

From Triumph to Tragedy

Judges 8

How you would react if God were to bestow upon you an extraordinary and unexpected blessing that would overturn your life for good. Gideon had just that experience. When we first meet Gideon, he is living a defeated life--defeated by the Midianites and defeated by self-doubt. In Judges 6, the Lord reveals Himself to Gideon and transforms him into the "valiant warrior" who will save his people.

In chapter 7, the victory of the 300 Israelites over 135,000 Midianite oppressors was miraculous; it could not possibly be explained in any other way. In fact, in chapter 7, verse 2, the Lord specifically said that the reason He orchestrated Israel's victory with so few men was **"lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'"** There is no possibility of boastfulness in such a miraculous victory.

Chapter 8 records the events that occurred in the immediate aftermath of the conflict. Often our greatest tests of faith do not come in how we handle adversity, but in how we handle victory. We have seen the Lord give Gideon a great victory in chapter 7. But in chapter 8 we will see Gideon snatch defeat from the mouth of victory. For Gideon, what started in triumph as he trusted the Lord, ended in tragedy as he depends on himself.

The first test of victory comes through criticism:

1. The Test of Criticism (8:1-3).

- 1 Now the men of Ephraim said to him, "Why have you done this to us by not calling us when you went to fight with the Midianites?" And they reprimanded him sharply.**
- 2 So he said to them, "What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleanings of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?"**
- 3 God has delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. And what was I able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that.**

Back in chapter 7:24-25, after the Midianites were defeated and were on the run, Gideon sent messengers to the men of Ephraim to pursue after them. The Ephraimites did this and they killed two of the princes of the Midianites and brought their heads to Gideon.

When they met up with Gideon, they began to criticize him. They want to know why they weren't asked to join the battle. The Bible says they **"reprimanded him sharply"**. They attacked Gideon because he had not called them to the battle.

Ephraim was the largest of all the tribes. At this time, the Tabernacle was located in Shiloh, which was in Ephraim. The Ephraimites descended from Joseph and his Egyptian wife. They were a tribe that was proud of its heritage, proud of its influence and proud of its power. They wanted the respect of the rest of the tribes. Ephraim was always a tribe marked by trouble, pride and selfishness.

In this case, they are jealous of Gideon's victory. They are sorry that they missed out on the spoils of war. They are angry because they were not the object of glory, so they turned on Gideon.

The Ephraimites are typical of those who are full of self. They are quick to lift their voice and criticize those who are attempting to do something for God. There are plenty of people still around who think and act just like the Ephraimites, but that is an attitude the church could do without!

How does Gideon respond to criticism? Instead of reacting in anger to their criticism, Gideon responds very graciously. In verse 2 Gideon says, **"What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?"** He says, "your leftovers were better than our main course!"

When you are doing something for the Lord, you can expect to be criticized by those who do nothing. When they attack you, your motives and your efforts, it is easy to get sidetracked and allow anger to rule in your heart. It is easy to lash out and tell them off or put them in their place. When the attacks come, and they will, we should do like Gideon and live out Proverbs 15:1, **"A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger."**

He turns away their wrath because he swallowed his pride and thought about what was best for the nation. Gideon gave them the glory they wanted, and they were satisfied! Instead of getting sidetracked by our critics, we must keep our eyes on the task we have been assigned by God.

2. The Test of the Compromisers (8:4-9)

4 When Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over, exhausted but still in pursuit.

5 Then he said to the men of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian."

6 And the leaders of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?"

7 So Gideon said, "For this cause, when the Lord has delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers!"

8 Then he went up from there to Penuel and spoke to them in the same way. And the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered.

9 So he also spoke to the men of Penuel, saying, "When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!"

As Gideon and his men continue in their pursuit of the Midianites, Gideon becomes concerned about the welfare of his men. They pass two towns, first they came to Succoth, and then they came to Penuel. At each town Gideon made a simple and very reasonable request of his fellow Israelites. He asked them for bread to feed his weary men. But, instead of coming to the aid of God's chosen deliverer, the elders of both towns refused to get involved in Gideon's fight.

These men are playing politics with the things of God. They were like the politicians of our day who have to see which way the wind is blowing before they will make a decision. They were afraid to take a stand for God.

The men of these cities only wanted to find fault with Gideon and to protect their own little kingdoms. They failed to realize that by giving Gideon bread, they would be

guaranteeing future blessings for their people. All they cared about was maintaining the status quo.

There are still people around who do the same things these cities did. There are some who play politics with the things of God. You see there are no gray areas when it comes to the work of the Lord. You cannot be neutral when it comes to serving Him. Jesus put it this way, **“He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad,”** Matt. 12:30.

