

“Growing Through Challenges #4: The Praise of the Lord”
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February 23, 2020

“The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon.” Judges 7:20

Looking at the story of Gideon, did the Lord communicate to him in a way that we might say helped build a sense of capability and confidence? Looking at how the Lord communicates with us; does He try to foster a sense of capability and confidence within us? Why does the Lord tell us “without me you can do nothing.” Why does He say we are born with hereditary inclinations to love evil things and to embrace false ideas? Why does the Lord give us compelling images of the overwhelming power of the hells in comparison to our capabilities? One reaction a person could have to these teachings would be to be filled with debilitating shame and to feel quite incapable.

In the beginning of the story of Gideon he was a man who didn’t have a lot of confidence. When the angel first appeared to Gideon the angel told him words that should have been encouraging. He said, “The LORD is with you, you mighty man of valor!” (Judges 6:12) and also “Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?” (Judges 6:14). But Gideon responded: “O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house.” (Judges 6:15). Repeatedly the Lord gave Gideon signs to reassure him, the last of which was part of today’s reading.

Just prior to the great battle, the Lord invited Gideon, if he was afraid, to go spy out the huge camp of the Midianites. When Gideon reached the camp, there was a man recounting a dream to his companion. He said, Behold, I have dreamed a dream; and behold, a cake of barley bread rolled towards the camp of Midian, and came all the way to a tent, and struck it so the tent collapsed (Judges 7:13). The man’s companion said it meant Gideon would defeat them. The meaning of this dream is described in the teachings for the New Church.

“Midian” means . . .in the contrary sense those who fail to lead a good life. . . Sensory pleasure, if this is what a person has in view instead of a simple quality of goodness, is what is meant by “a cake of barley bread.” This is the state that the Midianites described here represented on that occasion. (*Arcana Caelestia* 7602)

If we are paying attention, we can recognize that life doesn’t really work if we are not trying to work with the Lord to live a good life.

The miraculous victory of Gideon’s small force over the awesome Midianite army was effected under the battle cry of our text. The story of this victory and the cry, “The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon” presents the means whereby the Lord can save us from overwhelming states of doubt and despair that can fill our minds in temptation.

The Midianite hordes that wreaked havoc upon the Israelites in Gideon’s day represent the times in our lives when false ideas fill our minds. In the literal sense, the Midianites descended upon the children of Israel because they had done evil in the sight of the Lord. The destruction wrought by the Midianites did not come in a single onslaught but recurred for years following every sowing season. The Midianites, the Amalekites, the children of the East would come out of the deserts that were across the Jordan from the land of Canaan and would plunder the land. Their seasonal attacks were so destructive and had so wasted the land that the children of Israel

had been forced into living in caves and dens in the mountains, surviving on meager rations because the desert marauders left no food, neither sheep, nor oxen, nor donkey.

This desolate existence aptly describes the inner quality of our lives when we have learned many true ideas from the Word but are facing a significant area of life in which we have yet to apply them. We know facts about what is true, but we are not using them to help ourselves and others. Just as the Midianites descended following every sowing season, when we are not in the life of charity, a powerful opposition arises in our minds every time truth from the Word might enter. Our tendencies to love ourselves and the things of the world above all things plunder our mind of its truth before it can bear any fruit. Our hereditary inclinations to love evil things accomplishes this destruction by twisting and perverting what we know from the Word until we no longer recognize what the Lord is trying to tell us, or by filling our minds with so many other concerns that we cannot hear the Lord's voice. Either way, we are left without a clear idea of what is good and what is true. We are without spiritual food. Those who want to be led by the Lord feel distress when doubts and other false ideas fill their minds. This distress is the pain of temptation. It comes from an attack on something true or good that we love.

In states of temptation our mind is filled with obscurity. Like the Israelites, we must cry to the Lord because of the spiritual Midianites that have impoverished our mind. It is only when we have submitted ourselves to His guidance that He can come to our aid. It is only when we have submitted the guidance of our life to the teachings of the Word that He is able to save us. When we humbly do this, the Lord can flow miraculously into our thoughts with His word of truth, routing the doubts that have been oppressing our thoughts. This is the miracle represented in the defeat of the vast Midianite camp by the small army of Gideon.

Gideon was the man chosen by the Lord to save Israel from her enemies. The Lord told Gideon, "Go in this might of yours, and you shall save Israel from the hand of the Midianites. Have I not sent you?" (Judges 6:14). It is the Lord's command that a person should remove evil as sin from his thoughts and actions; and then and not otherwise, can the Lord remove the evil desires that impel us toward such evil thoughts and actions (*Divine Providence* 100).

When all the Midianites and Amalekites and the children of the East gathered together and moved against Canaan, again the spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet. Blowing on the trumpet represents our reception of the power of Divine truth. This power cannot be received unless we compel ourselves to do what is good. It is the power of Divine truth that allows us to battle with the evil spirits that are the real source of temptation.

Gideon sent out messengers to gather an army to do battle with Midianites. The Lord did not allow him to keep the whole army that was gathered. He told Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give the Midianites into their hands, lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me'" (Judges 7:2). It is essential in temptation that even when we act as though we alone had power in resisting evil thoughts and actions, we do not believe that it was our own ability that enables us to defeat their attacks. Indeed, the teachings for the New Church tell us that if a person congratulates himself after suffering temptation, it is a sign that that person has not conquered, but on the contrary has yielded a key part of the battle. The temptations in which a person overcomes are attended with a belief that all others are more worthy than himself and that he has earned no personal credit through his temptations. (*Arcana Caelestia* 2273) We must acknowledge that we don't have the power to win in temptation. The power that saves us and defeats the hells is solely from the Lord. It is the sword of the Lord.

