



Judges - Chapter Eight

- II Judges 3:7-16:31 - The Downward Spiral of Israel's Apostasy (continues)
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Summary of Chapter Eight

Gideon has to pacify the Ephraimites who were miffed at not being called out to battle sooner. He continued to lead the chase as the Midianites and their allies fled. In Transjordan they asked for bread from the residents of two towns, Succoth and Penuel, but were refused. After Gideon had captured and killed the two opposing kings, he returned and punished the towns who had refused to help.

Israel wanted Gideon to become their king and he rightly refused saying that it was the Lord who was their king. Despite his statement he acted regally and thus led his family and the nation back into idolatry. The death of Gideon saw the nation once again plunge into even greater apostasy.

¹ Then the Ephraimites said to him, 'What have you done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against the Midianites?' And they upbraided him violently. ² So he said to them, 'What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?' ³ God has given into your hands the captains of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb; what have I been able to do in

comparison with you?’ When he said this, their anger against him subsided.

Judges 8:1-3

What have you done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against the Midianites? The Ephraimites complained that they had been called out only belatedly, but Gideon’s diplomatic and flattering response had a soothing effect on them. The men of Ephraim seem to have cared more about recognition than the overall good of Israel. Instead of being jealous about the recognition that others received, they should have been joyous that God’s people were rescued and that they had some part in the victory. Jealousy often hinders the work of God.

There is similar contention between the tribes of Israel when ten of them believe that Judah has better access to King David than they do because it was his ethnic tribe; refer to 2 Samuel 19:41-43.

What have I done now in comparison with you? Gideon did not challenge their pride; instead he soothed their pride by complimenting them and giving them the recognition they seemed to crave. Most importantly, he challenged them to get involved in the work of God that was at hand. His reply was a wise way to deal with contention when there is work for the Lord to be done. Yet, Gideon seems to have had a continuing controversy with the men of Ephraim. By making an ephod later on (v.27), he performed a great disservice to Israel and may have been prompted by a competitive attitude towards Ephraim.

II.e.iii.2 Judges 8:4-21 - Gideon’s Second Battle

Following the Lord’s great victory on the Israelites’ behalf, Gideon pursued a second military engagement. However, the narrative here takes on a different tone. Whereas the Lord is prominently mentioned as the one who orchestrates the victory in the preceding chapter, the presence of the Lord is noticeably absent in this chapter. Even though Gideon was concluding the action against the Midianites, the portrayal of Gideon in vv.13-21 is far from attractive, i.e. his treatment of Succoth and Penuel for their obstruction of his purposes (vv.13-17), and his reasons for slaying Zebah and Zalmunna, the Midianite kings (vv.18-21).

⁴ Then Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the three hundred who were with him, exhausted and famished. ⁵ So he said to the people of Succoth, ‘Please give some loaves of bread to my followers, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.’ ⁶ But the officials of Succoth said, ‘Do you already have in your possession the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna, that we should give bread to your army?’ ⁷ Gideon replied, ‘Well then,

when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will trample your flesh on the thorns of the wilderness and on briers.’⁸ From there he went up to Penuel, and made the same request of them; and the people of Penuel answered him as the people of Succoth had answered.⁹ So he said to the people of Penuel, ‘When I come back victorious, I will break down this tower.’

Judges 8:4-9

Then Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the three hundred who were with him, exhausted and famished. They were now in Transjordan. It can be imagined just how tired they were. They had fought hard all night and pursued the enemy over a long distance well into the following day.

Theirs was, of course, physical exhaustion unlike the exhaustion that comes upon some people through the pains of life experience: <<*Surely now God has worn me out; he has made desolate all my company*>> (Job 16:7), <<*I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping*>> (Psalm 6:6), and: <<*You said, ‘Woe is me! The Lord has added sorrow to my pain; I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest’*>> (Jeremiah 45:3).

Please give some loaves of bread to my followers. Through Gideon, the call came to the people of the city of Succoth to support those who had fought the battle and were pursuing the enemy of all Israel. They were not asked to engage in the actual battle, but simply to support those on the front lines. Succoth was in the territory allocated to the Gadites (Joshua 13:27).

