us? We know how sweet is the assurance that being justified by faith we have peace with God. It is well with us when we are assured that the Lord is with us, our helper, our shield, our portion forever and ever! But there arose in Gideon's mind a grave anxiety. His was a very careful, thoughtful soul, for he was a man of prudence—large-hearted, far-seeing and given to look at things coolly and steadily—and there arose in his heart a question, serious and vital, "Is this the voice of God to me, or am I deluded? Is God at peace with me, or am I like the rest, plunged in a horrible warfare against the living God?"

Therefore he puts a question and he asks for a sign that he might make sure of what he was about. Brothers and Sisters, in spiritual matters you and I had need be sure! If we have peace within our spirit, let us make certain that it is the peace of God, for there are still voices that cry, "Peace, peace," where there is no peace. Siren songs still charm men to ruin with their dulcet notes. Still does the fatal river flow most smoothly as it approaches the dreadful cataract. Beware of that Word of the Lord, "When they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction comes upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape."

None are more quiet than the ungodly when they are given up to a strong delusion. The Psalmist says of them, "There are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men." It was no so with Gideon—his anxiety made itself visible. He was not the man to leap at a shadow—he sought for substance. If he was to have peace, he must have it from God. If he was to be delivered,

he longed to have victory plain and permanent. The favor which he asked was requested because anxiety troubled him and he wished to make assurance doubly sure. He desired to know from God, Himself, that his mission was authentic and his success certain.

I believe that many of us have been and, perhaps, are, in Gideon's position. Of course we have not his errand, but we have one of our own and we are troubled because we are not personally sure of our peace. We are grieved by our past sins and their consequences. This is the lot of many men. "Conscience makes cowards of us all"—and when the mighty Spirit of God convicts us of sin—then sin becomes a second sorrow. No, worse than that, for if sorrow chastens us with whips, sin scourges us with scorpions. We are consumed by God's anger, but by His wrath we are troubled. The mind is tossed to and fro and is confounded, but even in its confusion it seeks the true rest and longs to gain peace in God. Like the needle in the compass, it is agitated and disturbed, yet still it knows its pole and trembles towards it.

It will never be still till it reaches the point of its rest. Have you ever been in that condition? I know you have if the Lord has loved you and ordained you to His work! Has God, at such a time, sent you a message of mercy? Have you searched the Scriptures and found a precious promise? Have you heard a faithful servant of God preach under his Master's anointing and have you been comforted? Even then, I should not wonder if the darkening thought has arisen like a cloud, "Is this the right comfort for me? May I really enjoy it? Will it be presumption or assurance?" There is often a fine line, thin as a razor's edge, between the two—and woe unto him who makes a mistake about it! O God, save us from carnal security! Prevent our crying, "Peace, peace, where there is no peace."

Better that we write bitter things against ourselves, if they are true, than that we say smooth things and flatter ourselves to destruction. Therefore, I should not wonder if you are asking the Lord to give you a token for good. You are praying to Him and saying, "I will not be comforted except You comfort me—Your dove shall find no rest for the sole of her foot except it is in the Ark with the true Noah, in whom is rest." As for me, I will take no cup of consolation except that which Jesus proffers when He gives it me with His own pierced hands. If washed, it shall be in Jesus' blood! If clothed, it shall be in His righteousness!

From Gideon's longing, panting desire to obtain peace with God and then peace for his country, we turn to look a little further into Gideon's fear which he met with in the way of peace. "An angel" appeared to him—so says the text in the Authorized Version—but in truth it was the Angel of Jehovah and this should have comforted him, even as it has comforted us! One would have thought that Gideon would have leaped for joy when he beheld his God veiled in angelic form, but instead, the shadow of death fell upon him! Here was a man panting for peace and firmly following the way of peace, and yet afraid with a deadly fear!

Peace cannot be had except by our drawing near to God and the Lord's drawing near to us, but as soon as this process commences, poor humanity shrinks from the interview

and is melted with fear. "When Gideon perceived that He was the Angel of the Lord, Gideon said, Alas, O Lord God! For because I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face." It usually happens that when God is bringing men into peace with Himself—while the operation is going on thoroughly and soundly—there is a degree of trembling in the soul. I suspect that conversion which has no trembling in it! Note the prodigal's cry, "I am not worthy to be called your son." Note Peter's bitter weeping and the three days' darkness of Saul of Tarsus.

