

Judges 8:1-28
Gideon – Part 3

Introduction

1. Last week we saw God deliver Israel through the hands of Gideon and an army of 300 men
2. We saw a contrast between the weakness of Gideon and his army (and ultimately Israel) and God's strength and might
3. We saw how this reflects our own salvation: while we are helpless to rescue ourselves from sin and death, God raised up His own Deliverer, Jesus Christ, to save us and do what we could not
4. We have seen some different sides to Gideon over the past two weeks:
 - a. When we first met him he was a timid farm boy hiding in a wine-press threshing wheat
 - b. In a bit of foreshadowing, the LORD referred to him as a "valiant warrior" and indeed, that is what he became
 - c. We saw him grow into a confident commander leading his small army of 300 men up against a massive 135,000 opponent—all because he believed that the LORD would be true to His word and deliver Israel through his hands
5. Today, however, we see something different and it's both disturbing and difficult to understand
 - a. It's difficult because there are some interpretive challenges
 - b. It's disturbing because, if we're interpreting the events of the passage correctly, we see a troubling side to someone who just one chapter ago was a hero

A. Ephraim complains against Gideon (1-3)

1. The passage is actually a continuation of chapter 7 where Gideon and the Israelites are pursuing the 15,000 Midianites who escaped the prior battle
2. As the Midianites attempted to flee, Gideon calls upon the tribes of Naphtali, Asher, Manasseh and Ephraim to rise up and prevents their escape
3. Ephraim is upset that Gideon didn't call upon them sooner and accuse him of wrongdoing (1): **"Then the men of Ephraim said to him, "What is this thing you have done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian?" And they contended with him vigorously."**
4. However, through a bit of flattery, Gideon is able to appease his accusers (3)
5. This particular narrative may serve two purposes:
 - a. It shows the beginnings of internal strife among the tribes that will intensify throughout the Gideon narrative (that continues through Abimelech)
 - b. It may serve to foreshadow the civil war that will develop during Abimelech's reign

B. Succoth and Penuel refuse to help Gideon (4-9)

1. As Gideon and his men continue their pursuit of the Midianites, they come to the city of Succoth (4):
 - a. Succoth was located east of the Jordan river in the land allotted to the tribe of Gad (Transjordan)
 - b. The text doesn't tell us specifically if Succoth was an Israelite city or Canaanite
 - c. However, the little evidence there is would suggest Israelite inhabitants

- 1) Joshua specifically mentions the city by name as one of the border cities for Gad (Joshua 13:27)
 - 2) Later, it becomes the spot where the Israelites build their brass foundries for casting the metal used in the temple (1 Kings 7:46)
 - 3) The inhabitants of the city feared the Midianites making it unlikely that they were allies (i.e. fellow Canaanites), and more likely that they were being oppressed just like the Israelite tribes to the west of the Jordan
 - 4) There is no indication that Gideon approached Succoth as either a hostile city or even one that was in subjection to Israel (what one would expect if were filled with Canaanites, since Israel enslaved the inhabitants in those cities they controlled)
 - 5) In fact, it appears that Gideon simply expected their help—when Moses agreed to let the Transjordan tribes settle to the east of the Jordan and outside the Promise Land, it was under the condition that they would help Israel when needed against their enemies. This may explain why Gideon responds with such intense anger.
2. When Gideon asks the men of Succoth to supply food for his army, they refuse (5): **“The leaders of Succoth said, “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army?”**
 - a. They refuse out of fear of retribution from the Midianite in the event that Gideon’s army is not successful in destroying them
 - b. In verse 15 we learn that their reply wasn’t just a refusal to help, but a taunt of Gideon and his small army (likely due to sheer numbers—Gideon’s army of 300 men couldn’t possibly defeat an army of 15,000)
 3. Gideon responds with a threat (7): **“Gideon said, “All right, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will thrash your bodies with the thorns of the wilderness and with briars.”**
 - a. Gideon’s threat was a promise to come back and torture them after capturing the Midianite kings
 - b. A more literal rendering of Gideon’s threat: **“I will trample your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briars”**
 - c. This was a form of ancient torture where captives were tied to the ground naked on a bed of thorns with the thorns being driven into their flesh as they were rolled over by carts or wagons
 4. Gideon and his army travel to the city of Penuel where he again asks for food for his men (8-9):
 - a. Like Succoth, they too refuse to help (8)
 - b. In response, Gideon promises that he will return and tear down their defensive tower (9)

