

## Dethroning the Elder Gods by Pastor Marty

I believe I was 22 when I first attended a Pastoral Care Ministries school, led by Leanne Payne. This was a week-long period of one two-hour session after another on healing, prayer, wholeness, holiness, faith, and the list goes on and on. This first school took place at Wheaton College in Illinois, and I have some noteworthy memories of that time: standing in long lines in the cafeteria as everybody tried to eat between morning and afternoon sessions; seeing the actual wardrobe from C. S. Lewis' Narnia books and the note by Wheaton College (that they are not responsible for people who disappear after stepping into it); seeing a thunder and lightning storm with lightning coming from and returning to all directions at once; hearing Mario do his rendition of the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet; and most of all, not understanding most of what Leanne was saying. In addition to these memories, there are three sessions that were distinctly impactful: healing of a sense of being and well-being, restoring the true imagination, and renouncing Ba'al. The last, which is based on the story of Gideon, I believe will be very applicable to recent trends in our culture today.

***The Biblical story of Gideon is highly applicable to recent cultural trends.***

The story of Gideon is found in the book of Judges, beginning in chapter 6. We find that the people of Israel had become subject to the oppression of the Midianites because of their repeated sin. It is important to identify this sin: they were again worshiping Ba'al and Asherah. When God brought them into the land under the leadership of Joshua, He clearly stated—as

He had done through Moses—that they should not worship or serve any of the gods of the peoples of the land, of which Ba'al and Asherah were the most common and widespread. These were the male and female deities representing fertility, an issue of great importance for those cultures dependent on agriculture. However, as would be expected, this involved much more than prayers for blessings on seeds and cattle: it had a direct effect on their views of sexuality. These cultures incorporated promiscuity as part of their society to an extent often unimaginable to modern sensibilities. Prostitution, both male and female, was a common form of worship, services often involved orgies and worshippers cutting themselves to shed their blood, and the idols were fashioned to resemble erotic images. For the ancient world, the altars were their version of public pornography, resulting in widespread immorality. These practices were directly contrary to the laws God gave to Israel, promoting monogamy, fidelity, and purity.

***Sexual immorality was a common form of idol worship in some ancient cultures.***

Although the people of Israel belonged to God, they were easily enticed by the worship of these idols, ignoring the warnings of coming judgment by the prophets God sent to them. As a result of their sin and disobedience, the other nations were able to rise up and enslave them. This brings up an important point: if Israel was living like the surrounding nations, why was she such a threat? In other words, why did those other nations so strongly desire Israel's total destruction? Of course, defeating other nations

was a primary way one culture grew in power; however, there was another reason that Israel was often the focus of negative attention—her association with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; this was a God who destroyed Egypt, the most powerful nation of the ancient world (discounting Atlantis), parted the Red Sea, and brought down the walls of Jericho. Even when the people of God let the nations around them live as they pleased, it was not enough. We see this expressed in Genesis in the story of Lot. His simple request—for the men of the city to let a guest in his house be spared from the forced involvement in their immoral practices—was immediately categorized as judging them, and it instantly instigated violent retaliation. This is understandable, for the sinful nature hates any kind of opposition. To restate it the way Jesus expressed it . . . the darkness hates the light.

***The sinful human nature cannot easily abide direct (or even indirect) opposition.***

By the time Gideon came on the scene, Israel had been worshiping Ba'al and Asherah for a while, and their sin directly led to their being oppressed by the Midianites. Therefore, the people began to cry out to God for Him to deliver them. In response, God sent an angel to Gideon, calling him to be the next Judge of Israel. It is important to understand what this meant at this time. Prior to the inauguration of kingship with Saul, David, and Solomon, a Judge held the highest position of leadership in the land; it meant standing in the position held by Moses and Joshua previously. God made it very clear to Israel that He did not want them to have a king—He wanted to be their King. The primary difference being a Judge was someone

directly called and anointed by God, under His direct authority, and for a very specific time and purpose. Because a Judge was called, not elected or granted by birth, the people never lost sight of God being the final authority. Still, the Judge was considered the highest position of human leadership and authority in Israel.

***The Judge would be considered the highest position of leadership in Israel.***

God was now calling Gideon to stand in this place of authority. However, his job was not just to deliver that people from oppression; he was called—as was every previous Judge from Othniel through Deborah—to stand in the place of Moses and Joshua and restore Israel's focus and commitment to God. However, as the angel informed him, there was something he needed to do before he would be able to fulfill his calling and step into that place of authority: destroying the altar to Ba'al and Asherah pole his own father had built. As we read in chapter 6, Gideon obeys this command, but he does so at night because he is afraid of what the people will do. There are two significant points to be made here. First, even though the people were crying out to God for deliverance, they had not removed the sin that led to their oppression. The altars were still standing—and presumably still being used—throughout Israel. Second, Gideon needed to take a stand for God and confront this specific public object of idolatry. It was not a coincidence that God directed him to destroy the altar that was built by his father; he was being called to renounce the sin “closest to home” before he could deliver the nation. He had to first take responsibility for his own home before he could take responsibility for Israel.

