

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

“Gideon’s miraculous signs lead to the question of whether it’s appropriate for believers to ask the Lord for signs of guidance and direction in their lives.”

● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

GIDEON’S SIGNS

So, what’s the sin you keep returning to? That’s not a very odd question, really. All of us, no matter how strong our faith and commitment to the Lord, are afflicted by a particularly persistent sin, an ongoing habit of action or thought against the Lord’s will for us, for which we need God’s forgiveness again and again. For some, it is a particularly destructive habit, such as alcoholism or drug addiction. For others, it may be something which appears subtle and benign to the rest of the world, but remains an ongoing violation of God’s Law, for example, an inner jealousy and envy for the possessions of a neighbor.

For the people of Israel, it was apostasy. Again and again, God’s people doubted the faith of their fathers and strayed into the worship of foreign gods. As a result, the people of Israel would find themselves alienated from God and in trouble with their enemies. Again and again, the Lord would raise up a leader to guide them back to faith and trust in the only true God, and for a while, all would be well. But the backsliding was as inevitable as dust on a video screen.

The story of Gideon and his miraculous signs is introduced to us with an understanding that the people of Israel have once again fallen into apostasy. And they are suffering the consequences of their idolatry. For seven years they have been oppressed by the Midianites. The Midianites are also known in the Scripture as the Ishmaelites, which leads us back to the story of Joseph and his jealous brothers. Remember, it was the Ishmaelites, or Midianites, to whom Joseph was sold for twenty shekels of silver (Genesis 37:25–28).

• • • • •

Many scholars speculate this "angel of the Lord" is the preincarnate Christ Himself, the second Person of the Trinity, not yet come to earth in human form, but still interceding between God and man.

• • • • •

The Midianites weren't always at war with the Israelites. After Moses murdered an Egyptian who had been beating up a Hebrew worker, he fled to the land of Midian and married a Midianite woman. But now that Israel's tribes were established in the Promised Land, they encountered more and more hostility from their neighboring tribes. From time to time a tribal leader would be raised up to deliver God's people from their oppressors. These leaders came to be known as "judges" because God gave them the moral authority to settle disputes as well as conquer foreign tribes. Gideon is the fifth judge recorded in the book of Judges, and certainly his story is the greatest of them all.

The Midianites were one of several hungry, nomadic tribes that sought to plunder the more settled people of Israel. After Joshua's invasion, God's people had become so settled that they planted crops and raised cattle. But, nomadic tribes like the "Amalekites and other eastern peoples" (6:3) would gather together and raid the Israelites' food supplies. For seven years the nomadic Midianites had been swarming through Israel's lands like hungry locusts, impoverishing the Israelites and transforming their land of milk and honey into a desert wasteland. After seven years of punishment, the people of Israel turned to the Lord and cried for help. And the Lord heard their pleas. The first thing God did was

send a prophet (whose name we don't know) to remind God's people of His miraculous providence in the past. He reminded them of their deliverance from Egypt and their conquest of the Promised Land through His almighty power. He recalled commanding them not to worship foreign gods. And then He pointed out Israel's faithlessness. But, because of His compassion and mercy, the Lord would deliver His people once again. The God of miracles does this by sending "the angel of the Lord" to a man named Gideon, the youngest son of Joash, a farmer of the Abiezer clan in the tribe of Manasseh.

Now, the "angel of the Lord" always has an interesting role in the Old Testament. He shows up now and then, here and there, to announce the Lord's plans and to choose His special servants (Genesis 18:2, 10, 32:22–30; Exodus 3:1–5; Judges 13:20–22; Zechariah 3:1–7). Those who encounter this angel view him not just as a "messenger" (which is what the word "angel" means), but also as the Lord Himself. And yet, no one is allowed to see the Lord without dying in their sins (Exodus 33:20). Those who have encountered this "messenger" naturally marvel that they've been spared certain death. Which leads to the question, who is this angel? He is called both a "messenger" and "the Lord," but those who look upon Him have their lives spared. Many scholars speculate this "angel of the Lord"

is the preincarnate Christ Himself, the second Person of the Trinity, not yet come to earth in human form, but still interceding between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5).