Do you already have in your possession the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna, that we should give bread to your army? Instead of help, the people of Succoth and Penuel had an excuse. They did not want to support Israel in the fight against Midian until the battle was finally won. It can be supposed that this was discouraging for Gideon and those fighting the battle. They did not ask the people of Succoth and Penuel to fight on the front lines, only to support those who did. Yet they were unwilling and made excuses. When Christians set out to do the Lord’s work, often the resistance they face is from their own friends. They cannot allow this to hinder or discourage their work. The apostle describes the required action of the church very well: <<*Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you; they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God; for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers. Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth*>> (3 John 5-8).

When I come back victorious, I will break down this tower. With or without the help of the people of Succoth and Penuel, Gideon knew he would win the battle, saying when, not if. Yet he vowed to take revenge on these cities that refused to help the army of Israel at this strategic time. Penuel was also probably in the land of the Gadites and was not far from the Jabbok River where Jacob had wrestled with God: <<*The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping because of his hip*>> (Genesis 32:31).

¹⁰ Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about fifteen thousand men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the east; for one hundred and twenty thousand men bearing arms had fallen. ¹¹ So Gideon went up by the caravan route east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and attacked the army; for the army was off its guard. ¹² Zebah and Zalmunna fled; and he pursued them and took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and threw all the army into a panic.

Judges 8:10-12

Gideon attacked the army; for the army was off its guard. Gideon, continuing in the boldness of the Lord, led a courageous surprise attack. This was not the same as 300 attacking the vast army described in Judges 7:12, but it was still a small army against a much larger army. Gideon's active involvement in attacking and chasing the enemy contrasts sharply with his and the people's standing by while the Lord gave them the victory in the earlier encounter; refer especially to Judges 7:21.

It can be supposed that Gideon was bold enough to do this because he saw God do great things in similar circumstances before. The previous work of God encouraged him to trust God for even greater things in the present: <<*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father*>> (John 14:12).

He pursued them and took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and threw all the army into a panic. This shows the persistence of Gideon. He fought until the battle was won, and he went after the leaders of the opposition.

¹³ When Gideon son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres, ¹⁴ he caught a young man, one of the people of Succoth, and questioned him; and he listed for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven people. ¹⁵ Then he came to the people of Succoth, and said, 'Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you

taunted me, saying, “Do you already have in your possession the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna, that we should give bread to your troops who are exhausted?”¹⁶ So he took the elders of the city and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them he trampled the people of Succoth.¹⁷ He also broke down the tower of Penuel, and killed the men of the city.

Judges 8:13-17

Then he came to the people of Succoth. The men of this city did not want to help Gideon or his army before victory was assured. They refused to help Gideon by faith, and so Gideon would punish them as he had promised. Gideon’s actions here fulfil his pledges in v.7 and v.9.

So he took the elders of the city and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them he trampled the people of Succoth. Apparently Gideon publicly whipped the leaders of the city of Succoth with thorns and briers as a method of public rebuke for their failure to support their fellow Israelites in need.

He also broke down the tower of Penuel, and killed the men of the city. The text does not make it clear, but it could be supposed that there was justification for this severe penalty. Perhaps the people of Penuel were significant supporters of the Midianites and traitors against Israel. Certainly on the face of it they were no worse than the people of Succoth.

¹⁸ Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, ‘What about the men whom you killed at Tabor?’ They answered, ‘As you are, so were they, every one of them; they resembled the sons of a king.’¹⁹ And he replied, ‘They were my brothers, the sons of my mother; as the Lord lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you.’²⁰ So he said to Jether his firstborn, ‘Go, kill them!’ But the boy did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a boy.²¹ Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, ‘You come and kill us; for as the man is, so is his strength.’ So Gideon proceeded to kill Zebah and Zalmunna; and he took the crescents that were on the necks of their camels.

Judges 8:18-21

They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. Apparently these two Midianite kings were responsible for the death of Gideon’s brothers. Gideon wanted this known and confessed before he executed these kings. The private nature of Gideon’s feud with the Midianites is seen most clearly in this conversation, where Zebah and Zalmunna challenged Gideon’s manhood, i.e. You come and kill us;

for as the man is, so is his strength, and Gideon responded by killing them himself. Holy war, which is to be fought at God's command for the protection of the whole people, gives no warrant for this kind of personal vengeance. At least Gideon's eldest son Jether was unable to kill these men in cold blood, no matter what their crime was against his uncles.

II.e.iv Judges 8:22-28 - Gideon's Idolatry

The people request Gideon to be their king and he declines, However, despite God's faithfulness to Gideon, he turns away from the Lord by leading the people into improper worship practices.

