

## Finding Inner Peace

### Growing through Challenges Part 2: the Peace of the Lord

John L. Odhner, Bryn Athyn Cathedral, February 9, 2020

“The Lord is Peace.” That was Gideon’s name for the altar he built after the Lord called him to lead the fight against Israel’s oppressors. Last week we began our series, Growing through Challenges, which is designed to help us understand how we can get through the hard things in life, as Illustrated in the story of Gideon in the Bible. Erik Buss spoke of how the Book of Judges contains a cycle that repeats many times over. When Israel was without a leader, they would forget about the Lord, and turn to evil. This made them vulnerable to attacks from their enemies, and they found themselves defeated and oppressed. Then they cried out to the Lord for help, and the Lord raised up a judge who would lead them in battle, bringing them victory and a time of peace, until that judge died and again they were left without a leader and fell back into evil. So there were times of oppression and times of freedom. There were times of war and times of peace.

When we compare ourselves with other people, it may seem as if other people's lives are much different from our own. Maybe we see ourselves as being very challenged and having extremely difficult things to face in life and we look at other people and see that their life seems pleasant and not difficult at all. Or we may look at others and see challenges much greater than our own. But comparing ourselves with other people doesn't tell us much, because we don't know what's going on in someone else's mind and heart. Every one of us has our own battles and struggles. We have our own challenges to face. We can't compare what's going on inside of us with what appears on the outside with other people. So regardless of whether our life is seems easier or more difficult, we all have our ups and downs. We all have times when things go better and times when things go worse.

### The Lord is Peace

The Lord had appeared to Gideon at a time when the people of Israel had been been hiding in fear and starving because Midianite raiders had taken all their food. They had cried out to the Lord for help, so the Lord appeared in the form of an angelic messenger to raise up a leader who could again bring peace to the land. The promise and the hope that peace would return to the land was one reason Gideon proclaimed, “The Lord is peace.” Another reason is that the Lord appeared to him and promised to be with him, and the Lord’s presence with Gideon gave him a feeling of peace.

Our message last week was about that Presence of the Lord. The Lord is always present with us invisibly, beyond our conscious awareness. “In Him we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28) Yet He cannot be present in our conscious thought unless we think about Him, and we can think about Him when we know Him and understand Him. So the first step in overcoming challenges is to think of God as Someone who loves us dearly and came into our world to be with us in our trials and lead us through our struggles against evil. This Presence is pictured in our story by the Lord appearing to Gideon and promising to be with him.

Our message this week is about the Peace of the Lord, which follows from the Presence of the Lord, because true peace comes from our connection with the Lord, as we read in many passages:

I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; for You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. —*Psalm 4:8*

The Lord will give strength to His people; The Lord will bless His people with peace.—*Psalm 29:11*

Lord, You will establish peace for us, for You have also done all our works in us. —*Isaiah 26:12*

From *Heaven and Hell*:

I have talked with angels about peace as well, and have told them that on earth they call it peace when wars and conflicts between nations are over, or enmities and disagreements between individuals, and that they think inner peace is simply the peace of mind we have when anxieties are banished, or especially the relief and delight when things turn out well for us. The angels have responded, though, that this peace of mind, this relief and delight when anxieties are banished and things turn out well for us, may look like effects of peace; but they do not come from real peace except in people who are focused on heavenly good. This is because peace occurs only in that good. Peace actually flows in from the Lord into the very core of such individuals, and from that core comes down and spreads into their lower natures, causing peace of mind, relief of the spirit, and a consequent joy. —*Heaven and Hell 290*

## Two Causes of Trouble

There were two causes of trouble for the people of Israel. One was their external enemies—Midianites, Amalekites, and other people from the east who raided them and stole their sustenance. The deeper cause of trouble was an enemy that originated within their own borders: idolatry. We might suppose that idolatry is not a big issue today—who actually worships statues these days? But worshipping idols is symbolic of selfishness and materialism. Whatever we value the most and whatever guides our decisions is our god. If our highest values are compassion, integrity and refusal to cause harm to others, then our God is the Lord, who only requires that we do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). The “other” gods we sometimes rely on are money, status, pleasure and power. Any time that we cause pain to someone else in order to take pleasure for ourselves, or lash out at someone for inconveniencing us, or show contempt for someone just for disagreeing with us, we are worshipping the gods of pleasure, possessions and power.

