

Judges 8:1-35

Aftermath of Gideon's Victory

In the blessing of the tribes first by Jacob and later by Moses, we saw how each tribe of Israel had its own calling, mission and traits. The first divisions occurred with Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh settling on the east side of the Jordan. At the same time they are all shown united under Joshua in conquering the Promised Land.

But rivalry and jealousy between the 12 tribes is pictured more and more in the Book of Judges, and it would eventually result in a civil war between Benjamin and the other tribes (**Judges 20**). These divisions would continue until Saul and later King David could unify the people.

The lesson for us is a warning against these kinds of divisions. Sometimes these are caused by idolatry or heresy. Others by greed, jealousy or rash anger.

In this chapter, the tribe of Ephraim had just chased down and killed two Midianite princes - Oreb and Zeeb (**Judges 7:24-25**).

Diplomacy Defuses a Problem

Judges 8:1 - "And the men of Ephraim said unto him, Why hast thou served us thus, that thou calledst us not, when thou wentest to fight with the Midianites? And they did chide with him sharply."

or "strongly reproaching him, and almost treating him with violence."

They are really upset, but why?

When Joseph brought his sons to Jacob for a blessing, Jacob preferred the younger brother Ephraim over the elder Manasseh (**Genesis 48:13-19**). This may have produced some estrangement between the two tribes. Gideon was from Manasseh. Joshua had been from Ephraim, and his grave was in their territory.

Ephraim was the most populous tribe and was prideful and almost arrogant in wanting a leadership position in Israel. They envied the glory that was surrounding Gideon with this victory. They were saying that since Manasseh and Ephraim were brothers, Gideon should have called them first, and possibly should have ceded leadership in this expedition to Ephraim. They were offended that Gideon did not consult them, nor ask their aid.

But this was no time to lecture them or even explain Gideon's call and mission from the Angel of the Lord. They all needed to quickly complete the "mopping up" operation part of their victory.

So Gideon in an act of self-denial, modesty and prudence compliments their

achievement and humbles himself in describing his own victory. He doesn't mention himself or his tribe of Manasseh, only his lowly family, the house of Abiezer. This seems to pacify their wounded pride for the moment.

- **Proverbs 15:1** - "A soft answer turneth away wrath."

- **Ecclesiastes 10:4** - "... yielding pacifieth great offences."

Judges 8:2-3 - "And he said unto them, What have I done now in comparison of you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer? God hath delivered into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb: and what was I able to do in comparison of you? Then their anger was abated toward him, when he had said that."

Targum - "Are not the weak of the house of Ephraim better than the strong of the house of Abiezer?"

Ephraim does the same thing later, venting anger at Jephthah:

- **Judges 12:1** - Then the men of Ephraim gathered together, crossed over toward Zaphon, and said to Jephthah, "Why did you cross over to fight against the people of Ammon, and did not call us to go with you? We will burn your house down on you with fire!"

That conflict doesn't end well for Ephraim.

Eventually, Ephraim's pridefulness will lead it to break away completely, culminating in the division of Solomon's kingdom into Israel under Jeroboam based in Ephraim's territory, and Judah under Rehoboam. The northern kingdom of Israel established its own rival worship centers at Dan and Bethel and a separate priesthood, including erecting a golden calf in each shrine. (See **1 Kings 13:1-14:18**)

Judges 8:4 - "And Gideon came to Jordan, and passed over, he, and the three hundred men that were with him, faint, yet pursuing them."

Gideon's supply lines were stretched and they lacked provisions to continue pursuit.

The Sin of Succoth

Judges 8:5 - "And he said unto the men of Succoth, Give, I pray you, loaves of bread unto the people that follow me; for they be faint, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of Midian."

Succoth (booth) is located on the east side of Jordan in the tribe of Gad, and named because that was where Jacob erected booths for his flocks on his return from Padanaram (**Genesis 33:17**).

The men of Succoth were Gadites - fellow Israelites. The Tribe of Gad were herders of cattle and earned a reputation as some of the fiercest warriors among the Israelites, renowned for bodily, as well as mental strength. Living on the frontier, the tribe was supposed to act as guards for the other tribes. But the Midianites had overrun them all.

Now the men of Succoth knew that if Gideon was not successful, they would be the first to feel the backlash when the Midianites returned. They wanted to remain neutral in some sense, so they responded with selfishness and ingratitude to Gideon's band, even though they were in the process of defeating their oppressors.

They wanted to hedge their bets.

Judges 8:6 - "And the princes of Succoth said, Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in thine hand, that we should give bread unto thine army?"

Rashi adds - "That you boast that you saved us from Midian?"

Gideon had been self-effacing when confronted by the Ephraimites' anger. But they had assisted greatly in the war effort. Now it was Gideon's turn to become angry, on behalf of his 300 men.

Judges 8:7 - "And Gideon said, Therefore when the LORD hath delivered Zebah and Zalmunna into mine hand, then I will tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers."

The sense is, either that he would scourge them with thorns and briers; or, as the Targum has it, thrust their flesh upon thorns; which Kimchi interprets of casting their naked bodies upon thorns and briers, and then treading on them with the feet; or draw a cart over them, as it was usual to do when grain was threshed out. In other words it was a harsh threshing floor which would separate the spiritual seed from the chaff.