In a remarkably casual appearance, the “angel of the Lord” waits for Gideon under one of the oak trees near the place where Gideon is threshing wheat. The Bible says He is simply sitting there, waiting, as if there’s nothing else pressing for the Lord to do! And when Gideon sees Him, the angel announces that the Lord is with him.

Gideon’s answer strikes a chord in all of us who have endured crises and have questioned the presence of the Lord. Gideon says, “If the Lord is with us, then why are all these awful things happening to us?” How many times have you or someone you know engaged in this same speculation? We believe the Lord walks with us throughout our journey on earth, and yet Christians endure hardships as difficult as anyone else. Christians lose beloved children; Christians battle cancer and heart disease; Christians suffer financial losses; Christians suffer all of the tribulations of the world; and yet they are sustained by the knowledge that the Lord is with them. But even the most solid faith will sometimes turn heavenward and ponder whether the Lord is truly present and aware of life’s dire circumstances. As Job cried out, “How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone upon my head and by his light I walked through darkness” (Job 29:2–3).

The Lord announces He has chosen Gideon to deliver His people from the Midianites. Gideon is, of course, dumbfounded. He feels, like Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah, that his qualifications simply aren’t adequate for the task ahead. Gideon is, after all, from the weakest clan in the tribe of Manasseh, and he is the weakest in his family. Once again, the Lord is choosing that which is foolish to shame

the wise (1 Corinthians 1:27). And to calm Gideon’s fears, the Lord promises He will be with him to help him conquer the Midianites.

The Lord’s promise isn’t sufficiently convincing for Gideon, nor would it be for us were we in Gideon’s predicament. How could Gideon know whether this angel was who He claimed to be? Couldn’t he be a Midianite attempting to entrap Gideon in a quixotic and destructive conflict? Or might he be some jokester from a neighboring tribe hoping to make a fool of Gideon? Or He could actually be the Lord. So, Gideon asks for a sign to prove the validity of His claim. But notice, Gideon gives the Lord the benefit of the doubt. His first intent is to gather an offering and set it before the stranger, and then he requests that the Lord prove His presence and message with a sign. After Gideon returns with his offering of meat and unleavened bread, the Lord touches both with the staff in His hand and the food is consumed in fire. This is a sign that the offering has been accepted (see Leviticus 9:24).

Gideon, recognizing this is indeed the Lord, now fears for his life. He, too, knows one does not look on the face of God and live. But the angel assures him that he need not be afraid, and that he will most certainly live. And the angel’s directive is simple: Gideon is to tear down the altar built to the false god Baal, and rebuild one to the glory of God. That’s the easy part. Gideon’s next task is much more formidable. He is to gather some of the tribes of Israel to attack the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern people who are once again threatening the livelihood of God’s people.

For such a task, the weakest son of the family which belongs to the weakest clan in Manasseh will need some reassurance. Gideon asks for another sign to show he has really been chosen to lead Israel to victory. The sign he asks for involves a sheep’s fleece to be placed on the threshing floor. If by morning the fleece is covered with dew while the rest of the floor is dry, Gideon will accept

the phenomenon as a sign and follow the Lord's direction. And it was as Gideon requested. He was able to take the fleece and wring a bowlful of water from it. The rest of the ground was dry.

Yet Gideon is still wrapped in insecurity. This was, after all, an extraordinary undertaking, to rally the tribes of Israel and lead them in warfare against the innumerable tribesman encamped in the valley below. With some trepidation, Gideon asks for yet another sign, one which will confirm the first sign. The second sign will again involve a wool fleece, but this time Gideon asks the Lord to keep the fleece dry while the rest of the ground is moistened by dew. And it was as Gideon requested.

