

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

JUDG. 6:25 And it came to pass the same night, that the LORD said unto him, Take thy father's young bullock, even the second bullock of seven years old, and throw down the altar of Baal that thy father hath, and cut down the grove that *is* by it:

26 And build an altar unto the LORD thy God upon the top of this rock, in the ordered place, and take the second bullock, and offer a burnt sacrifice with the wood of the grove which thou shalt cut down.

27 Then Gideon took ten men of his servants, and did as the LORD had said unto him: and so it was, because he feared his father's household, and the men of the city, that he could not do *it* by day, that he did *it* by night.

28 And when the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was cast down, and the grove was cut down that

was by it, and the second bullock was offered upon the altar that was built.

29 And they said one to another, Who hath done this thing? And when they enquired and asked, they said, Gideon the son of Joash hath done this thing.

30 Then the men of the city said unto Joash, Bring out thy son, that he may die: because he hath cast down the altar of Baal, and because he hath cut down the grove that *was by it.*

31 And Joash said unto all that stood against him, Will ye plead for Baal? will ye save him? he that will plead for him, let him be put to death whilst *it is yet* morning: if he *be* a god, let him plead for himself, because *one* hath cast down his altar.

32 Therefore on that day he called him Jerubbaal, saying, Let Baal plead against him, because he hath thrown down his altar.

NOTES

Gideon Destroys Baal's Altar

Lesson Text: Judges 6:25-32

Related Scriptures: Deuteronomy 7:1-6;
Exodus 34:10-14; I Kings 18:17-39

TIME: 1191 B.C.

PLACE: Ophrah

GOLDEN TEXT—"For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 7:6).

Lesson Exposition

THE ASSIGNMENT—Judg. 6:25-26

Our text this week is something of an interlude, sandwiched between two much better known and more frequently studied accounts: the call of Gideon to deliver Israel from the Midianites (Judg. 6:11-24), and the dramatic vanquishing of the vast Midianite army (7:9-25). The action in our present passage is preparatory to the main event that follows, but it is a crucial step.

God knew that Gideon was not yet ready to take on the daunting task of leading an army against the enemy hordes. Significant preparation was required to bolster Gideon's courage and, more important, build his faith in the One who had called him and would be with him in this enterprise. So, God started him off with a much smaller but nonetheless intimidating assignment.

Purge the evil (Judg. 6:25). The Lord did not waste any time getting Gideon started on his training. That very night He spoke to him and set before him his first task. He was to take a young bull from his father's herd, the

second-best one, in fact ("even the second bullock"), of seven years. A seven-year-old animal would be in its prime and thus represent a significant sacrifice.

As Gideon listened, he may have fleetingly thought, *So far, so good*; but he would have surely sensed that this was merely the first step. The main task was about to be revealed, and it must have sent a shiver down his spine: "Tear down your father's altar to the Canaanite god Baal, and cut down the Asherah pole standing next to it." That was not going to be easy!

That Gideon's father had a Baal altar on his property is a sad commentary on how far the people of Israel had drifted from fidelity to the Lord. Baal worship was a key element of the evil that had brought on the Midianite oppression (vs. 1).

Baal altars were often built in company with cult objects called Asherah poles (always translated "grove" in the KJV). "An Asherah pole was a sacred pole (or sometimes a tree) that was used in the worship of the pagan goddess Asherah" ("What

Was an Asherah Pole?" compelling-truth.org). Asherah was considered a fertility goddess and was probably also the one called the Queen of Heaven (cf. Jer. 7:18; 44:17-19, 25). The worship before such objects was blasphemous and immoral.

Deuteronomy 7:5 commanded the conquering Israelites to break down all pagan altars and cut down all Asherah poles found in the land. That command, sadly, had been flagrantly spurned.

Promote true worship (Judg. 6:26).

The second part of Gideon's task was to build an altar to the Lord, an altar for true worship. Baal altars were typically built on high ground, and it appears that Gideon was to build the Lord's altar on the same elevated location that the Baal altar had occupied: "upon the top of this rock." Once the proper altar was built, he was to sacrifice the young bull on it, burning the offering on the wood from the cut-down Asherah pole.

THE ACTION—Judg. 6:27

The task Gideon was given represented a considerable amount of work, clearly too much for one man to accomplish in a short time. Gideon therefore selected ten household servants and set about carrying out the Lord's instructions. Even with ten men surrounding him, however, he was afraid of what his family and the men of Ophrah would do, so he did the work at night.

Does Gideon deserve criticism for giving in to his fear of the people around him and doing the job under the cover of darkness? We might assume that a public sin such as Baal worship should be confronted by a public refutation.

But if criticism is warranted, due credit is equally not to be withheld. Gideon may have carried out the as-

signment at night because of fear, but the more important fact is that he did carry it out.

THE AFTERMATH—Judg. 6:28-32

Angry investigation (Judg. 6:28-29). The feared reaction was not long in coming. Early in the morning the deed was discovered: the Baal altar and Asherah pole were gone, and a new altar stood on the spot.

An investigation was launched immediately. "Who hath done this thing?" The impression we are given is of a whole town in uproar, with everyone shouting the question to everyone else at once. Who indeed could possibly have had the motive and ability to perpetrate such a heinous act? More disciplined inquiries were then made, and soon the finger of accusation pointed to Gideon, the son of Joash.