The first task the Lord gave Gideon was to tear down his own father’s idols and in their place make an offering to the Lord. It is the commandment against idolatry in the Ten Commandments that mentions “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons to the third and fourth generation.” Gideon received worship of idols from his father, and now he must turn against that idolatry and eradicate it. It seemed that Gideon’s first task was to turn against his own family and community. It calls to mind what the Lord said,

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.

—Matthew 10:34-36

The Lord was speaking symbolically, here. He doesn't want to turn family members against each other, but He does want each of us to turn against the inherited evil—the hurtful intentions, self-centeredness, bitterness, hatred and vengefulness—that we all inherit from our parents.

## Inner and Outer Self

We all have an inner self where we keep our deepest secrets, dreams and intentions, and an outer self that we put on display for other people. We naturally want people to like us and do us favors, so we usually try to appear humble, wise and good to others. But this is just an external mask, especially before we have begun our spiritual work. Selfish motives lurk within, and we ourselves may not recognize them if we do not search them out. If we simply change our outer self, we do not become a new person. It's just putting a new coat of paint on the outside of a house, without cleaning out the trash and decay on the inside. Or as Jesus said, it is like washing the outside of a cup or dish and leaving the inside filthy. From *Secrets of Heaven*:

The internal self is regenerated first by the Lord, and the external after that, the external being regenerated by means of the internal. The internal self is regenerated through thinking about matters of faith and intending them, but the external through a life in keeping with them. The life of faith is charity.

—*Secrets of Heaven* 8746

From *True Christianity*:

Once our inner self is reformed, a battle develops between it and our outer self; whichever self wins will control the other self. The reason why a battle develops at this point is that our inner self has been reformed through truths. These truths allow us to see what evil and falsity are; but we still have evil and falsity in our outer or earthly self.

—*True Christianity* 596

Our first step in regeneration is to reform our inner self by turning to the Lord and putting his values, ideals, and purposes in place of the selfish ones that we have inherited. Similarly, Gideon had to first reform his own people, turning them away from idolatry, back to the Lord, before he could call them together with the confidence to attack an enemy that was apparently much stronger.

We cannot fight evil from evil motives. If our purpose in improving our life is some selfish advantage, then the best we can do is keep up an appearance of being a good person. So the Lord always works to change our motives—change us on the inside—first. When we make that change, we do not suddenly become good. We still have many enemies to fight, but we have gained a vision and a hope for what we might become—what the Lord wants us to be, and this hope gives us an inner peace that will sustain us through the battle ahead.

## Doubt

Some people think that when we turn to the Lord we should have a feeling of certainty that we are saved and that victory is already ours. The Lord shows us with Gideon, though, that we are likely to

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have doubts, and the Lord accepts our doubt. If we did not doubt our ability to overcome evil, we would not learn humility and our need for the Lord. Even the Lord in His temptations experienced doubt, saying, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” The answer to doubt is not certainty, because no one but the Lord can know the future. Rather the answer is *hope* (*Divine Providence* 178). Where negative doubt drags us down, affirmative doubt springs from hope that angels inspire (*Secrets of Heaven* 2338).

When Gideon doubted whether the Lord could save Israel through him, he asked for a sign, that dew might appear on a fleece he set out, but not on the ground around it. The fleece, being from a lamb, represents innocence—a childlike faith and trust in the Lord. This innocence brings an inner peace, even when things around us are not peaceful.