Even to Believers, the visitations of God are not without overwhelming awe. Jacob cries, "How dreadful is this place!" Job abhors himself; Moses does exceedingly fear and quake, and Isaiah cries, "Woe is me!" Why was Gideon afraid? Not because he was a coward—you will scarcely meet with a braver man in all Scripture than this son of Joash— but because even brave men are alarmed at the Supernatural! He saw something which he had never seen before—an appearance celestial, mysterious, above what is usually seen of mortal men and, therefore, as he feared God, Gideon was afraid. When the living God draws very near to a soul, even though it is in the Person of Christ Jesus, that soul is struck with awe and trembles before the Lord. It cannot well be otherwise.

Remember how it was with the beloved John. "When I saw Him," says John—that was, his own dear Master, upon whose breast he had leaned his head—"when I," the disciple whom Jesus loved, "saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead." You do not wonder, therefore, if a poor soul full of doubt and anxiety, vexed with a sense of sin and greatly troubled by affliction, is full of fear when Jesus draws near! Though He comes with no feeling but of love, no thought but of mercy, no sentence but of free forgiveness, yet the heart is awe-struck at the wondrous sight! Alas, some of you know not what it is to have the Lord drawing near to your spirits. If you did, you would not think it strange that certain awakened ones have acted in a singular way and, for a while, have forgotten to eat bread!

Daniel says, "I was left alone and saw this great vision, and there remained no strength in me: for my comeliness was turned in me into corruption and I retained no strength." When this glorious God comes near to the soul, it is a solemn visitation, and the mind is bowed under it! Moreover, Gideon had been ill-taught by tradition. There was a rumor abroad which was derived from the Truth of God and yet was false, namely, that no man could see a heavenly Being and live. It is true that the Lord expressly told His servant Moses that he could not see His face and live. But He did not say, "You cannot see an angel and live." Nor had He said, "You cannot see My veiled Presence and live." The tradition was an accretion to the Truth and a corruption of it. We may not see the face of God, but we may see Jesus. In fact, we live because we see Him!

Beware of the moss which grows upon a Truth of God! Many a heart bleeds because it is wounded by its own imperfect ideas of God and so, when God does draw near—when the great Almighty overshadows us—there is a slavish dread for which there is no need. "I shall die," he says, "I shall die." He sees his sin and, therefore, he thinks that God has come

in anger to punish him. He feels his weakness and, fainting under it, he groans, "I shall die." No, Soul, if God had meant to slay you, He would have left you alone! Whom God destroys, He first leaves to the madness of his own conceit. He does not take the trouble to show a man his sin and reveal to him his transgression, unless He means to pardon and save him. If the Lord has taken to strip you, He will clothe you! If He makes your righteousness to fade like the leaves of autumn, it is because He has a glorious robe with which to array you! Therefore be not afraid.

Besides, Gideon was in a state of mind in which he could be easily cast down. He was a brave man, but long affliction had cast a tinge of sadness over him. His usual conduct in life is well pictured by the two signs which God gave him. When all the people around him were, with excitement, like the threshing floor, heated and dry, he, like the fleece, was cool and composed. And then, again, when all around him like the wet floor, were dampened with discouragement, he, alone, remained in his ordinary condition, with not a drop of cowardice within him. That was the kind of man Gideon was—calm, quiet, determined, brave.

But, at the moment recorded in our text, he was smarting under a cruel oppression, conscious of God's anger for Israel's sin, and overshadowed by God's own Presence and, therefore, his mind was ready to rush from one fear to another. Only see the beauty of it—that he always tells his fear to God, always goes to Him for comfort and, therefore—always obtains succor! The brave man is not he who sees no fear, but he who, seeing the danger, rises superior to it. Such was Gideon, tossed to and fro from one fear to another, but never tossed off from his God and so, always sure to right himself. One thing is noteworthy, namely, that Gideon's greatest fear arose out of a sign which he had, himself, asked for. He said, "Show me a sign," and when he had that sign, namely, God's coming to him, then it was that he was afraid.

