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"God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty, . . . that no flesh should glory in His presence." 1 Cor. 1: 27, 29.

"And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him, and said unto him, The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor . . . And the Lord looked upon him and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?" Judges 6: 12, 14.

"And the Lord said unto Gideon, The people that are with thee are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands." Judges 7: 2.

The strength of weakness leaning upon God, and the weakness of human strength -- this is the paradox, this is the spiritual truth of which Gideon's life is the illustration.

I. We see this principle illustrated in Gideon's call. Hiding behind his winepress and seeking by stealth to thresh a little wheat for his family without being discovered by the Midianites, the angel of the Lord suddenly appears before him with the startling greeting, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor!" Gideon felt anything but a mighty man of valor, and he must have looked it, too, as he began to apologize and explain to the angel the helplessness and distress of his people, when the answer came as the Lord looked upon him, and said, "Go in this thy might and thou shalt save Israel. Have I not sent thee?" And Gideon understood that it was not his might nor valor, but the Lord's, that was to save his country. It was the strength of faith which is always the strength of weakness because it is the strength of God.

This is always the story of grace and the secret of supernatural power. It is ever a paradox to the natural mind. "When I am weak, then am I strong," is the proper inscription of every victorious saint.

God comes to the sinner and by a word of sovereign grace pronounces him forgiven, and that word makes him what it declares. He comes to the sinful soul, and says, "Now are ye clean through the word that I have spoken unto you," and that word creates the fact of his sanctification. He comes to the struggling Jacob, and by a word transforms him into the conquering Israel. He comes to the stormy Boanerges, and, lo, he is henceforth the gentle John, rising above all human probabilities and natural causes. Grace speaks and it is done, and faith counts the things that are not as though they were, and Gideon, the trembling fugitive from his foes, stands panoplied the next hour in the strength of God, the mighty victor.

II. But next we see this principle in the test of Gideon's faith. Henceforth he is no longer the natural man, but the man of faith; but how weak his faith is, and how slowly it develops into maturity and confidence.

First, he asks a sign from his supernatural visitor that he may know for a certainty that it is the Lord, and so he prepares an offering and brings it to the angel, and as he presents the kid and unleavened cakes, lo, the staff in the angel's hand touches the offering, and it is consumed in a moment in flames of fire. No sooner has Gideon's test been granted than he breaks down with a cry of fear. "Alas, O Lord God! because I have seen an angel of the Lord face to face." Gideon is reassured by the comforting message of the Lord. "Peace be unto thee; fear not; thou shalt not die," and so he builds an altar unto the God of Peace, and goes forth to take his first step of faith and obedience.

This begins at his own home and his father's house, for there the altars of Baal are erected, and the worship of the false gods of the Canaanite is carried on beneath his own roof. God's first command is to build an altar unto Jehovah, and offer upon it his father's bullock in sacrifice to Jehovah, and then tear down the altar of Baal and cut down the grove. Still we see the timid man and the trembling faith even in his obedience. He takes a few men and stealthily by night he secretly does what he was commanded, and in the morning his neighbors look with astonishment and anger upon the wreck of their shrine, and the evidences of Gideon's bold rebellion. They soon find out who the guilty party is, and their cries are loud and unanimous that he shall die. But Joash, his shrewd father, tactfully turns aside the anger of the people by suggesting that if Baal is a true God, he ought to kill Gideon himself, and should have been able to defend himself against

the insult offered to his shrine. The father's brave attitude turns the tide, and God sustains His obedient child, as He ever will the heart that dares to trust in Him.

But no sooner has Gideon begun his grave task than the devil also begins to stir up his forces and resources. The Amalekites and Midianites assemble with a mighty army of one hundred and thirty-five thousand men, and

pitch their camp in the valley of Jezreel. Then the Spirit of God comes upon Gideon, and he blows a mighty trumpet call and, lo, the people of his city and his clan gather around his standard; and from Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun and Naphtali volunteers pour in, until Gideon stands at the head of an army of thirty thousand men.

But again we see his faith begin to falter, and once more he comes to Jehovah for a reassuring word or sign. God is very gentle with his trembling servant; He sees the true purpose of obedience, and He gives him time to be sure. He always does. When God commands us to take any important step He always will grant us all the certainty and all the strength we need.

Gideon asks a sign suggested by his simple pastoral life, namely, that the fleece upon the floor of the barn shall be filled with dew while all around is dry; and, sure enough, next morning he wrings a bowl of water from the soaking fleece, while not a dewdrop is to be seen on flower or blade of grass. Still Gideon shrinks from going forward, and once more asks a sign from God, namely, that the token of last night shall be reversed, and that the fleece shall be dry the next morning, while all the ground and grass shall be soaked with dew. Once again God answers his request and grants the asked-for sign.

There was one good thing about Gideon's second request. He was willing to have his sign turned upside down. Sometimes when we are asking guidance we want it all one way, and this is usually the reason why we are so oft misguided. We are biased in our preference. We want the dew always in our fleece, and we are not so willing that it shall be dry; but Gideon's will was so fully surrendered to God that he was ready to take His answer either way, and so God could teach him. Not by these signs does God promise now to direct His children. For He has given to us His Holy Word and His Holy Spirit to show us the way in which we ought to go.

We should be very careful in resorting to the lot, or by opening our Bibles at random, and a presumptuous and superstitious dependence upon auguries and portents which leads so many astray.

In the Holy Scriptures we have a standard of right and wrong upon which we can always depend for the general principles at least which should direct our actions, and in the voice of the Holy Spirit we shall always have the special guidance which we need in particular circumstances. But there are certain conditions which we must ever observe. "The meek will He guide in judgment." The yielded and willing heart will find His way. The selfish will, the heart that chooses its way and then comes to God to have Him indorse it, will be very likely to go astray.