²² Then the Israelites said to Gideon, 'Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also; for you have delivered us out of the hand of Midian.' ²³ Gideon said to them, 'I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you.'

Judges 8:22-23

Rule over us. The desire for a human king over Israel started early in the nation's history. Hundreds of years later, in the days of Samuel the prophet and judge, God gave Israel the king they asked for. This request, while understandable from a human perspective, since Gideon may have begun to conduct himself like a king (v.18), flew directly in the face of the entire narrative up to this point: it was God and not any human being who was due the credit for delivering his people; refer to the comment made on Judges 7:2.

I will not rule over you. This was the correct response from Gideon. He understood that it was not his place to take the throne over Israel.

The Lord will rule over you. The Hebrew word order might be paraphrased as, "It is the Lord, and no other, who shall rule over you!" While Gideon's words were theologically correct, his subsequent actions show either that he was only pretending or that he was self-deceived; he appears eventually to have been seduced by the lures of being a king. Pride is one of the biggest barriers people face to a relationship with God: *<<Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for all that is in the world – the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches – comes not from the Father but from the world. And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live for ever>>* (1 John 2:15-17).

Gideon definitely gave the right answer when he said he did not want to be a king; yet in the rest of the chapter he acted like one. His words were humble but his actions were not. It is easier to talk about humility and service to God than it is to actually live it.

²⁴ Then Gideon said to them, ‘Let me make a request of you; each of you give me an ear-ring he has taken as booty.’ (For the enemy had golden ear-rings, because they were Ishmaelites.) ²⁵ ‘We will willingly give them,’ they answered. So they spread a garment, and each threw into it an ear-ring he had taken as booty. ²⁶ The weight of the golden ear-rings that he requested was one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold (apart from the crescents and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and the collars that were on the necks of their camels).

Judges 8:24-26

Let me make a request of you; each of you give me an ear-ring he has taken as booty. This did not seem like much to ask for, yet when it was totalled, it came to more than 50 lbs or 22 kgs of gold. This was quite a fortune.

We will willingly give them. The people were happy to give this, and it is hard to say that Gideon did not deserve this huge fortune. At the same time it was inappropriate, because it lifted him far above the level of the people he would lead, and it was at their expense. A general rule of thumb is that Christian leaders who make their living from the gifts of God’s people should live at the level of their own people - not below or above it.

Gideon, like so many others throughout the history of the human race was attracted by wealth and finery without realising he was falling into the trap of Satan. **Wealth is only temporal:** <<*On that day the Lord will take away the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarves*>> (Isaiah 3:18-19), and: <<*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains*>> (1 Timothy 6:10). **Jesus teaches a different kind of wealth:** <<*Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also*>> (Luke 12:32-34).

Despite Gideon’s protest that he would not become a king, the ornamentation of the Midianite kings – the crescents and the pendants and the purple garments – was now Gideon’s.

²⁷ Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his town, in Ophrah; and all Israel prostituted themselves to it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.

Judges 8:27

The original ephod was an ornate ceremonial garment worn by the high priest and is described in Exodus 28:6-14 and 39:1-31. It was made of choice materials ornamented with gold and onyx stones. According to the Mosaic Law, there was to be only one ephod in Israel, and it was to have a 'breastpiece of judgement' (Exodus 28:15-30). The ephod was used to inquire of God (1 Samuel 14:3, 23:9 and 30:7). By setting up another ephod in his own town, Gideon may have been making it his own to use, at his own whim. Ultimately, it became a snare to Gideon and his family, echoing Judges 2:3.

This was obviously wrong and it is not immediately apparent why Gideon did this. It is possible he did this to work against the prestige and influence of the tribe of Ephraim. At this time the tabernacle - the centre of worship for Israel - was at Shiloh, in the territory of Ephraim. Gideon perhaps set up this rival place of worship to compete against the tribe that troubled him in the battle against Midian.

All Israel prostituted themselves to it there. The people of Israel enjoyed this idolatrous worship. The beautiful and expensive ephod became a snare to Gideon, his family, and all Israel. Refer to the comment made on Judges 2:17.

Artistic beauty has a way of impressing people and giving a sense of awe but it is not necessarily a godly impression or awe. Many times it can distract focus from the Lord. In contrast to this ephod, God commanded that his altars be made of unfinished stone (Exodus 20:25), so that no one's attention was focused on the beauty of the stone carver's work but on God's altar.