Be very cautious how you ask for signs, for they may work your discouragement rather than your comfort. I have known some say, "I shall not believe I am a child of God unless I feel a deep sense of sin." And when they have entered into that feeling, they have exclaimed, "I will never again ask for this!" I have heard of others who thought they could come to Christ if they were gently drawn—and the Lord has been gently drawing them—and then they have wished that they had been more troubled and distressed! They imagine that they could have believed more readily had their despair been greater—certainly a strange notion! We are always busy in manufacturing fresh doubts—and for raw material we use the very tokens for which we so earnestly besought the Lord!

We cry aloud, "Show me a token for good," and when the token is given, we are amazed at being heard and fall to fearing more sadly than before. Therefore pray for such gifts with bated breath and say twice over concerning such things, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." All this while Gideon had one Truth before him which ought to have prevented

all his fears, for the Lord had spoken to him, and said, "Go, in this your might, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent you?" Look, he goes home fearing that he will die, and yet that could not be! How could he die if he was to deliver Israel? He must be a live man to do that and yet, you see, he forgets to reason for his own comfort, but takes care to argue for his fears.

Have I never seen my Hearers doing this? I have often caught myself at it—refusing to use my logic for the strengthening of my faith—but perverting reason in order to assist my unbelief! Is not this foolish and wicked? Too often we are industrious in the fabrication of discomfort and utterly idle in the search for joy. This is folly and yet, better men than we are have fallen into this fault, too. The Lord save us from it! In drawing near to God is our peace and if, in that process, a sense of the Presence of God casts us down and creates a more poignant sorrow than we had at the first, let us not, there-

fore, shrink from the process, but push on with all our might! As our safety lies in coming to God, to Him we must approach at all hazards. If He seems to stand before us with a drawn sword in His hand, let us run upon the point of it! If even our God is a consuming fire, let us still draw near to Him, for this is, indeed, the high privilege of saints. "Our God," that is our God in Christ Jesus, "is a consuming fire." Who, then, shall dwell with the devouring fire?

Now let us spend a few minutes in considering God's comfort of His servant. "The Lord said unto him, Shalom— peace be unto you; fear not: you shall not die." The Lord would not have His Gideons disturbed in mind. If we are to trouble the enemy, we must not be troubled, ourselves. Notice, Brothers and Sisters, the great power of God in speaking home the Truth. Suppose I salute you with, "Brothers and Sisters, peace be to you." That would be a sweet word, but when the Lord says it, you feel the peace, itself! Suppose Peter had stood up in that boat which was tossed upon the Galilean Lake and had said to the waves, "Be still"—the waves would not have taken much notice of him—and the whistling blast would have defied him!

But when Jesus said, "Peace, be still," the rampant lions of the sea crouched at His feet and there was a great calm. "Peace!" The word is shalom, the word which Gideon borrowed and applied to the altar which he raised in obedience to the Lord's bidding. It signifies not only quiet, but prosperity, success—"good fortune"—as the multitudes say. When God spoke that word home to His dear servant's heart, a great joy was born within him to prepare him for his great warfare. The Lord also cheered him with, "Fear not." Oh, that charming word—as full as it is short—"Fear not." What is there to fear? If God is with you, of whom can you be afraid? Gideon feared himself, dreaded his own unfitness and un-worthiness, feared in the awful Presence of God. But the Lord said, "Fear not," and Gideon's heart grew calm.

Then the Lord added, "You shall not die," thus meeting the special form of his dread. This is what the Lord says to every poor trembler who is holding to Him by the desperate

grip of faith—"You shall not die. You shall not die the second death. You have no sin to die for, for I have laid your transgressions on My only-begotten Son. You shall not die, for Jesus died. Your spiritual life cannot expire, for your 'life is hid with Christ in God' and, because Jesus lives, you shall live also."