The reason why 'dew' means the truth of peace is that it comes down in the morning from heaven or the sky and on grassland looks like a light shower of rain. But also it holds a certain sweetness or pleasantness, more so than a shower of rain does, and causes grass and crops in the field to rejoice.... Peace holds within itself trust in the Lord, the trust that He governs all things and provides all things, and that He leads towards an end that is good. When we believe these things about the Lord we are at peace, since we fear nothing and no anxiety about things to come disturb us. —*Secrets of Heaven* 8455

## Inner Peace

As we read in our lesson from *Secrets of Heaven*, when we go through spiritual trials, “a state of peace exists with us inmosty. But for its presence inmosty we would not put up any fight at all.... We would never have the power and strength to fight. And this is also what enables us to overcome.” (*Secrets of Heaven* 3696) We could compare it to the eye of a hurricane which is quite peaceful even when the storm is raging around it. It is also like the Lord sleeping in a boat while the storm raged around him. The dew on the fleece is the the peace in our inner self, even though there is no peace in our outer self (yet), as there was no dew on the surrounding ground.

Yet inner peace alone is not the end of the story. The next sign for Gideon was that the surrounding ground had its turn to receive the dew. This contains a promise that our external self can also be at peace when it has been regenerated as well. Next week we will see how Gideon’s hope and courage grow stronger as he prepares for the battle by learning to trust the Power of the Lord, a trust he can develop because he has gained an inner peace by following the Lord and destroying his father’s idols and so reforming his own forces.

The Lord said,

These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.” —*John* 16:33

Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. —*John* 14:25-27

## First Lesson: Gideon's Fleece

Now Gideon perceived that He was the Angel of the Lord. So Gideon said, "Alas, O Lord God! For I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face."

Then the Lord said to him, "Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die." So Gideon built an altar there to the Lord, and called it The-Lord-Is-Peace. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

Now it came to pass the same night that the Lord said to him, "Take your father's young bull, the second bull of seven years old, and tear down the altar of Baal that your father has, and cut down the wooden image that is beside it; and build an altar to the Lord your God on top of this rock in the proper arrangement, and take the second bull and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the image which you shall cut down." So Gideon took ten men from among his servants and did as the Lord had said to him. But because he feared his father's household and the men of the city too much to do it by day, he did it by night.

And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, there was the altar of Baal, torn down; and the wooden image that was beside it was cut down, and the second bull was being offered on the altar which had been built. So they said to one another, "Who has done this thing?" And when they had inquired and asked, they said, "Gideon the son of Joash has done this thing." Then the men of the city said to Joash, "Bring out your son, that he may die, because he has torn down the altar of Baal, and because he has cut down the wooden image that was beside it."

But Joash said to all who stood against him, "Would you plead for Baal? Would you save him? Let the one who would plead for him be put to death by morning! If he is a god, let him plead for himself, because his altar has been torn down!" Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, "Let Baal plead against him, because he has torn down his altar."

Then all the Midianites and Amalekites, the people of the East, gathered together; and they crossed over and encamped in the Valley of Jezreel. But the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him. And he sent messengers throughout all Manasseh, who also gathered behind him. He also sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali; and they came up to meet them.

So Gideon said to God, "If You will save Israel by my hand as You have said— look, I shall put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; if there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that You will save Israel by my hand, as You have said." And it was so. When he rose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece together, he wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowlful of water. Then Gideon said to God, "Do not be angry with me, but let me speak just once more: Let me test, I pray, just once more with the fleece; let it now be dry only on the fleece, but on all the ground let there be dew." And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, but there was dew on all the ground.

## **Second Lesson: The Lord's Peace**

Jesus answered and said to him, "If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me.

"These things I have spoken to you while being present with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you. Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." —*John 14:23-27*

## **Third Lesson: Inner Peace**

With our new life when we are being regenerated, at first we experience a state of serenity, but as we move on into the new life so we move into a state that is not serene. For evils and falsities which we has taken into ourselves previously now emerge and show themselves, and these trouble us, so much so at length that we undergo temptations and trials from the devil's crew who try all the time to destroy our state of new life. But despite this a state of peace exists with us inmostly. But for its presence inmostly we would not put up any fight at all, for in all the conflicts we experience we see that state as the end in view. If that end were not in view we would never have the power and strength to fight. And this is also what enables us to overcome.

—*Secrets of Heaven 3696*