Gideon was instructed by the Lord to narrow down his army until it contained only three hundred men who passed a special test by lapping water with their tongues. These men represent the natural affections which have led us to learn what is true (*Apocalypse Explained* 455:9). Each of the three hundred men was given a trumpet and a pitcher in which to hide a burning torch, and they were divided up into three groups on different sides of the Midianite camp. This was all done in the middle of the night. The darkness of the night represents the state of obscurity which a person experiences during temptation, for at that time the true ideas that he knows are under attack. The pitchers that hid the torches represent the knowledge that has been stored up prior to the state of temptation. Upon the signal from Gideon all the men broke their pitchers, revealing their torches, and then they immediately began to sound their trumpets. The torches represent the clarity of ideas that are motivated by a desire to do what is good (*Arcana Caelestia* 8914). This clarity or brightness strikes through the darkness brought on by doubts, cutting through the false ideas that have clouded our thinking. The sound of the trumpets represents a person's reception of truth Divine through the heavens (*Arcana Caelestia* 8815). When we have done our part in fighting in temptation, we can receive the power of the Lord.

The battle cry of the Israelites was not just, "The sword of the Lord," but rather was "The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon." Spiritually the sword was also Gideon's because his part in this victory was cooperating with the Lord and through this cooperation the power of the Lord accomplished its salvation. Only one sword is referred to because there is only one power against evil. The sword of Gideon is the sword of the Lord. Even though we must act as if of ourselves to remove evils from our thoughts and deeds, we must acknowledge that the Lord is the only one who can remove these evils.

So, does the Lord want us to believe we can win in our battles of temptation? Absolutely. But He wants to know that it cannot possibly come from our own power alone. The Lord also wants us to know that we are not "just fine" the way we entered adult life. There are hereditary inclinations to love evil things and to embrace false ideas that must be conquered. And the Lord wants us to know that He is with us in these battles and more than anything else He wants to bring us His strength and power that allows us to overcome. If we can hold all these things together in our minds, it provides a wonderful foundation for us to praise the Lord and daily give thanks to Him for all He does for us. We have our part to play. In order to progress spiritually, we must actively seek to recognize the implications of truth for our daily life. For those who desire to be led by the Lord, final victory is assured. Peace will be achieved through the power of "The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon." AMEN

Lessons: Judges 7:7-23, *Arcana Caelestia* 9410:5, *True Christian Religion* 68

Judges 7:7-23

⁷ Then the LORD said to Gideon, "By the three hundred men who lapped I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand. Let all the *other* people go, every man to his place."⁸ So the people took provisions and their trumpets in their hands. And he sent away all *the rest of* Israel, every man to his tent, and retained those three hundred men. Now the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.

⁹ It happened on the same night that the LORD said to him, "Arise, go down against the camp, for I have delivered it into your hand."¹⁰ But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant,¹¹ and you shall hear what they say; and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp." Then he went down with Purah his servant to the

outpost of the armed men who *were* in the camp. ¹² Now the Midianites and Amalekites, all the people of the East, were lying in the valley as numerous as locusts; and their camels *were* without number, as the sand by the seashore in multitude. ¹³ And when Gideon had come, there was a man telling a dream to his companion. He said, “I have had a dream: *To my* surprise, a loaf of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian; it came to a tent and struck it so that it fell and overturned, and the tent collapsed.” ¹⁴ Then his companion answered and said, “This *is* nothing else but the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel! Into his hand God has delivered Midian and the whole camp.”

¹⁵ And so it was, when Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, that he worshiped. He returned to the camp of Israel, and said, “Arise, for the LORD has delivered the camp of Midian into your hand.” ¹⁶ Then he divided the three hundred men *into* three companies, and he put a trumpet into every man’s hand, with empty pitchers, and torches inside the pitchers. ¹⁷ And he said to them, “Look at me and do likewise; watch, and when I come to the edge of the camp you shall do as I do: ¹⁸ When I blow the trumpet, I and all who *are* with me, then you also blow the trumpets on every side of the whole camp, and say, ‘*The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!*’ “ ¹⁹ So Gideon and the hundred men who *were* with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that *were* in their hands. ²⁰ Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers--they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing--and they cried, “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!” ²¹ And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled. ²² When the three hundred blew the trumpets, the LORD set every man’s sword against his companion throughout the whole camp; and the army fled to Beth Acacia, toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah, by Tabbath. ²³ And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites.

Arcana Coelestia 9410:5

In the Word angels are called “powers”; and it is also well known in the Church that they are such. Yet they are not powerful by virtue of anything their own, only by virtue of the Lord; for they are recipients of God’s truth which emanates from the Lord. The power they have from the Lord is such that one of them can drive away a thousand of the devil’s crew, confine them to the hells, and keep them in check.

True Christian Religion 68

The reason a person has from Divine Omnipotence power against evil loves and false ideas to the extent that person lives in accordance with the Divine order is that no one, except God alone, can resist evil loves and the false ideas they produce. For all evils and their falsities come from hell, and there they hold together as a unit, exactly as all kinds of good and so truths do in heaven. In the sight of God the whole of heaven is like one human being, and in the opposite case hell is like one monstrous giant. Thus acting against one evil and its falsity is like taking on that monstrous giant or all hell. No one can do this except God, because He is omnipotent. It is plain from this that unless a person approaches almighty God, that person can do no more against evil and so falsity than a fish against the ocean, a flea against a whale, or a speck of dust against an avalanche . . . Moreover, a person has so much less power against evil and so falsity because he was born into evil, and evil cannot act against itself. The consequence of this is that unless a person lives in accordance with order, that is, unless he acknowledges God, His omnipotence and the protection this gives a person against hell, and unless that person on his part also fights with the evil in himself, for both of these are part of order, the person must inevitably be plunged into and drowned in hell.