Let us now look at Gideon's memorial. His fears being banished and being at perfect peace, Gideon now goes to work. Are any of you questioning whether you are saved or not? Do not go out preaching, yet, for you may, perhaps, put others into bondage! Are any of you half afraid that you are not at peace with God? Be careful what you do! Strive after peace lest you weaken your testimony. I remember the lesson which I learned from my Sunday school class—I was taught, if the other boys were not. Though yet a youth, I was teaching the Gospel to boys and I said, "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved." One of them asked, somewhat earnestly, "Teacher, are you saved?" I answered, "I hope so." The boy replied, "Teacher, don't you know?" As if he had been sent to push the matter home to me, he further inquired, "Teacher, have you believed?" I said, "Yes," "Have you been baptized?" I said, "Yes." "Well, then," he argued, "you are saved." I was happy to answer, "Yes, I am"—but I had hardly dared to say that before!

I found that if I had to teach other people the Truth of God, I must know and believe its sweet result upon myself. I believe that you will seldom comfort others except it is by the comfort with which you, yourself, are comforted of God. God would have His people be at peace with Him and know that they are so, for if they are fretted within, and worried in reference to their God, how can they fight the battles of life? When Gideon is fully at peace, what does he begin to do for God? If God loves you, He will use you either for suffering or service—and if He has given you peace, you must now prepare for war. Will you think me odd if I say that our Lord came to give us peace that He might send us out to war?

Gideon's first work was to go and cut down his father's sacred grove which stood on the top of the hill, and enclosed an altar to Baal. He could not effect this business by day because the foolish worshipers would have rallied to the defense of their dumb idol and have overpowered the reformer. Therefore, with his 10 men, he performed the work by night. I think I see him and his people in the dim darkness, with their axes and saws, doing the work as quietly as they could, felling all those trees. A splendid clearance was made that night. "Now," he cries, "over with that detestable altar to Baal!" Some people would have said, "Spare it as a fine piece of antiquity." Yes, and leave it to be used again! I say, down with it, for the older it is, the more sin it has caused, and the more likely is it that it will be venerated again!

I often wish the Reformers had been more thorough in their destruction of idolatrous images and Popish trumpery. In many a parish church of this land, everything is ready for the restoration of the Roman idolatry. But see, by the Lord's bidding, Gideon piles a new altar of earth, or unhewn stone! And when that is done, he fetches his father's bullock and

slays it for a sacrifice! How steadily they went about this reestablishment of the pure faith! Look, they use the wood of the grove for burning the sacrifice and the heavens are red with the blaze! I think I hear the gallant leader say, "Let them wake now; they cannot prevent our worshiping the Most High, nor can they cause the grove to grow again. By yon beacon-fire, Israel shall gather together to fight against Midian and victory shall be ours."

Beloved, if God has given you peace, go home and begin your reform! I would preach up the overthrow of every sin. Down with every idol. Have you one left? Over with it and present a sacrifice to God. But to pull down is not enough. Plenty of people can do that. Gideon, as we have seen, builds an altar to Jehovah. When you are at perfect peace with God, think what you can do for Him—think of a new plan of work, or consider how to do the old work better—advance any part of Divine Truth that has been forgotten, any ordinance that has been neglected, any virtue that has been despised. Especially make prominent Christ Jesus, the Altar and Sacrifice so dear to God. When he had built his altar, he called it "Jehovah-Shalom," which was done by way of thanksgiving for peace received. The inscription declares that "Jehovah is our peace." Blessed be His name this day! We have entered on the battles of peace, for the Lord God is with us and with His people we will go forth to win the peace which He has promised!

It was a Psalm in two words. It was a song of one verse, infinitely sweet. "Jehovah-Shalom"—The Lord Our Peace. Moreover, it was a prayer, as the margin puts it—"Jehovah, send peace." If you have peace with God, let your next prayer be, "Lord, give peace to all Your people." "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem." Work it, O Holy Spirit of Peace! Then ask for peace by conquest of an ungodly world for Jesus till the first Christmas carol shall be sung again, "Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, goodwill toward men."

See, Brothers and Sisters, and with that I finish, there may sit here, this morning, a young man who does not know what God is going to make of him. The capacities of service that God can infuse into a single individual are marvelous! At present you are disturbed in mind, afflicted in heart, ill at ease—you need perfect peace, but you have not found it, yet. Rest not till you have it. At God's own altar, where Jesus died, you will find it, and only there. When Jesus' blood makes peace with God, there is your peace. Rest not till you are assuredly at peace with the Lord of All, so that your soul lies down in green pastures and is led by the still waters.