It is a further sad commentary on the darkened spiritual awareness among the people of Israel that such anger and consternation are not recorded regarding the neglect of the true worship of God. These people reacted violently only when their idolatry and false worship were threatened.

Demand for retribution (Judg. 6:30). "Hand him over!" was the cry that went up. The whole town of Ophrah—all "the men of the city"—descended on Joash's house and demanded that he turn his son Gideon over to them for punishment. It was a lynch mob, and nothing less than Gideon's immediate death would appease them.

Would Joash respond as Lot once had and cravenly seek to appease the crowd (cf. Gen. 19:4-8), or would he stand his ground?

A spirited defense (Judg. 6:31-32). To his great credit, Joash did not allow himself to be cowed by the fury of the mob. Whatever culpability he may have borne for having had a Baal altar on his property, he now saw things

clearly. Baal was not worth shedding anyone's blood over, not to mention his own son's. Joash therefore answered the angry crowd with great courage, leavened by a healthy dose of keen irony.

He began by insisting that the people take a hard look at what they were doing. "Why are you defending Baal?" is the essence of his first question. They needed to consider why they were even on Baal's side. They were Israelites—people who were in the land by the grace and intervention of the Lord. Why would they even think of taking up the cause of Baal?

Joash's questions became pointed: "Will ye save him?" (vs. 31). Did they think that by taking the action they were bent on, they were actually preserving the life and power of their precious idol? Joash answered his own question by bluntly insisting, "Let him plead for himself." If any action was to be taken against the person who destroyed Baal's altar, Baal should be the one to do it. If Baal was as great as they seemed to think, then he should be well able to defend his honor.

Between Joash's opening questions and his conclusion is a somewhat more puzzling statement, at least to those of us far removed from the event: "Let him be put to death whilst it is yet morning." The most likely meaning is that in Joash's view, the people should let Baal do his own avenging and "anyone who took the matter on himself . . . should himself be put to death" (Wood, *Distressing Days of the Judges*, Zondervan).

The agitated men of Ophrah had no answer for Joash. At least none is recorded, and no harm came to Gideon. In fact, instead of being dragged out to an ignominious death at the hands of his fellow townsmen, Gideon found that his reputation had been given a significant boost as a result of the confrontation. From that day forward, he

had a new nickname: Jerubbaal. Verse 32 translates this as "Let Baal plead against him," or alternatively, "Let Baal defend himself." Today we might more loosely render it as "Baal Crusher."

Through all this, Gideon carried out a risky mission for the Lord and experienced His faithfulness both in enabling him to see it through and in protecting him from the expected consequences. We know from what comes later in the episode of the fleece that Gideon still was not confident of his calling from God (vss. 36-40). The Lord's unexpected hero would still need more preparation and encouragement, but he had overcome a major hurdle in the power of the Lord.

—Kenneth A. Sponsler.

QUESTIONS

1. What was the first thing Gideon was to do?
2. What was the main task set before Gideon?
3. What was the "grove," or Asherah pole (Judg. 6:25)?
4. What was Gideon to do after the initial task of dismantling the forbidden objects?
5. Why did Gideon carry out his assignment at night?
6. What was the reaction of the townspeople to the destruction of Baal's altar?
7. What punishment did they want to inflict on Gideon?
8. What pointed question did Joash pose to the angry crowd?
9. How did Joash answer his own question?
10. What was the immediate result of this confrontation for Gideon?

—Kenneth A. Sponsler.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Obeying God may require bold and risky action (Judg. 6:25).
2. Consistent worship keeps our focus and commitment firmly centered on the Lord (vs. 26).
3. God provides the support and resources needed to carry out His commands and fulfill His mission in the world (vs. 27).
4. To follow the world's lead is to become God's enemy (vss. 28-29).
5. God never fails to show Himself strong on behalf of one who trusts in Him (vss. 30-31).
6. God gives victory to those who believe His promises and obey His commands (vss. 32).

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. How was Israel's situation the result of direct disobedience to God's commands (cf. Ex. 34:10-14; Deut. 7:1-6)?
2. What challenges might Gideon have faced as a believer whose family worshipped Baal?
3. What difficult commands has God given us in Scripture? How does the Bible prepare us to move forward in faith and obey those commands?
4. Gideon destroyed the altar at night "because he feared his father's household" (Judg. 6:27). How can a believer know when to act boldly and when to be discreet?
5. What message does Gideon's moniker "Jerub-baal" (vs. 32) tell us about those who follow after false "gods"?

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

Golden Text Illuminated

"For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth" (Deuteronomy 7:6).

The people of Israel were specially chosen by God. God showed favor upon their nation. He made covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He continued to come through on His promises for generations afterward. He performed miracles for them in front of their unbelieving neighbors.

Going into a new land and devoting everything in it to destruction would require a lot of courage and dedication for the Israelites. A commitment to trust and obey God in this scenario would be a commitment to drive out the inhabitants of the land and destroy all of them and their valuables.

In the golden text, God explains to His people why He wants them to wipe out the Canaanites so completely. The Israelites were created to be a holy people unto the Lord. They were set apart and commanded to be different from the people around them.

There are some parallels in the New Testament where the church is also called God's treasured possession (cf. Eph. 1:14, Titus 2:14, 1 Pet. 2:9). Believers are called to be holy and to devote their lives to the Lord because He is the one true God. Members of the church today, like the Israelites, can show their devotion to the Lord by forsaking worldly influences in their lives so that they can focus wholeheartedly on serving Him.

—Carissa Dobson.