



Shalom!

That's a typical greeting from my country, ancient Israel. It means "peace to you." I knew peace in my life; hardship in my life; war in my life.

When I was a boy there was peace in my country. Deborah and Barak had defeated Jabin the king of Canaan. The result was peace. Kids skipped and played. Farmers worked the land and the crops we grew ... oh! The fruits were sweet and the vegetables rich with flavor. This lasted for 40 years.

Then a strange thing happened. I was just a boy at the time so my experiences were seen through the examples of the adults around me. It was like the adults forgot that the Lord had rescued them from King Jabin. In fact, we hardly talked about the Lord. Instead, my father built an altar to Baal and an Asherah pole on the edge of our property. Everybody in town came and worshipped it. Not only was this strange. It proved disastrous.

Then the dastardly Midianites and Amalekites started coming from the East, from across the Jordan River, over the mountains. They moved like a swarm of locusts with their camels and livestock. As I watched them move down the hills surrounding the farming valleys, they looked like water running down the hills, filling every open spot. They completely filled our valleys. They'd walk right through our beautifully straight lines of crops. They bent the stalks of our crops with their tents. The hooves of their camels and livestock would destroy our nicely plowed farmland too. And they'd just eat anything they didn't destroy. When we tried to stop them, they'd laugh with scorn. We weren't a strong people with warriors. All it took was a little aggression from them and we fled to the surrounding hills and lived in the caves until they left.

For seven years we endured this harassment. We were starving. Terrified. Sure, the elders gathered to discuss the problem but it always ended the way those council meetings end: Let's keep talking and thinking about it. Some even said, "Maybe the Midianites and Amalekites just won't come back." That didn't happen! Year after year, they just kept coming.

No one knows where the movement back to worshipping the Lord started. Little by little, I guess. I started hearing more and more about people praying to the Lord, crying out to him in

desperation. He was our only hope left! Little by little, people were talking about their hope in the Lord to rescue them from this enemy.

You might wonder what I was doing during all of this. Keeping my head down and staying out of trouble. I was a nobody from Manasseh. I wasn't anybody special. I wasn't a leader. I wasn't even sure about the stories of the Lord performing miracles for my ancestors. Who knows why my parents named me Gideon. That means "destroyer," you know. Destroyer. That certainly wasn't me.

Oh! I'm so sorry, I was so caught up in my story that I forgot to introduce myself. I'm from the tribe of Manasseh, on the west side of the Jordan. My clan, the Abiezrites, is very small. My father's name is Joash, which means "God has given." My name is Gideon, but during my lifetime some people called me Jerub-Baal for my actions.

You can imagine how surprised I was when the angel of the Lord showed up and called me to lead a military campaign. I was a farmer! I knew how to harvest wheat. I didn't know anything about a sword or cutting another person with it.

So when the angel said to me, "The Lord is with you, mighty warrior. Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand," I thought this was just some guy messing with me. I was so fearful, I'd been threshing wheat inside a wine press. That's an impossible task! There's no wind in there to separate the wheat from the chaff! But I preferred doing something idiotic than something brave.

But there was something compelling about this angel and his words. When he spoke to me, something was different. There was a weight to his presence. I felt his words connect with my soul. Something happened inside of me. I was inspired to act differently than I'd ever acted in my life.

I was still petrified. More afraid than I'd ever been in my entire life. I let my fear govern my decisions so I asked him for a sign. And he gave me one by scorching the meal I brought to him. That's when I knew he was the angel of the Lord and despite my paralyzing fear, God was calling me to do something. Something so big that my abilities would never make it happen. God had to do a miracle.

Before my big moment, I had to make things right in my own family. The angel told me to destroy my father's altar to Baal and the Asherah pole, sacrifice a bull from my father's herd as a burnt offering to the Lord.

When I heard this, dread spread through my gut. My father's sacred altar to Baal and the Asherah pole! Everybody in our village worshipped these. They were sacred relics to them. I knew they would kill me if they learned I destroyed them. So under the cloak of darkness, I gathered 10 of my servants and we did it. I wanted to be faithful to the Lord but I didn't want to risk being ostracized or killed by my neighbors, friends and family.

In the morning, the village was like an angry beehive. Everybody saw the smoldering broken altar and burnt offering, and the manhunt ensued. They were blinded with rage and thirsting for my blood. They found me, of course. And surprisingly, it was the intervention of my father that saved my life. He reasoned with the angry mob that if Baal was really a god, he could defend himself. A god didn't need people to act on his behalf.

That stuck with me. People scurry around earth worshipping these unseen gods. And my dad was saying, "Let's not blindly believe some unseen god exists. Let's see how this god acts in the physical realm we live in. Then we'll know if he's real and then we'll know his or her character."