Having read about the signs requested by Gideon and granted by the Lord, one cannot but think of Jesus words to the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Matthew 12:39: "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." We might ponder whether this was an overreaction on Jesus' part against people who were, after all, asking for a miraculous sign to prove Jesus' identity even as the angel of the Lord had proved His to Gideon. The key to this apparent contradiction is found in the context of Jesus' condemnation. Unlike Gideon, who showed his messenger respect and at least in part believed in Him, the Pharisees and teachers of the law had just accused Jesus of being Beelzebub, the devil (Matthew 12:24). The Pharisees and teachers of the law had thus committed the unpardonable "sin against the Holy Spirit" by rejecting all faith in the Lord. Of course the Lord would refuse to fulfill their requests. Yet, He did indeed give His listeners a sign. The sign was the story of Jonah, who lived in the belly of a large fish for three days until he was regurgitated alive. Even as Jonah appeared to be dead and buried for three days until he was expelled from

the fish, so Jesus would be dead and buried for three days and then resurrected. The sign would be a miraculous one indeed, but, of course, most of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law would disbelieve it anyway. Without faith, even the greatest of miracles is doubted.

After asking for and receiving so many signs from the Lord, Gideon was convinced. The Lord was indeed on his side. Gideon rallied thousands of God's people for war, but was told by God that he had too many warriors. When Americans wage battle, we have learned that warfare goes more smoothly with the presence of overwhelming force. But in Gideon's case, there was strength through subtraction. First, God guided Gideon to allow anyone frightened by the prospect of engaging in warfare to go home. Twenty-two thousand people left in fear. That left only 10,000 troops. This was, in the Lord's eyes, still too many. God guided Gideon to tell the remaining troops to savor a drink of water from the nearby Jordan. Those who knelt on all fours and drank water directly from the river were excused from battle. Those who used their hands and lapped water into their mouths were the only soldiers to be chosen. That left 300 men.

With 300 soldiers the Lord promised to defeat the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern people whose numbers appeared so great that they resembled a swarm of locusts feeding on valley vegetation. Surely, we would wonder at the Lord's wisdom were we to find ourselves in a similar situation. This time we read of no request by Gideon for a sign. But, the Lord gave him one anyway. Gideon and one of his servants crept down to the enemy camp and overheard a Midianite soldier describe a dream in which he saw a round loaf of barley bread tumble into the Midianite camp. It struck a tent with such force that the entire tent collapsed. The soldiers' friend interpreted the dream as a sign that the

Midianites would be crushed by Gideon's troops, and Gideon, overhearing all of this, was overjoyed. In his opinion, this was yet another sign from the Lord.

Gideon's strategy was rather simple. He divided his troops into three groups of one hundred, and gave each soldier a trumpet, an empty pitcher, and a torch. At the sound of Gideon's trumpet each soldier was to blow his trumpet, break his pitcher, and holler, "For the Lord and for Gideon!" We can only imagine the tremendous noise created by the blowing trumpets, the shouting voices, and the breaking pitchers. The sound was chaotic and frightening and it instigated general panic among the Midianites. They jumped from their mats, grabbed their weapons and began slaying one another. With mass confusion leading to the slaughter and retreat of Israel's enemies, the word was spread through the surrounding tribes of God's people that the Midianites were in retreat. The message brought thousands of God's people into the fray, slaughtering Midianites and seizing goods and land. Before long, the threat of outside invasion was gone.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of this series of sign miracles is Gideon's ability to ask the Lord for a specific sign and receive it as requested. There are, of course, other moments in Scripture when one of God's people is given a sign to assure him of his calling and purpose. When Moses was chosen to lead God's people from Egypt, the Lord asked Moses to throw his staff on the ground, whereupon the staff changed into a snake. Furthermore, Moses was told to put his hand into his cloak, and when he pulled it out, his hand was leprous. After putting his hand back into his cloak, Moses removed a clean and restored hand (Exodus 4:1–7). These were signs of the Lord's support. When King Ahaz was threatened by the king of Aram, Isaiah assured Ahaz of his safety. The Lord gave a sign to Ahaz and all people that the Messiah would be born of a virgin and be called Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14). What makes Gideon's signs so unique is the opportunity to make a specific request and find that request fulfilled.