The High Priest's clothing including the Ephod

Gideon was remarkably obedient and filled with faith in the extreme moment of battle. The routine of daily living seems to have been a greater test of his character. This is true for many, and the challenges of daily living are more difficult than those of the extreme moment.

²⁸ So Midian was subdued before the Israelites, and they lifted up their heads no more. So the land had rest for forty years in the days of Gideon.

Judges 8:28

So Midian was subdued before the Israelites. Regarding the security of the nation, Gideon's rule as a judge over Israel was a success. Yet in many ways he was a spiritual failure.

So the land had rest for forty years in the days of Gideon. Despite their slide into apostasy, God honoured the initial faithfulness of Gideon by giving the land peace from its oppressors.

This is the third and final time that the land had rest for a period of forty years; Judges 3:11 and 5:31 contain the other two statements. Refer also to the comments made on 3:11 for other significant periods of forty years in the history of Israel.

II.e.v Judges 8:29-35 - The Death of Gideon

These verses briefly describe Gideon's polygamy, introduce the next major character Abimelech, the death of Gideon, and the apostasy that followed.

II.e.v.1 Judges 8:29-32 - Gideon, Father of Abimelech

This transitional unit shows that one of Gideon's most fateful contributions to Israel's future was his son Abimelech, whose violent story is told in Chapter Nine.

²⁹ Jerubbaal son of Joash went to live in his own house. ³⁰ Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. ³¹ His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech. ³² Then Gideon son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash at Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

Judges 8:29-32

For he had many wives. A harem was not only a reflection of a man's inability to control his sexual lust, it was also a way for him to proudly express his wealth, by saying, "Look at all the wives and children I can support." It was the downfall of King Solomon, whose wisdom could not let him see his failings in this area of his

life: <<Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart>> (1 Kings 11:3).

The OT never directly condemns polygamy, although the NT does: <<He answered, 'Have you not read that the one who made them at the beginning "made them male and female", and said, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh"? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate'>> (Matthew 19:4-6), and: <<Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money>> (1 Timothy 3:2-3). Yet the OT shows the bitter fruit of polygamy. The stories of polygamous families in the OT, such as with Jacob or David, are the stories of conflict and crisis.

Abimelech means 'my father is king.' Ironically, then, Gideon, who had vigorously proclaimed that he should not be king, nevertheless did function as a king, even to the point of giving his son such a name. It is the name that a king himself would have and thus it was perhaps Gideon's intention that his son would become king.

Then Gideon son of Joash died at a good old age. Through his career, Gideon is seen as a man who slipped from great heights of faith to a place of outright apostasy and rebellion against God. It could be said that Gideon handled adversity better than success. Success, riches, and prominence brought him down. It is not enough for anyone to begin well with God. They must continue on throughout their entire Christian life. Gideon, in his later years, had to look back to see anything he had done for God. All his works and of greater significance, his faithfulness, were in the past.

II.e.v.2 Judges 8:33-35 - Continuing Apostasy

The steady downward cycle of Israel's apostasy continued unabated. Gideon, although he had accomplished some good things under God's command, was a significant contributing factor to this downward slide.

³³ As soon as Gideon died, the Israelites relapsed and prostituted themselves with the Baals, making Baal-berith their god. ³⁴ The Israelites did not remember the Lord their God, who had rescued them from the hand of all their enemies on every side; ³⁵ and they did not exhibit loyalty to the house of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

Judges 8:33-35

As soon as Gideon died, the Israelites relapsed and prostituted themselves with the Baals. In a sense, Israel served the memory of Gideon well, especially the Gideon of his later years. By serving Baal, Israel said, “What really matters is money and success,” and in this they followed the example of Gideon in his later years. Yet the final statement does recognise the time that Gideon was faithful to God: they did not exhibit loyalty to the house of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.

Baal-berith means ‘Baal of the covenant’: Israel made its covenant with one of the Baals, not with its own covenant-keeping God: <<*When all the lords of the Tower of Shechem heard of it, they entered the stronghold of the temple of El-berith*>> (Judges 9:46).

Jerubbaal means ‘let Baal contend’ and was the name given to Gideon by the people after he had destroyed Baal’s altar and sacred pole in Chapter Six. The use of this title supports the narrators final comment on the good Gideon had done. Yet it is perhaps the record of Paul’s life and death that should be the model: <<*If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith*>> (Philippians 3:4b-9), and: <<*As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing*>> (2 Timothy 4:6-8).