Baal never did punish me for destroying his altar. But Yahweh sure did work powerfully as I stepped out in faith. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I haven't told you about God's biggest work in my life yet.

After the ordeal with my father's altar to Baal, it was the harvest season and the Midianites and Amalekites were coming into our land like they'd been doing for seven years. They kept coming and coming; stomping our crops; destroying our farmland. I watched them with renewed interest wondering how the Lord intended me to save my people from these invaders. I thought about fighting them, but I wasn't trained. I thought about negotiating a treaty. But that seemed like a dumb idea because we had nothing to offer in a trade that they weren't already taking. They'd never go for that.

That's when it happened. The Spirit of the Lord came upon me. I sensed his power. I could understand how he was placing thoughts into my mind as his way of speaking to me. I didn't need to figure out a plan to save my people. God already had the plan. I just needed to follow His plan.

So I blew my ram's horn and summoned people from the neighboring tribes: Manasseh, Asher, Naphtali and Zebulun. People were assembling and preparing to confront these foreigners and

drive them out of our land. I was ready to step out in faith but I wanted to make really sure that this was the Lord's plan and not my delusion. If this was really God's plan, then I would do anything. But I really needed to know. So I asked for another sign: a wet fleece with dry ground. And the Lord gave me this sign. Then I did something cowardly, I asked for another sign: a dry fleece with wet ground.

God was gracious to me and he gave me the assurance I needed with this second sign too. But it was cowardly of me to ask for these. God had already shown me enough and I already knew the Lord was real and powerful. Looking back, I guess the easiest way to understand it was this: I required extra reassurance before I would take a big step of faith. And I needed it because the next thing the Lord asked of me defied logic.

The very next morning I heard from the Lord and he said I had too many men. Now that's pretty funny because I only had 32,000 men. Did I mention that there were 140,000 Midianites and Amalekites?

Too many men? But I was learning that when God is calling me to do something that seems ridiculous, it might be in preparation for a miracle.

So I followed the Lord's instructions. I told the men that if anyone was trembling with fear they were free to go home. 22,000 left us. With a reduced force down to 10,000 the Lord told me that I still had too many men! So I did what the Lord said and took the men down to the water. This act alone was petrifying because the river was the only barrier between the Midianites and Amalekites and us. Literally, we were just across the river from them. This was crazy. God reduced my army another 9,700 because the men drank water the wrong way. 300 men lapped the water like a dog. The Lord designated these men as my army.

And he did it because he knew we'd attribute the victory to our own strength unless it was ridiculously obvious that the Lord was the **only** one who had performed a miracle. He would do the amazing work. I need to step out in faith and trust him.

But still I was afraid. I know, you're starting to wonder why he chose me, aren't you?

To build my confidence, one more time, the Lord sent me over to the Midian camp at night on a secret eavesdropping mission. As I stood outside a tent I overheard one guy telling another guy about his dream. Here's what I learned. The Lord had been giving them dreams that were scaring them to death, dreams about their camp being destroyed. They were terrified of the Lord and me. While the Lord was reducing our army, he'd also been reducing the Midianite's confidence.

I hurried back to camp, organized the men into three groups and we set out to get these people out of our land.

The Lord had given us the battle plan. We were to surround the camp on three sides with 100 men in each group. I would blow the trumpet and then everyone would blow their trumpets. We'd all shout "For the Lord and for Gideon." We'd throw clay jars on the ground to make crashing noises. We'd continue blowing our trumpets and holding torches in our left hands. And we stood our ground. We didn't advance or retreat.

The Midianites and Amalekites were so scared and confused they ran throughout their camp, in the dark, killing each other. The Lord did all the real fighting while we stood firm. There was utter chaos. People were dying everywhere and running for their lives. The battle was ours. Their will had been broken. They were on the run.

I called in Manasseh, Asher, Naphtali and Ephraim to help mop up the stragglers and we cleared the land of all foreigners. 120,000 of their men had died. The Lord answered our plea for deliverance. The oppression of the Midianites and Amalekites was over. We lived in peace for 40 years.

The people wanted to make me king after this victory. I said "no" to that. I didn't want any part of being their king. I wasn't a leader. And I knew enough about my people's history to know that the Lord was our king and we weren't meant to have an earthly one.

At the beginning of my encounter, the angel of the Lord told me, "Go in the strength you have and save Israel out of Midian's hand." I've thought about that moment a lot over the centuries. What was the strength I had?

My strength was this: the Lord was with me. The angel told me this. And when the Spirit of the Lord came upon me, oh, I knew it.

I see how God uses people who know they are small to accomplish big things for him. And I see how the snare of thinking you are so big prohibits God from using a person to the fullest.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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