Gideon's miraculous signs lead to the question of whether it's appropriate for believers to ask the Lord for signs of guidance and direction in their lives. The concept is certainly scriptural. We see it happening many times. As a matter of fact, when King Ahaz is told to ask for a sign, he refuses because he doesn't want to "test" the Lord. And the Lord grows angry with him for not asking (Isaiah 7:12–13). Generally, we must remember, however, that the Lord grants signs on his terms and not ours. Indeed, it is when we demand specific signs and wonders from the Lord that we "test" Him (Exodus 17:7). It is the biblical exception to request a certain specific sign and expect to receive it.

The ultimate sign to support us through our moments of confusion and frustration is found in the cross. Finally, all problems facing Christians are solved in the promise of the resurrection. When believers are involved, all roads lead to victory, direction, peace, and joy in the arms of the living Lord. So, if you feel the Lord has never given you a sign of direction for your future, think again. Go to church and look at the cross. There is the sign!

PERSONAL APPLICATION*DALLYING WITH DELILAH - JUDGES 13-16*

Lord of power and might, I pray Your hand will guide and protect me through all life's trials. Should evil assail me, give me Your strength to overcome. Intervene in this world to redeem my sins into something which will work for Your good. In Jesus' name. Amen.

1. Once again (this is getting tiresome!), what is Israel's predicament and how did she get into it? (13:1)

2. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Manoah's wife and announced she would give birth to a special son, of what stories are we reminded?
Genesis 18:1-15

 Luke 1:11-13

 Luke 1:26-38

3. What command does the messenger give Manoah's wife that is similar to the instructions medical professionals give expectant mothers today (13:4)?

 What command indicates this child will be raised differently than others (13:5)?

4. Explain once again why Manoah and his wife were fearful of being struck dead after the episode of 13:15-23?

5. Who was responsible for finding Isaac a wife and what was the general requirement for Isaac's future wife? (Genesis 24:1-4)

 Who made the choice of Samson's wife and what would Abraham have thought of his selection? (Judges 14:1-3)

 In your opinion, what does this suggest about Samson's character?

 How might the concerns of Samson's parents in 14:3 be legitimately shared by today's Christian parents? (2 Corinthians 6:14)

How does the author of Judges imply that the Lord will work Samson's sinful defiance into something good?
(Judges 14:4)

How might the Lord use a marriage in which a believer is yoked with an unbeliever for ultimate good?
(1 Corinthians 7:12–14)

How do these examples confirm the promise of Paul in Romans 8:28, and Joseph's evaluation of his brothers' treachery in Genesis 50:20?

6. What was the answer to Samson's puzzle in 14:14? (14:6, 8–9)

How did the Philistines solve Samson's riddle? (14:15–17)

7. What was Samson's reaction to his wife's betrayal and the Philistines' duplicity? (14:19)

8. Explain how the cycle of violence and vengeance escalated in the following verses:
Judges 15:3–5

Judges 15:6

Judges 15:7–8

Judges 15:9

Judges 15:14–15

9. By the time Samson met Delilah, how do you think the Philistines felt about him? (16:1–2)

10. Explain the methods Samson falsely told Delilah could strip him of his strength. (16:7, 11, 13)

11. What tactic did Delilah use on Samson which some wives may still use? (16:15–16)

12. What, finally, was the true secret of Samson's strength? (16:19)

13. In the end, we find Samson humiliated, incapacitated, and defeated. How did the Lord work one final miracle through Samson to turn death into victory? (16:26-31)

Who else won a miraculous victory through His humiliating death at the hands of evil? (1 Corinthians 15:57; Hebrews 2:14-15)

14. Share with each other your general impressions of Samson's character. Would you like him as a friend? Who does he remind you of? Why is he a surprising choice through whom God would work miracles?
