

"Today we come to the end of Gideon's story in the Book of Judges. We will see how the end of the battle with the Midianites came about, and how the Midianites were not the only opponents Gideon faced. He also had to deal with various kinds of opposition from his own people, the Israelites.

As we come in on Gideon today, he and his 300 men have seen God rout the Midianite enemy in an amazing way. In the middle of the night, with Gideon's men blowing trumpets and holding torches and smashing clay jars all around the perimeter of the enemy camp, God caused panic and confusion to spread like wildfire among the Midianites as they were roused from their sleep. And in the dark the Midianites couldn't tell who was an Israelite and who was a Midianite and they started turning their swords on each other. So thousands of Midianites died and the rest began to flee in panic.

And Gideon then sent out messengers to all of the nearby tribes of Israel, and probably roused out all those soldiers he had previously sent home, and by morning the Midianites were being chased out of the Promised Land. And Gideon sent word to the Ephraimites who lived in the south along the Jordan River, and told them to guard the fords of the Jordan where the enemy was headed and attack them as they tried to escape across the river. This they did, and they ended up killing two of the leaders of the Midianite army, Oreb and Zeeb. But the Ephraimites were not pleased that they had only been called in to help with the mop up at the end of the battle. We come in on Gideon as the Ephraimites are complaining to him, and voicing their resentment.

So turn with me to the Book of Judges chapter 8, and we will be reading verses 1-28.

Now the Ephraimites asked Gideon, "Why have you treated us like this? Why didn't you call us when you went to fight Midian?" And they challenged him vigorously. But he answered them, "What have I accomplished compared to you? Aren't the gleanings of Ephraim's grapes better than the full grape harvest of Abiezer? God gave Oreb and Zeeb, the Midianite leaders, into your hands. What was I able to do compared to you?" At this, their resentment against him subsided. Gideon and his three hundred men, exhausted yet keeping up the pursuit, came to the Jordan and crossed it. He said to the men of Sukkoth, "Give my troops some bread; they are worn out, and I am still pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian." But the officials of Sukkoth said, "Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your troops?" Then Gideon replied, "Just for that, when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will tear your flesh with desert thorns and briers." From there he went up to Peniel and made the same request of them, but they answered as the men of Sukkoth had. So he said to the men of Peniel, "When I return in triumph, I will tear down this tower." Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with a force of about fifteen thousand men, all that were left of the armies of the eastern peoples; a hundred and twenty thousand swordsmen had

fallen. Gideon went up by the route of the nomads east of Nobah and Jogbehah and attacked the unsuspecting army. Zebah and Zalmunna, the two kings of Midian, fled, but he pursued them and captured them, routing their entire army. Gideon son of Joash then returned from the battle by the Pass of Heres. He caught a young man of Sukkoth and questioned him, and the young man wrote down for him the names of the seventy-seven officials of Sukkoth, the elders of the town. Then Gideon came and said to the men of Sukkoth, “Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me by saying, ‘Do you already have the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna in your possession? Why should we give bread to your exhausted men?’” He took the elders of the town and taught the men of Sukkoth a lesson by punishing them with desert thorns and briars. He also pulled down the tower of Peniel and killed the men of the town. Then he asked Zebah and Zalmunna, “What kind of men did you kill at Tabor?” “Men like you,” they answered, “each one with the bearing of a prince.” Gideon replied, “Those were my brothers, the sons of my own mother. As surely as the Lord lives, if you had spared their lives, I would not kill you.” Turning to Jether, his oldest son, he said, “Kill them!” But Jether did not draw his sword, because he was only a boy and was afraid. Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Come, do it yourself. ‘As is the man, so is his strength.’” So Gideon stepped forward and killed them, and took the ornaments off their camels’ necks.

Gideon’s Ephod

The Israelites said to Gideon, “Rule over us—you, your son and your grandson—because you have saved us from the hand of Midian.” But Gideon told them, “I will not rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you.” And he said, “I do have one request, that each of you give me an earring from your share of the plunder.” (It was the custom of the Ishmaelites to wear gold earrings.) They answered, “We’ll be glad to give them.” So they spread out a garment, and each of them threw a ring from his plunder onto it. The weight of the gold rings he asked for came to seventeen hundred shekels, not counting the ornaments, the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian or the chains that were on their camels’ necks. Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.

Gideon’s Death

Thus Midian was subdued before the Israelites and did not raise its head again. During Gideon’s lifetime, the land had peace forty years. Jerub-Baal son of Joash went back home to live. He had seventy sons of his own, for he had many wives. His concubine, who lived in Shechem, also bore him a son, whom he named Abimelek. Gideon son of Joash died at a good old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. No sooner had Gideon died than the Israelites again prostituted themselves to the Baals. They set up Baal-Berith as their god and did not remember the Lord their God, who had rescued them from the hands of all their enemies on every side. They also failed to show any loyalty to the family of Jerub-Baal (that is, Gideon) in spite of all the good things he had done for them.

