

Sermon 7: Judges 8: Gideon the Sinner

OUTLINE

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INTRODUCTION

One of the most dangerous temptations we face is success. When we succeed and people begin to approve of us we can get an inflated view of our own importance thinking that our thoughts, plans, ideas, opinions and contributions are more important than anyone else's. When things go well for a preacher he may get the idea that God is blessing him and not blessing the gospel and that he can do no wrong. Pride comes before a fall and on the heels of success, that is why the most important time to be vigilant is just after a success or breakthrough. Gideon has just had a success; God has used him and his 300 to overcome a great threat. And Gideon now proves the proverb true. Gideon is always remembered as a man of faith, but here we have the whole picture of the man. If we read the book of judges sensitively we would notice that in the ordinary cycle of a judge you would have a description of God raising up a deliverer, Israel being delivered and then some sort of statement about rest for a certain number of years. It is when the narrator deviates from this pattern that you should be taking note, and we see these deviations in Gideon's cycle. You would have expected the end of chapter 7 to jump straight to a verse like 8:28, 'So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more. And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.' But there are two important deviations which draw our attention to the details that we should be noting from this section. Firstly, we see Gideon's action in the mop up after victory showing us how he acts after success. But then we also have an odd postscript in 8:29-35. These two added sets of details help us to gain a fuller picture of Gideon. And the picture is not pretty; we are confronted with Gideon the sinner. Once again our heroes are shown to be flawed; once again we are pointed away from any other sinful human being as the one who can save us so that we must look to another to be the one who will save us. Three things stand out for us. Firstly, we see Gideon the politician and his conflict resolution skills in his dealings with the disgruntled Ephraim; secondly, we see Gideon the judge who deals out harsh judgements against his countrymen and who executes his enemies for personal reasons; and thirdly, we see Gideon who said that he would not be king with his mouth, but who by his actions sets himself up as king.

Sinful conflict resolution

V1-3, 'Then the men of Ephraim said to him, "What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?" And they accused him fiercely. ² And 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 grape harvest of Abiezer? ³ God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. What have I been able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger against him subsided when he said this.' You will remember after the rout of the enemies forces in the last chapter that Gideon called upon the various tribes to help in the mop up operations. We saw Gideon call back into the fight those who had gone home scared or who had been sent home from Naphtali; Asher and

Manasseh, 7:23. Singled out for special mention is Gideon calling upon Ephraim to hinder the enemies retreat where they were able to kill the Midian princes Oreb and Zeeb, 7:24-25. Chapter 8 now opens with the truth that you can't please everybody, and we see that Ephraim are not happy. We see that they have taken personal insult by not being included from the start and only being called upon for the clean-up.

We have witnessed Gideon as a general. Even though only having three hundred men Gideon showed some real tactical genius in how he employed those 300. True the victory belonged to the Lord but we must recognize that Gideon was no slouch when it came to surprise tactics. Now we witness Gideon the politician in a non-military situation where he has to handle people and their complaints and egos. Firstly, let us appreciate that the Ephraimites did exactly what God did not want to happen. In 7:2 we see, 'The Lord said to Gideon, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.' The Ephraimites were upset because they had been left out. Now it has been noted that the Ephraimites were a large and economically viable tribe who would likely not have responded if Gideon had called them, which was probably why he didn't. But this tribe of the people of God are upset for playing such a small part and what they perceive to be a low role in the victory. If you were Gideon how would you counsel the Ephraimites? I am sure you would retell the story of how God appeared to you and called you personally, how you tore down the altar of Baal, and you would have spoken about the terrible way in which Israel has been faithless in the past. You would have spoken about how God sought to glorify Himself before Israel, how God sought to parade His faithfulness and glory and power that Israel might put their faith in Him, put their idols away and obey Him. You would dramatically retell the story of the whittling down of the fighting force, of the fear and trembling you experienced, how God sent a dream to encourage him, and the surprising ease of the victory because God not Gideon was the one who won the battle. But this is not what Gideon does.

Instead of using this as a teaching moment to direct the people of God to their God, he strokes their ego. We see Gideon the politician using all the tricks in the book. He uses rhetorical questions; he uses flattery; he uses a proverb; he diminishes his own role while exaggerating theirs. In fact instead of using the covenant name for God YHWH he uses a generic reference. Instead of giving the glory to God he gives it to Ephraim. Instead of doubling down on the message that flesh profits nothing and no flesh should glory in His presence, instead of utilizing this grand miracle to direct people to God and greater faith and faithfulness to Him, he leaves Ephraim quibbling over who is the greatest with the greatest prize.

Sinful justice

Now this sounded like a post battle wrap up, but we see the mopping up continues, v4, 'And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing.' The enemies have been soundly defeated but Gideon is still pursuing the last vestiges of the enemy army. Is this because he is so diligent to do all the will of the Lord, or is there some other reason? We will see Gideon's driving of his own men is not for good reasons but to settle a personal vendetta. V5-9, 'So 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 after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian."

⁶ And the officials of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?" ⁷ So Gideon said, "Well then, when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers." ⁸ And from there he went up 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 And he said to the men of Penuel, "When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower." Gideon seeks provisions for his chase, but he is rebuffed. The men of these towns do not think that 300 men can defeat 15 000. Instead of Gideon telling the story of how he too was weak in faith, but God had been gentle and accommodating and condescended to aid his weak faith even accepting tests; Gideon threatens them. He threatens to thrash them with thorns and to tear down their defensive tower. These are his own countrymen that he threatens this way. And he makes an oath in the name of the Lord taking the Lord's name in vain in the process.