The apostles gathered, from combining all the leadings in a given case, that God was directing them at an important crisis, and so the wise man will ever bring to every question not only the general principles of the Holy Scriptures, and the special whisperings of the Holy Spirit, but also a sanctified judgment and a calm, deliberate consideration of all the circumstances and providence concerned, and then will hold all humbly before the Lord in prayer, and suspend all action until impressions become absolute convictions and he can go forth with certainty and rest to follow the path that has been indicated, and leave results with God.

III. Next, we see the principle of our text illustrated in the selection of Gideon's men. It was a good thing for Gideon that he was weak and timid enough to wait at every point for God's next word. It is quite possible for us to receive a command from the Lord and then to go forward blindly to obey it, and really find ourselves at last, in some measure at least, out of God's order even in seeking to obey Him, because we did not stop and hearken all along the way for His further orders. God does not give wholesale a manual of instructions for all the future, but He guides us step by step and day by day, and it is necessary for us at every moment to hearken and obey. Had Gideon gone right on with his thirty thousand, with floating banners and clanging trumpets and patriotic enthusiasm, he would surely have been defeated, and all God's promises would have failed. And so he wisely waited for his leader to point every step of the way. Beloved, we have not only a manual of instructions, but we have a living Lord, and a Leader to help us carry out our instructions. Let us walk closely with Him. For while with one breath He says, "Observe all the things whatsoever I have commanded you," in the other He says, "Lo, I am with you through all the days, even unto the end of the age."

This is the mistake the Church has often made; she has taken a set of doctrines and rules, and bound them up in a volume of instructions, principles and rules, creeds, confessions and doctrinal principles, and then gone forth to carry them out herself. We have no hesitation in saying that even the Bible without the Holy Ghost is not a sufficient guide for the Church or the Christian.

So as Gideon waits and hearkens, another message comes: "The people that are with thee are too many." And God begins to sift them, and, lo, Gideon beholds his splendid army melting away like snow upon the mountains, until two out of every three have gone back at the bidding of his fears. So God still tests us and lets us retire

from the tasks for which He knows we are inadequate.

Ah, brother, you think it was God that led you to abandon that work for Him? Nay, God let you abandon it because He saw that you were afraid and would have failed, but had you dared more you might have had more.

But even the ten thousand that are left are still too many, and so there is a second test and God again lets them test themselves. Oh, how solemn it is to know that every step we take we are weighing our own lives, and writing our own record, and fixing our own place of service and reward!

Gideon brings them up to the water brook, and simply watches them while they drink. The most of them, intent only upon drinking, and forgetting all about the foe, kneel down on the river brink, and drink and drink till they are satisfied, oblivious of all else, and never dreaming of the enemy who may be lurking right across the stream, ready to spring upon them in the unexpected moment. These men will not do for God's work, and so He puts them all aside. But there are a few, only three hundred, who go down to the water's edge in a very different fashion. With eyes alert they look around in every direction to guard against surprise or ambush, and then they just stoop down and lap the water with their hands, mouthful by mouthful, at the water's edge, watching between every mouthful for any possible surprise or assault, ready at a moment's notice to stand armed and equipped for the battle. Ah, these are God's men, and Gideon sets them aside while the others go home with the timid ones, unfit to be used of God in His commission.

Beloved, how solemn, how true all this is for you and for me! God is always bringing us down to the valley of decision, to the test place of life. He gives you some blessing, some draught from the fountain of love and prosperity, and He watches to see how you will drink, and, lo, you become absorbed in your blessing; you get right down like them to drink and drink, and forget everything else. You show where your heart is, and God cannot trust you in His enterprises. Perhaps He gives you money, and immediately you become absorbed in business or pleasure, and you are not quite ready at God's call for the sudden emergency or the subtle opportunity.

Perhaps He gives you some friend, and that friend becomes more to you than Christ, or the call of duty, and He has to set you aside, not from heaven perhaps, but from His highest will. Perhaps it is some special service which is the test. He lets you have a soul or a work for Him, and, lo, you become absorbed in your work, and you cannot hear His voice, you cannot watch His hand, you cannot be adjustable to His will, and, God says, "Go home, drink all you want to; sleep on now, and take your rest, the opportunity is passed."

Oh, how the days are telling! Oh, how God is testing! Oh, how, unconsciously to ourselves, each of us is being weighed in the balance! God help us to be watchful, to walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

God does not give us notice of these tests before they come. This is an examination where the questions are not submitted to the candidates beforehand. We understand it all afterward, and, oh, how we wish that we had watched! It is not only for the rewards of glory, but it is for the sake of higher service here that our Master is picking out day by day His followers and preparing the vessels unto honor, which are to be sanctified and meet for the Master's use, and prepared for every good work. God wants a chosen people.

Dr. Chalmers had a phrase which might well illustrate the story of Gideon's band. It was the expression, "out and out." He used to say God wants us to be "out and out." Gideon's people were "out and out." First, they were picked out from the thirty thousand, and then they were picked out from the ten thousand. There was a double selection, and so today God is picking out a people from even His professed followers, and then from these, yes, even from the consecrated ones, He is picking out a people who have not only received the Holy Ghost, but have followed Him truly through all the tests and all the deaths, all the way, so that He can say of them, as we read of the followers of the Lamb, in the day of His appearing, "The people that are with Him, are tried, and chosen and faithful." God makes us "out and out." God keep us tried and chosen and faithful. Then the "little one shall become a thousand," and the weakest saint "more than conqueror" through the omnipotence of God.