

Saul and Gideon

830527

There is a contrast between two people who were presented with a once-in-a lifetime chance for complete power; each chooses a different path though they start from almost identical points. These two people are Gideon and Saul.

An angel of the LORD came to Gideon in a time when Midian was oppressing the land of Israel. Gideon was threshing wheat in a winepress to hide what he was doing from the Midianites. The angel said, "The LORD is with you, mighty warrior." Gideon asked, "How can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." He knew that he was nothing in the sight of God or of Israel. We find that God, by performing several miraculous works, finally convinces Gideon to accept the job as leader. Gideon puts out a call to arms, to which 32,000 men of Israel responded. But so it not be thought that the strength of man had saved the day, God cut the number to 10,000 by sending all of the fearful home. This was still too many, so the number was cut again, this time to the 300 men who lapped up their drinking water with their tongue. I know we are all familiar with the story that follows, with the pitchers, torches and trumpets. We see then that the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and we hear his battle cry, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!"

Through Gideon, the Lord gave a great victory: 300 men of Israel conquered 135,000 Midianites, killing 120,000 of them. These were tremendous odds in human terms, but with God we must remember that he alone is a majority. But through all of this Gideon became a great hero to all of the people of Israel, who offered him and his descendants the rule of their nation. He would be made king! But Gideon told them, "I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you." Gideon knew that the Lord and the Lord alone was the true ruler of Israel. Though he had been in command and had experienced the taste of power and of victory, it did not overpower him such that he forgot who was the real boss. This takes a tremendous amount of presence of mind to keep things in perspective as Gideon did. All of this from the man who was least in the family of the weakest clan in Manasseh, one of the smaller tribes.

The story of Saul closely parallels that of Gideon in the beginning. Samuel tells Saul that he will be come a ruler in Israel. Saul answered, "But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin?" The Spirit of the LORD came upon him in power, and he won a great victory over the Ammonites for the Lord and for Israel. Like Gideon, the people of Israel all hailed him as a great hero, and wanted him as their king.

In both of these stories, the man to whom God was to impart a special mission thought himself the least member of the least family of the least tribe of Israel. Both were visited by a measure of the Spirit of God and were able to win a great victory and freedom for their people by it. Both were given a chance to become the king of all of Israel. Whereas Gideon recognized God's role as king, Saul seems to have accepted only too readily the power of that position. He seems to become every more power hungry as the years go on, not just for himself but for his family as well. We see that it ceased to matter much what it was that the Lord really wanted from him.

On one occasion, with his army dwindling as he waited for Samuel, he decided to offer up the burnt offering himself. Samuel told him that he had done a great wrong and that God had sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people because of it. Power took hold of Saul, and he tried to control Israel himself instead of relying on the power of God. Another time Saul grasped for the power of worldly things rather than submit to the will of God. He was ordered to completely destroy the Amalekites, but he returned with the best plunder from the battle. But Samuel replied: "To obey is better than sacrifice." Saul feared the loss of earthly power, and as a result, he is rejected by God.

So we see that, starting from the same point of extreme humility, Gideon and Saul traveled down different paths. Gideon kept his perspective and was able to relinquish the power that he had received. He did not let it corrupt him. Saul loved power more than he loved the Lord God, and let it control him until it destroyed him.

© Copyright 1983, Heard Lowry