Because these two cities refused to help him, Gideon tells them that they will face judgment when he returns the victor over the Midianites. He reminds them that there is a price to pay for standing against the Lord and His work.

God saved us to work, James 2:18. God has placed us in His work, Eph. 2:10. God expects us to be involved to the best of our ability! Are you a preacher? Get out there and preach! Are you a singer? Stand up and sing! Do you have a testimony? Share it for the glory of God! Do you have a dollar? Give it to Jesus and watch Him bless it for His glory! All I am saying is get up and get active in the work of the Lord, and never, ever be found hindering, opposing or standing in the way of what God is doing in the world! May we never, like these people, be guilty of refusing to serve the Lord out of fear!

3. The Test of Personal Retaliation (8:10-21).

10 Now Zebah and Zalmunna were at Karkor, and their armies with them, about fifteen thousand, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East; for one hundred and twenty thousand men who drew the sword had fallen.

11 Then Gideon went up by the road of those who dwell in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah; and he attacked the army while the camp felt secure.

12 When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them; and he took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army.

Instead of being discouraged and defeated by the criticism of Ephraim and by the callousness of the two cities from which he requested help, Gideon and his army pressed on in pursuit of the Midianites. I love the phrase in verse 4, which says, **“exhausted but still in pursuit”**. These men were tired and weary from the battle. They are hungry and great need of rest, yet they carry on! I love that attitude, don't you?

Where did we ever get the idea that there was a place to sit down on the Lord? Where did we ever get the idea that it was OK to sit back while others did all the work? Where did we every get the idea that we could back off, slow down and take it easy in our spiritual walk? Where do some people get the idea that they can join a church and never do anything? Wherever those ideas come from, they certainly did not come from the Lord. I would suggest that it is an idea planted in our minds by the enemy to try and get us to quit on the Lord.

Gideon and his men persisted and defeated their enemies capturing the Midianite kings. Then Gideon takes his revenge.

13 Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle, from the Ascent of Heres.

14 And he caught a young man of the men of Succoth and interrogated him; and he wrote down for him the leaders of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men.

15 Then he came to the men of Succoth and said, "Here are Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you ridiculed me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in your hand, that we should give bread to your weary men?' "

16 And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taught the men of Succoth.

17 Then he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

Just as he promised, Gideon returns to Succoth and Penuel to exact revenge for their refusal to help him. First, he thrashes the elders of Sukkoth. Second, he not only pulls down the tower of Peniel, as promised, he also kills the elders of the town. If we act on a desire for revenge, we will never be satisfied, because we never profit from someone else's pain.

What's more likely to happen, therefore, is that, being unsatisfied with a little, you will want more. Your desire for revenge will escalate, as it escalated for Gideon. Gideon, by all appearances, is filled with rage. Why? Judges 8:18-21 is, as they say, the rest of the story.

18 And he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor?" So they answered, "As you are, so were they; each one resembled the son of a king."

19 Then he said, "They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the Lord lives, if you had let them live, I would not kill you."

20 And he said to Jether his firstborn, "Rise, kill them!" But the youth would not draw his sword; for he was afraid, because he was still a youth.

21 So Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Rise yourself, and kill us; for as a man is, so is his strength." So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments that were on their camels' necks.

Gideon now interrogates his prisoners, the two kings. He asks them about the men they killed at Tabor. Now we know why Gideon, like an animal on the prowl, hunted down the two kings. Now we know why Gideon defused a potential conflict with the men of Ephraim, who threatened to distract him from his quest, and why he flew into a rage at the men of Succoth and Penuel, who refused to aid him in his quest. Gideon was tracking down the killers of his brothers.

Gideon turned the call to deliver Israel into a personal vendetta. Long before he crossed the Jordan, he crossed a line. He decided to nurse his anger west of the Jordan, when he heard about the death of his brothers, whereupon his anger morphed into a desire for revenge and he acted on that desire.

Anger feels good; that's why we nurse it. But if you continue to feed your anger, it will take over your life.

4. The Test of Celebrity Status (8:22-35).

22 Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian."

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."

The people want to make Gideon king and establish a dynasty of Gideon's family to rule over them. Notice how the people missed the point of chapter 7. The whole point of the victory over 135,000 with just 300 men was so that as God told Gideon, **"lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'**" Who do the people credit for the victory? Who do they honor? Not the Lord, Gideon! They completely missed the lesson!

Gideon rightly rejects the offer by observing, **"the Lord shall rule over you."** However, he neglects to correct the Israelites' observation that he, not the Lord, saved them. If Gideon had stopped there, we might overlook his omission and chalk it up as a minor oversight. But Gideon doesn't leave it there. He has one request:

24 Then Gideon said to them, "I would like to make a request of you, that each of you would give me the earrings from his plunder." For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.

