



Rev Alan Johnston

The temptation this morning would be for me to stand here in this pulpit and simply go through all the various forms of ministry we have here in Hazelbank, highlight the need there is within each for more help and then attempt to make you feel guilty for not signing up for one of them. You might be glad that this is not the approach that I have decided upon. Those in the various organisations might be disappointed to hear this but this not what I believe God wants me to do today. I was ready to prepare and develop the story of the Good Samaritan that we thought about during our small groups, about how you could not walk past a need if you saw one and at the same time call yourself a Christian. I was ready to encourage you to see the gifting that God has given you and ask you today to exchange that gift in the form of some service for a blessing from God. But that is not where I was led in my prayers this week.

It came from a conversation I had with Aimee Cummings during the week where we were talking about the fact that here in Hazelbank there are so many ministries and so few people and God said one word to me – Gideon. In fairness this is not where I would have gone with this address but I believe that there is a blessing to be found in the story of Gideon and what happened when the Midianites came for their annual plunder in the valley of Jezreel. Today's underlying message is – it is not important how many people we think we need – it doesn't matter how many people sign up or commit or get connected to service in Hazelbank – what matters is that you are faithful to God's call and that the presence of God is sought more than a massive army!

Before we look at the account that we read this morning we need to understand what has been happening with the Israelites.

³Whenever the Israelites planted their crops, the Midianites, Amalekites and other eastern peoples invaded the country. ⁴They camped on the land and ruined the crops all the way to Gaza and did not spare a living thing for Israel, neither sheep nor cattle nor donkeys. ⁵They came up with their livestock and their tents like swarms of locusts. It was impossible to count the men and their camels; they invaded the land to ravage it. ⁶Midian so impoverished the Israelites that they cried out to the LORD for help.

Point 1: The Israelites had an annual problem

The problem came around every year when the crops were just about ready to be harvested. This was a very fertile part of the country, Jezreel means "God sows." The enemies of Israel were almost used to coming into this land and eating the crops and then leaving. Like locusts they had arrived there for last eight years. Something needed to be done but Gideon couldn't do it on his own. There is a certain similarity here.

Every year at the start of a new session of church work we have an annual problem. There is a job to be done and we are always faced with having to ask for help. This is not a Hazelbank problem but rather this is a problem that many churches have. There is an easy way of solving it. We stop all the forms of ministry and simply meet up on Sunday morning, once a week! And trust me every now and then that seems a very tempting idea – ask any of our leaders. But that is a crazy thought and one which is not even on the table for discussion. We need to realize that there is a battle to be fought at the start of every year and one which will always be there unless we take time on days such as today to give our leaders the encouragement they need. They need to be encouraged to stand up and face the new year knowing that they have the help and the human resources they need to face their Midianites when they arrive in September. What we hope is that through our 40 days of purpose campaign the Lord spoke to you and prompted you to get connected, get involved. That during the campaign he laid it on your heart that there was something you could do since you were shaped for service.

I want you to understand that this morning in the Hall are all the ministries we have going presently and some potential new ones waiting to hatch. But this is not us sending you on a guilt trip as you walk through the hall but rather it is our desire that you see this as simply us giving you the opportunity, the chance you need to take up the ministry the Lord has prompted you to get involved with. You and I were shaped to

serve and this purpose for your life could take shape before you leave church today. For Gideon and indeed us there is the annual problem.

Point 2: The specific equipping

⁴Then the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon, and he blew a trumpet, summoning the Abiezrites to follow him.

In the next part of our story we read these amazing words:

Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon...

All the commentators agree that the Hebrew language here suggests a “special kind of incarnation”, that God’s spirit put on Gideon’s personality like a garment. David Jackman writes: We are told that the Holy Spirit put on Gideon like a suit of clothes, much as we might dress up for a special occasion, such as a wedding, or put on overalls to crawl under a car. Gideon is the clothing in which God is going to appear, the instrument that he is going to use...” I love what Jeff Lucas says about this, he says: “Jackman’s analogy is helpful, too, in that it suggests the purpose of the clothing of the Spirit. He points out that the Greek word *dunamis* used in the New Testament has as its root meaning ‘the ability to get the job done.’ Some translations render the word ‘enabling’.