So as you have just heard, the end of Gideon’s story is not a simple happy ending. It’s a complicated tale which reveals the ever-present brokenness of God’s people. It’s a tale, which like all of the stories in the Book of Judges, reminds us of the Exodus and the travails of Moses.

In the Exodus, God did amazing signs and wonders as He saved His people from their bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt. The Israelites saw with their own eyes and could not deny that God was with them, that God had saved them with his mighty outstretched arm. But at every step along the way of the Exodus they moaned and complained, and were full of fear and resentment against God and against Moses. And they were unbelievably quick to turn to idols and forsake the Lord again and again and again.

Well, not much has changed here in Gideon's day, and if we're honest and look at our own lives, we are not much different in our own day either.

In Gideon's case, he and his 300 men have seen God do another unbelievable act of liberation for his people, by bringing judgment down on these brutal Midianites who had been robbing and raping and pillaging the people of the Promised Land for the past 7 years.

And God did this by causing a midnight panic among the Midianites and having them turn their own swords on each other. The Israelites just watched from the sidelines. They had trumpets in one hand and torches in the other hand, and they made a bunch of noise. But the Bible says, 'The Lord caused the men throughout the camp to turn on each other with their swords.'

And then by morning the Midianites were fleeing in complete retreat trying to get back across the Jordan River and back to the Arabian Peninsula from whence they came. All the Israelites had to do was pick up the enemy swords left lying on the ground, and chase them out, killing whoever they could catch up with.

It was an amazing victory for Israel against overwhelming odds and all by the hand of God. You would think that all of Israel would be rejoicing, and worshipping God, and thanking Gideon for his obedience to God and his leadership of God's people.

But that's not what happens, is it? Instead God's people immediately start in on Gideon with their resentments and fears and complaints.

It's the Ephraimites who are full of resentment, and they start in even before the battle is even over.

They see this amazing victory that God has won and they want to know why Gideon didn't called them to be part of it from the beginning. And it says in verse that they criticized Gideon sharply.

But you know what? Gideon had sent messengers to all of the surrounding tribes back in the beginning, and 32,000 Israelite men did volunteer for service. If the Ephraimites weren't part of the initial force Gideon had pulled together, it was because they hadn't shown for duty.

And Gideon could have defended himself, and could have told them it was their own fault if they were late to the party. But like Moses, Gideon is remarkably humble and diplomatic here with the Ephraimites. At least they are on-board and helping now, and they did respond to his second call to arms by defending the fords of the Jordan ahead of the fleeing enemy.

So Gideon deflects their criticisms by praising the important part they have played in the battle, and highlighting how God used them to bring down two of the commanding officers of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. This mollifies them, and their resentment against him subsides.

But the battle hasn't even fully ended yet. The actual kings of the Midianites tribes, Zebah and Zalmunna have not yet been captured. And the Israelites do not want them regrouping their men across the Jordan and then coming back. So Gideon is still in hot pursuit. And notice that the Ephraimites still do not sign on to join Gideon in that pursuit. They still are wary of the Midianites, and are content to back off and take no further part in the battle.

And the men of the Israelite towns of Succoth and Peniel are even worse. When Gideon's 300 men go through their towns in pursuit of the enemy they are exhausted. He and his men have been up all night. They haven't eaten a thing since dinner the night before. They have traveled a great distance in pursuit of the enemy.

In verse 5 and verse 8, Gideon pleads with the men of these towns to just give his men and little bread and water as they pass through the town to sustain them for the day ahead. But the people won't do it! They say, 'Is the battle over? Have captured the enemy kings yet?'

It seems they are afraid that if the hated Midianites are not really subdued, their towns will end up facing the repercussions of the Midianites later for having aided Gideon now. But the problem is, what they are doing is aiding and abetting the enemy now! They are putting Gideon and his troops in danger. They are making them more vulnerable in their exhaustion. And they are not at all thanking God for what God is in the process of doing to liberate them from the enemy. They are still skeptical, and wary, and fearful, and cautious.

And by siding with the enemy like this, they are actually making themselves subject to the same judgment God is inflicting on the enemy.

Remember, Gideon is a 'judge.' There's a reason that these leaders of Israel at this time were called 'judges.' It's because they are being used by God to bring judgment on those who by their evil and idolatry and injustice and lack of mercy on others set themselves up against God and his people.

So Gideon tells the people of Succoth and Peniel that when he returns victorious they will bear the consequences of the decision they made that day. Not by facing the repercussions of the enemy, but the repercussions of God.

And that is what happens. Not only do Gideon and his exhausted men capture the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, and bring God's judgment on them. They also return to those two towns and brings God's judgment on those Israelites who aided and abetted those kings in their flight.

It's a sad way to end the story of a great battle in which God saved His people once again from bondage and oppression and poverty and desperation. A battle which showed once again God's mighty and outstretched arm coming to the rescue, and proving to his people that He is with them and loves them and is worthy of their trust and praise.

But God's people display a mixture of frailties always and for ever. Fears, resentments, wariness to trust, a lack of gratitude, pettiness and sullenness. And ever and always, a natural propensity to idolatry.