25 So they answered, "We will gladly give them." And they spread out a garment, and each man threw into it the earrings from his plunder.

26 Now the weight of the gold earrings that he requested was one thousand seven hundred shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments, pendants, and purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the chains that were around their camels' necks.

He wants a little of the plunder. It's not too much to ask, is it, to be compensated for all his hard work? The Lord had commanded that a king in Israel "must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold," but Gideon is now in possession of what looks like a royal treasure (Deuteronomy 17:17). Gideon has refused the kingship but collects a treasure fit for a king—a pagan king, that is—complete with the crown jewels that once belonged to pagan kings.

If you collect a little of the plunder, what might you do with it? Let's see what Gideon does with it:

27 Then Gideon made it into an ephod and set it up in his city, Ophrah. And all Israel played the harlot with it there. It became a snare to Gideon and to his house.

So, what does Gideon do with all the gold he has collected? He makes an ephod, a priestly garment. In the law, the Lord ordered the fashioning of an ephod for the high priest (Exodus 28:15-30). Now Gideon, who wasn't supposed to be a king but embraced the trappings of royalty, usurps the role of the high priest, though he hailed from the tribe of Manasseh, not the priestly tribe of Levi.

Does Gideon, in the role of a priest, lead people to the Lord? No, he leads them astray. The Israelites make pilgrimages to Ophrah, not the site of the tabernacle, to worship the ephod, not the Lord.

For Gideon, though, the ephod became a snare, trapping him in pride and false worship. It became a snare for his family, too, especially for one of his sons, whom we're about to meet.

28 Thus Midian was subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted their heads no more. And the country was quiet for forty years in the days of Gideon.

29 Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house.

30 Gideon had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives.

31 And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, whose name he called Abimelech.

32 Now Gideon the son of Joash died at a good old age, and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

33 So it was, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-Berith their god.

34 Thus the children of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side;

35 nor did they show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

The narrator summarizes Gideon's life in an ambiguous way. Midian was permanently subdued, the land enjoyed peace during Gideon's lifetime, and the manner of his death, "at a good old age," suggests a life well lived.

Gideon went back home **and dwelt in his own house**. But Gideon didn't go home to retire; he went home to make an object of worship and live like a king. He had a king's harem, with many wives, even though a king in Israel was not to "take many wives" lest his heart turn away from the Lord (Deuteronomy 17:17).

The Lord blessed Gideon with a stunning victory, but instead of celebrating the Lord, Gideon lapsed into idolatry (the ephod) and succumbed to money (forty-three pounds of gold), sex (many wives and at least one concubine), and power (assuming the posture of a king). His is a sad legacy indeed.

When the narrator of the Book of Judges introduced us to Gideon, he portrayed him along the lines of Moses, who led the people out of bondage to Egypt and to the edge of the promised land (Judges 6). When the Israelites entered the promised land, they again became subject to pagan domination. Soon after they entered the land, they were already hoping for a new Moses and a new exodus.

They wondered: would Gideon be the one? When Gideon returned to Ophrah, he resembled not Moses but Moses' brother, Aaron. Both Aaron and Gideon asked the people for gold rings. Aaron fashioned the gold into a calf; Gideon fashioned the gold into an ephod. In Aaron's day, the people worshiped the calf; in Gideon's day, they worshiped the ephod (Exodus 32:1-8). Gideon is not the new Moses, nor does he effect a new exodus. The story of Gideon leads us to look for someone else.

But by reading carefully you can see him beginning to lose his way. When the Ephraimites demand credit for the battle they fought, he doesn't say to them, "The credit belongs to the Lord alone." He gives the Lord credit, but also makes sure that their

fleshly desires are mollified as well. When he is able to capture his enemies and punish the towns who refuse to support his men, you can see a concern for justice on his part, but angry revenge also motivates him. Over time Gideon begins to like the position of power to which he's been raised, using it for ends that aren't entirely right. He continues to credit God (most of the time) for what's done, but he also believes more and more that the human contribution should be rewarded.

May our lives testify to this truth:

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold;

I'd rather be His than have riches untold;

I'd rather have Jesus than have houses or land.

I'd rather be led by his nailed-pierced hand...

I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause

I'd rather be faithful to His dear cause;

I'd rather have Jesus than worldwide fame.

I'd rather be true to his Holy name,

Than to be the king of a vast domain

Or be held in sin's dread sway.

I'd rather have Jesus than anything

This world affords today.