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| C. Gideon captures the two Midianite kings and returns to punish Succoth and Penuel (10-21) |
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1. Gideon captures Zebah and Zalmunna, but he doesn’t kill them just yet (10-12)
2. Instead, he takes them back to Succoth and searches out the 77 leaders of the city (13-14)
3. He then tortures the leaders for their refusal to feed his men (15-16)
4. He then returns to Penuel just as promised, tears down their defensive tower and kills all the men of the city (17)
5. Finally, he kills the Midianite kings (18-21):

- a. In an rather unexpected dialog, we learn that the two kings had murdered Gideon's brothers (18)
- b. He reveals also that he would have let the two kinds live had they not killed his brothers (19)
- c. He then ordered his oldest son to kill the two kings rather than doing it himself (20)
- d. When his son refuses (out of fear), the kings taunt Gideon leading to him finally killing them (21)
- e. Finally, we see Gideon take the royal ornaments that were around the necks of the kings' camels (i.e. typically taken as a prize)

D. Gideon makes an idol and leads Israel back into idolatry (22-28)

1. When Gideon returns from defeating Midian, Israel (i.e. likely his tribe) call on him to become their king (22): **"Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian."**
2. Gideon formally refuses and claims that only God should be their king (23): **"But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you."**
3. However, Gideon does the unthinkable: he creates an idol to place in his home town and leads Israel back into idolatry (24-27)

Conclusion

1. As I mentioned in the introduction, there are some difficult and troubling things in this passage today.
2. We have a man who by many accounts should be hailed as a man of faith and a hero of Israel, after all God used him to deliver Israel from their enemies.
3. The author of Hebrews refers to him in chapter 11, the famous Hall of Faith passage
4. Yet, we also see some rather troublesome things in Gideon
 - a. His torture, maiming and killing of fellow Israelites at Succoth and Penuel comes across as a cruel and vindictive act of personal retribution (especially when we see Gideon not simply kill the kings of Midian when he captures them, but taking them back to Succoth, parading them in front of the leaders of the city)
 - b. The collection of gold and other items of plunder from the Israelites and fashioning it into an idol
 - c. The creation of a harem, a very king-like thing to do (8:30)
 - d. The taking of a Canaanite concubine (8:31)
 - e. Finally, in chapter 9 he is only referred to by his Canaanite name, Jerubbaal (is the author trying to tell us something?)
5. So, what's the lesson we can learn from this today?
 - a. Gideon is not alone
 - b. Abraham who tried to fulfill God's promise through his concubine, yet became the father of Israel and the line through which the savior was born
 - c. Moses who was prohibited from going into the Promise Land, yet was God's instrument to deliver Israel from Egypt and to proclaim the Law
 - d. David who committed adultery and murder, and yet was called a man after God's own heart
 - e. Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, but one who had forsaken God at the end of his life— yet he penned part of our OT

- f. Jonah, the reluctant prophet
 - g. Peter who denied the Lord three times, yet was a pillar of the Church and author of some of our Bible
 - h. Paul, a murderous Pharisee who killed Christians before coming to Christ. A man who wrote in Romans 7 that he still struggled with sin, yet was one of the greatest apostles and is responsible for almost half of the New testament
 - i. Each of these men had their flaws, but were used by God in a mighty and powerful to accomplish His will and purpose
6. Maybe one lesson here today is that God can and does call imperfect people into His perfect plan and purpose
- a. He doesn't call or use only perfect, sinless people.
 - b. Gideon may have done some awful things, but in 8:35 that Israel sinned against him because they did not **"show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel"**
 - c. The bottom line is that God calls sinners like us: Romans 5:8 says, **"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ dies for us."**
 - d. And as such, what God gets is sinners, who will sometimes continue to stumble and fall
 - e. He's not surprised or shocked by this, nor is His plan or purpose thwarted by it.
 - f. Rather, He has even provided a means to deal with that: 1 John 1:8-9 says, **"If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."**
7. Maybe a second lesson we can learn from Gideon's failures is that sin has consequences:
- a. Gideon came from a family of idol worshipers, and while he did tear down his family's altar to Baal, in the end he didn't completely abandon his Canaanite ways and it lead Israel back into idolatry
 - b. His treatment of Succoth and Penuel seems to have been driven by self-serving vindictiveness and retribution which lead him to murder fellow Israelites
 - c. His collection of wives (harem) and a concubine which ultimately lead to major internal strife and conflict within Israel (chapter 9ff.)
 - d. We are continually challenged in the Bible to walk in a manner worthy of our calling (Ephesians 3)
 - e. This means that we cannot, and should not, be content continuing in our old ways (i.e. like Gideon returning to his Canaanite roots??)
 - f. We should pursue a life that represents the one who called us