This is a vital point for us, particularly as we remember an infant church in the book of Acts filled with the same Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. The Spirit came as they were poised on the springboard of mission, granting them an undeniable experience — not an experience for the sake of itself, but to help them to get the job done in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the uttermost parts of the Earth. The Spirit enables Gideon. The Spirit enables the New Testament church.

Perhaps as we adjust our priorities and regain a mission focus, we will know more the Spirit who comes, not just to give us goosebumps, but to empower us for service.” Isn’t that so true? We don’t need the Holy Spirit so much in our emotions but perhaps more so empowering us, enabling us to be the servants **we** want to be, for our God. So before you go into the hall in a few minutes, ask God through his holy spirit to fit you for whatever job he is pointing out to you. We would not ask you to be part of any ministry unless you were prepared to allow God’s spirit to empower and equip you. If you believe that God is calling you to becoming involved, then take time to ask for his spirit to be your enabling power and do it in his strength.

Point 3: Then thirdly there is the issue of the fleeces

³⁶Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—³⁷look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said.” ³⁸And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water.

Even though God had called and equipped Gideon for the fight Gideon still wanted to give God the opportunity to change his mind or prove himself wrong! I just want to mention this briefly before our final point. We all at some point do it – we test God or we set up incredible ways we want God to prove himself one way or another to us. Weirsbe writes: “An army of thirty-two thousand men rallied to his side, but he was still doubtful of victory. How gracious God is to minister to His feeble saints! Gideon “put out the fleece” twice and both times God answered...

It was too bad though that God’s people trust circumstances to lead them instead of relying on God’s clear word.” If through your personal quiet times, your times of prayer, bible reading, through our 40 days of purpose you have heard God clearly speaking to you about ministry then I want to encourage you to act on that and not to test God by asking for further revelations. Trust him that he knows what he is doing. Remember he made you and shaped you and called you and will equip you – he knows you better than you know yourself!! God doesn’t make mistakes.

Point 4: Then finally there is the ideal number

We read:

²The LORD said to Gideon, “You have too many men for me to deliver Midian into their hands. In order that Israel may not boast against me that her own strength has saved her, ³announce now to the people, ‘Anyone who trembles with fear may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.’” So twenty-two thousand men left, while ten thousand remained.

Some of you will leave here today without taking on any form of ministry. We would love it if everyone here this morning fulfilled this purpose for their lives but we understand that some might look at what is on display and just be fearful of what is being asked of them. This is alright, hopefully in the future we can incorporate you into some form of service as we introduce new ministries...

Ask me how many people we need for the new year in September and I will have to honestly tell you I don't know. I don't know because I don't want to know. If I get a figure then this figure will become a target for me and the Kirk session and this is not helpful to God and his plans. Look what happened to Gideon. 22,000 left because they were fearful – that's two thirds of what Gideon had hoped to take in battle. They were outnumbered 4 to 1 with the original number of 32,000 but now the odds were really stacked against them. To make matters even worse the numbers were slashed again with 97% of what remained sent home for failing a drink test...

We don't fully understand the relevance of this test in verses 4 – 6 of chapter 7 but the fact remains that God used it to further reduce the numbers of people needed. 300 against 135,000 that is 400 of Midian against every one Israelite! If you read on to the end of the chapter you will see that the Israelites won the battle and the Midianites never came into Jezreel again. We are tempted today to look at the massive need there is in the hall and say we need this and that, we are tempted to make you feel obliged to get involved, we are tempted to present you with figures but ultimately the battle belongs to the Lord and he knows our need and if we commit ourselves to pray about it and seek his leading he will give us exactly what we need.

More or less?

Only God knows but what is important is that we present ourselves to him and let him decide how he would use us – for his Glory.

You were shaped to serve – today is a wonderful opportunity.

Let's pray together