The second battle of the 300 is given very little air time, v10-12, 'Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about 15,000 men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East, for there had fallen 120,000 men who drew the sword. ¹¹ And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Nobah and Jogbehah and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. ¹² And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic.' Once again Gideon uses the element of surprise perhaps repeating his first tactic. The army is once again thrown into a panic and the description of the battle does not end with the enemy being fully wiped out but when Gideon captures the enemy kings.

The triumphant Gideon returns home by way of the towns that denied him aid and teaches them a lesson, and we can clearly see that he over punishes not because they denied the glory of God but because they resisted him, v13-17, 'Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. ¹⁴ And he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men. ¹⁵ And he came to the men of Succoth and said, "Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?' " ¹⁶ And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson. ¹⁷ And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.'

Now that he has rubbed the capture of Zebah and Zulmunna in the faces of those who did not aid them, now he attends to his captives, v18-21, 'Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, "Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor?" They answered, "As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king." ¹⁹ And he said, "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, "Rise and kill them!" But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man. ²¹ Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, "Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength." And Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels.' V18 reveals that Gideon's family were raided, and his captives reveal that they killed his family. Notice the introduction of the idea of Gideon's family being royal, this is going to

be a theme in Gideon's life. Gideon tries to get his oldest son to fulfill the rights of blood vengeance making the slaying of these kings a family matter not a matter of holy war.

If Gideon is a judge and one of his roles is to administer justice, he fails. He does not mix mercy with justice; he over punishes for personal slights; and he inserts his family business into the business of the Lord. Gideon is not the savior and judge that we need.

Sinful rule

V22-23, 'Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from 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." It is at this point that the people of Israel approach Gideon and offer him the role of being the king and his sons after him. There is a failure on the part of Gideon and the people. God has just delivered the people from Midian and they are fixated upon the man He uses and do not glorify God. This tendency to only see the human instrument is a failure common to all sinners. We value the jar of clay more highly than the glory God puts in it, and credit the successes to man and not to God. Celebrity focused Christianity has the danger of falling into this where we exalt men whom God has used greatly giving more credence to their teachings and actions than we ought. Gideon appears at this point to be virtuous and saying that the Lord not he will be king in Israel. Sadly, although Gideon makes all the right noises and says the right words in this exchange, the actions that we see following deny his words.

Several things can be noted. Firstly, Gideon asks for tribute from each Israelite, v24-26, 'And Gideon said to them, "Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil." (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) ²⁵ And they answered, "We will willingly give them." And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil. ²⁶ And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels.' Secondly, you will notice that Gideon also takes the booty of royal tokens that belonged to the kings. Thirdly, he takes to himself the typical royal prerogative of ancient kings and sets up an alternative worship site to the tabernacle in his own home town violating the clear biblical teaching around how the people of God are to worship. It is thought that he usurps a priestly function as well as he creates an Ephod which becomes a snare to Israel, v27, 'And Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.' The original ephod was to be used only by the high priest. It had the Urim and the Thummim in it, likely two stones with yes and no on either side. Two no's or two yeses would give a clear answer with a no and a yes giving a non-answer. Gideon was corrupting the priest's role taking the role of discovering God's will to himself. It appears that his actions in hanging out fleeces laid a pattern for miraculous guidance as a rule and he set himself up as the decision man speaking for God. Gideon's motives were probably sincere seeking aid in being a judge and making right decisions but stepping outside the boundaries of God's word he is a stumbling block to himself, his family and his people.

Only then do we have the typical verse that would end a cycle of one of the judges, v28, 'So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more. And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.' Now at this point you would expect the next situation of need to develop and God to raise up the next deliverer, but the consequences of Gideon's sin do not stop at his death they impact the next generation. What we will see here are more of the failing of the man who said he would not be king. V29-35, 'Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. ³⁰ Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. ³¹ And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. ³² And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. ³³ As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god. ³⁴ And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side, ³⁵ and they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.' Gideon like the ancient kings has a harem; Gideon takes a Canaanite concubine for himself and has a son by her; this son is given a name which means 'my father is king.' Gideon said one thing but did another. And despite being a man who was a one-time syncretist who mixed Baal worship with faith in YHWH who had been reformed from those beliefs and who had been taught through personal experience of the faithfulness and power of God on behalf of His people. Gideon does not drive Israel to worship the true God in the true way, but sets up an alternative way of worship and when he dies, we see a Baal based syncretistic religion arise. The memory of Israel is short and as soon as Gideon dies his family is no longer treated well.

What lesson do we learn from this section? We learn that pride comes before a fall, that success can blind us to our own sins and think that God is giving us permission to do things we ought not. We learn how easily we can advance our own personal agendas, and how nepotism can color our service of the Lord. We see that those who have served well and exercised great faith and not immune from future failure and must guard themselves and seek to finish the race well. We see how easy it is to say one thing while doing another. Gideon is a feast of lessons on sinfulness. But we must also see him as a foil against which we see our need for Christ. Where Gideon exhausted himself in pursuit of his own personal agendas, Christ poured Himself out unto death for us. Where Gideon is an imperfect judge who abuses power to over punish and seek his own purposes; Christ takes perfect justice upon Himself, the justice that we deserve; and He gives up power in order to save us. Where Gideon said he gave up being king to glorify God and then took the prerogatives of being king upon himself; Christ who was truly King truly gave us being king so that we would be a holy and royal priesthood. Where Gideon did not turn the hearts of God's people to the glory of God and lead them in true worship and obedience Christ turns our hearts to God modelling perfect worship and obedience. The legacy of Gideon after his death is one of the people of God turning from God to another, the legacy of Christ's life and death is to turn millions to the worship of God.