***Gideon had to confront the sin “closest to home” before he could help the nation.***

As we read further along, we find that Gideon’s concern is justified. It says the people of the area wanted to kill him for destroying their altar. These were likely some of the same people crying out to God for deliverance from oppression—but having to give up their idols is a different thing altogether! However, there is something else apparent in this passage: the Spirit of the Lord now comes upon Gideon, and the remainder of the story describes how he delivered Israel from the Midianites, bringing peace to the land of Israel. Nevertheless, this is not a story about a man who fearlessly trusted God in the face of opposition; that would be the story of King David. As we read through to the end of chapter 8, we have to recognize a person dealing with a great amount of fear and doubt. Almost every single thing he does is done with trepidation: first, the angel finds him hiding in a wine press; when he tears down the altar, he does it at night; he tests God twice with a fleece before attacking the Midianite army; and before he finally goes up against the enemy camp, he sneaks through the bushes to listen to someone relating a very weird dream. Clearly, the story of Gideon is not intended to teach us that we must be fearless; instead, it is telling us what we must do even while afraid.

***The story of Gideon is not about being fearless; it is about acting while afraid.***

We repeatedly see throughout the Bible instances where people are directly affected by the sins and actions of parents and leaders. If the impartation of original sin from Adam and Eve is not enough to convince us that this is

true, we only need to look at the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, men who were used by God but who often lied and deceived various people for various reasons. It would be a bit naïve to assume that none of their somewhat questionable character traits were the result of their family upbringing. (Children learn by watching what we do more than what we say). We can also see that although David was a man after God’s own heart, he clearly had a major moral weakness when it came to the opposite sex, and it was that very same weakness which eventually leads Solomon, the wisest man on earth, into clear and blatant idolatry. When God told Moses that the sins of the parents are visited on the children, He wasn’t making policy as much as He was stating fact: both holiness and immorality are strongly influenced by the upbringing of both the family and the culture.

***Holiness and immorality are strongly influenced by family life and culture.***

The story of Gideon gives us an example of a person taking steps to confront a sin that is “close to home” although it is not his own. He is commanded to tear down the altar built by his own father. In essence, he had to confront the idols that were worshipped by the very people in authority over him. We are in a very similar situation today in our culture. Pornography is everywhere and increasingly accessible; sexual immorality is portrayed in the media not only as normal but also as something positive—or even as tragically misunderstood; human sex trafficking and prostitution are so common that they almost go unnoticed; these are all the telltale signs that the altars and temples to Ba’al and Asherah are functioning successfully.

Before we can do as Gideon did and confront the immorality in our nation to bring healing, we must take steps to free ourselves from the sin and idolatry of those in authority over us. Unlike Gideon, however, we usually don't have a physical altar to tear down and burn; instead, we must destroy strongholds, speculations, and ideologies that are contrary to God and His own definition of holiness. It is not a coincidence that Paul describes this type of warfare to the Church at Corinth—the most immoral place of the New Testament time. However, there is something that many Christians do not notice or understand: the Corinthians had to first take responsibility before they could take authority.

***We cannot take authority until we have first taken responsibility for our own sin.***

The Christians in Corinth had to repent of their sin before they could confront it. If we want to break the power of Ba'al over our land, we do not do it by loud prayers and by binding Ba'al; there may be a time for that, but it is not at first. We start by taking responsibility for our own sins, by repenting for our nation as if we were directly responsible (which, if the Bible teaches us anything, it teaches us that we are responsible for the state of this world), and by making God the primary focus of everything we say and do. As an analogy, let us take the sin of pride. If we are struggling with the sin of pride, how do we combat it? It is not very useful to try positively confessing that we are humble and keep saying, "I am humble. I am humble. I am a humble and meek child of God!" The more we say it, the less we are. Pride cannot be bound; it must be confessed. We defeat pride by repenting of it and humbling ourselves before

God and other people—and we usually have to do it repeatedly before it really begins to take effect. How do we know when it has begun to take effect? When we stop thinking about our own humility. When truly humble people are wrongly accused of pride, they are quick to confess pride and repent of it because they are quick to recognize any trace of it inside. If we want to truly break the power of Ba'al in our land, we must break it in ourselves first by repenting for ourselves, for our families, for our churches, for our nation, and for our world. We will then have the authority to deliver creation.

***We must first repent for ourselves, our families, our churches, and our nation.***

However, there is something that is not commonly known about Ba'al: he sometimes goes by another name. Ancient civilizations that worshipped Ba'al would eventually worship him by his other name: Molech. When he was called Molech, he didn't just advertise sexual freedom and ask worshippers to cut themselves to shed blood; he craved the blood of children. Molech demands his followers to sacrifice their infant children alive in fire. The worship of Ba'al always leads to the worship of Molech, which always leads to the destruction of children. Any civilization, culture, or society that embraces sexual immorality will eventually be compelled to include sacrificing their own children. Sexual immorality—as we saw with Lot—demands full approval (the indoctrination of children), the destruction of the traditional family propagates promiscuity (the dis-formation of children), and promiscuity requires abortion on demand (the annihilation of children). If we desire to deliver our culture, we must first destroy our altars.