And that's how Gideon's story ends, with a sad tale of idolatry. And some people think that it is Gideon himself who leads his people into idolatry by making this golden ephod out of the rings of gold taken as plunder from the Midianites. But I don't think that is what Gideon is doing at the end of his story at all. No, I believe Gideon is continuing to model his life and calling around Moses, who was commanded by God to make an ephod of gold as part of the High Priest's garment to wear in leading God's people in worship.

In Exodus 28, God describes for Moses in great detail how an ephod of gold, woven together with blue and purple and scarlet yarn, and finely twisted linen to be made for the High Priest to wear.

And this ephod is a garment to be draped over the priest's robe hanging from the shoulders and coming down in front and back. And it was to have the names of all the tribes of Israel inscribed on it as a memorial that God was their God and they were to be his people, and the high priest was to represent them before God.

My friends, this is what Gideon made from the gold taken as plunder from the Midianites. And he had all of the Israelite tribes contribute gold to the project, because all their tribe names would be on it. It was a statement that they were all God's people, you see.

And Gideon was making an ephod like Moses did as a testimonial to God. He did this in response to the Israelites who said to him after the battle, 'You rule over us because YOU have saved us from the hand of Midian.'

Gideon responds, 'I will NOT rule over you, nor will my son rule over you. The LORD will rule over you!' You see, that is Gideon's point when he then makes the request for them to give him gold for an ephod. The Ephod was to be worn to lead God's people in worship of Yahweh, and in thanksgiving for all he had done for them. Gideon wanted the ephod to be a testimonial to all Israel that God is God, and God alone is to rule over them, and they are to worship him.

I know it then says in v. 27 as a summary statement that Israel ended up prostituting themselves by turning the ephod into an idol, but I don't think that was Gideon's intent at all. And when it says that it became a snare to him and his family I think it simply means that he ended up being sorry he had ever made it. Again, it's like Moses with the serpent in the wilderness. He made an image of a serpent that initially was meant for good, but that later got turned by the people into an idol that was a snare to Moses and Joshua and had to be destroyed.

My friends, all through this last phase of Gideon's life we see that our fears, our resentments, and our idolatries only get in the way of living a life in loving relationship with God and with other people.

Gideon was not exempt from those same fears, or those resentments and idolatries. And when God made Himself known to Gideon, He began inviting Gideon to let go of those fears step by step, day by day. It wasn't instantaneous, and Gideon was still subject to fear and insecurity all the way through his story.

But God did ask him right from the start to let go of the idols. And at the end of the story, Gideon is telling the people Israel not to idolize or idealize him either. He tells them in no uncertain terms that it is the Lord whose leadership they need. It is the LORD who will rule over them.

And for us today, Gideon's story is still a call to trust in God alone, and orient our lives around him alone. My friends, Gideon's story shows us clearly that a large part of walking with God is about subtraction. First God calls Gideon to get rid of idols his family and people have been leaning on. Then later before the battle God calls Gideon to get rid of the 32,000 troops he has been trusting in to fight with him.

God's point is, I am the only One you need to lean on, and I am the only One who will actually come through for you. The idols you cling to will not ultimately help you. Counting up your assets and constantly thinking more is better, and bigger is better really doesn't ultimately make your life more safe or secure or content.

God seems to like subtraction. Getting us to let go of things we cling to besides Him. He says in every generation: Let go of your idols. Let go of your pretenses, your consumerism, your notions of success, your illusions of grandeur, your need to be right all the time, your need for safety and competence and control. There are so many things we set up as idols in our lives. Things we think we 'have to have' in order to be ok. Things we orient our whole lives around, that we cling to.

Walking with God is in large measure a matter of letting them go. Casting them off. Repenting of them. Removing them from our households. It's simply what learning daily to trust God is all about. And my friends, Gideon's story teaches us to be especially careful of making idols out of the very things that should point us to God...like that golden ephod.

In our day, I would say to all of us: Don't idolize the church, any church, our church. The church is not God. Sure we should love the church we are a part of, but don't let it become an idol. Churches are meant to point us to the God we trust in. We are NOT meant to actually trust in the church itself.

And pastors! Don't idolize pastors or preachers or evangelists either. A pastor and church are excellent if they help you to fall in love with God, not if they cause you to fall in love with themselves.

Billy Graham once stood in front of a packed arena and he ended his sermon by telling of something that had happened to him that day at the hotel where he was staying.

He said he had gotten into the elevator to go up to his room and a man who was obviously drunk also got in, and was leaning against the corner of the elevator hardly able to stand. But as they were going up, the guy looked over and saw Billy Graham and said, 'Hey, I know who you are! You're Billy Graham. You changed my life!'

Billy said to the packed arena, 'That's what happens when Billy Graham changes your life. But when Jesus Christ changes your life you are a new creation, behold the old is gone and the new has come.'

'Don't trust in me,' Billy said, 'I am here to point you to the only One who really can save and make you new.'

Gideon would say, 'Amen.' Let's pray.