Later it says "and with them he taught the men of Succoth." (**Judges 8:16**). Abarbinel thinks the word yada = "cause them to know" has the signification of mercy in it. They were fellow Israelites after all. This may have been chastisement only on the city elders alone, not a death sentence, in order to "teach them a lesson."

At the same time, this echoes the crucifixion, where even sins of betrayal and selfishness are atoned for by the crown of thorns piercing Christ's head. But more particularly, they represent those who "crucify the Son of God afresh."

- **Hebrews 6:4-6** - "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame."

These were Israelites, but they appeared to "fall away" from their unity with brother

Israelites and from God for selfish reasons, in effect oppressing Gideon's men while they were in a weakened and vulnerable situation. Since they were spiritually "crucifying the Son of God afresh," they received in reality the same punishment they were inflicting in type - the briars of Jesus' crown of thorns.

The Sin of Penuel

Judges 8:8-9 - "And he went up thence to Penuel, and spake unto them likewise: and the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered him. And he spake also unto the men of Penuel, saying, 'When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.'"

This was Peniel ("face of God"), where Jacob wrestled with the Angel of the Lord and had seen God "face to face" (**Genesis 31**). Perhaps they were too proud of their association with a sacred place of Israel's history, and too trusting in their strong tower.

The men of Penuel probably depended on their strong tower to protect them from Gideon. But he would "beat it down" (**Judges 8:17**). And they since they had fled to it for safety, they were killed when it fell.

It reminds us of the people in Jeremiah's day relying on their belief that God would never allow Jerusalem to fall.

- **Jeremiah 7:4-5** - "Thus says the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel: Correct your ways and deeds, and I will let you live in this place. Do not trust in deceptive words, chanting: 'This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'"

The lesson of the men of Penuel for us is to not rely on our past relationship with God or what we as a church have accomplished, or even the sacrifices we've made or good deeds performed.

My journalism teacher always told us, "You're only as good as your last story."

Today is the day of salvation! We have to walk in repentance, sensitive to the Spirit and looking for the needs of others.

- **2 Corinthians 6:1-2** - "We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain. (For he saith, I have heard thee in a time accepted, and in the day of salvation have I succoured thee: behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.)"

Depending on the past is like hoarding yesterday's manna - "it bred worms and stank" (**Exodus 16:20**).

Defeat of Zebah and Zalmunna

Judges 8:10-12 - "Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor, and their hosts with them, about fifteen thousand men, all that were left of all the hosts of the children of the east: for there fell an hundred and twenty thousand men that drew sword. And Gideon went up by the way of them that dwelt in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and smote the host: for the host was secure. And when Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued after them, and took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and discomfited all the host."

'Neither Give Place to the Devil'

Gideon's scrupulousness in not leaving any of the enemy to fight another day is a good lesson for us. In the same way, every Canaanite was supposed to be expelled from the Promised Land. All of Pharaoh's army was drowned in the Red Sea.

Spiritually we should not leave any bastion or hiding place for Satan to continue. We saw how Israel began to make deals with the Canaanites. With Gideon, the temptation was to enjoy his victory and let the rest of the Midianites flee.

But the Midianites had been completely defeated before and came back to oppress Israel a couple of generations later. Thanks to Gideon's zeal, the Midianites never troubled Israel again.

Our Old Man, Adam, if allowed to co-exist with Christ's life, will always return to sin, to rebellion and to oppression and persecution of that Christ-life within us. So, leave no sin unconfessed. Baptism leaves no part untouched by the cleansing waters. All of us must die. The Passover lamb is completely roasted, and flames reach every part. Give no "place" to the devil (**Ephesians 4:27**). "Place" = *topos* - territory, opportunity, portion

Gideon's pursuit of the Midianite remnants is a reflection of this truth.

Gideon as the Avenger/Kinsman

Judges 8:18-19 - "Then said he unto Zebah and Zalmunna, What manner of men were they whom ye slew at Tabor? And they answered, As thou art, so were they; each one resembled the children of a king. And he said, They were my brethren, even the sons of my mother: as the LORD liveth, if ye had saved them alive, I would not slay you."

Better, "Where are the men!" A cry, a taunt or an expression of grief.

Gideon is acting here as the "*goel*" or blood-avenger/redeemer of his brothers, whom they had killed at a previous time at Mount Tabor. The responsibility of the *goel* was to either avenge the murder of his kinsman or redeem (purchase back) a relative who had been sold into slavery.

Zebah and Zalmunna reply that Gideon's brothers were so awe inspiring in battle - like

kings - that they had to kill them in fear for their own lives.

Gideon was not obliged by the law of God to put them to death, nor by the law of nations. Since they had surrendered themselves, or were captured and made prisoners of war, they ought to have been spared.

But Gideon doesn't accept their explanation. Apparently they had murdered his brothers in an unrighteous and cruel manner. By the *jus talionis* they deserved death. He would have spared them as prisoners of war (**2 Kings 6:22**), but he must do his part as *goel* or avenger (**Numbers 35:12** - cities of refuge were a protection against this type of vengeance in Israel).

Jesus personified the *goel* as redeemer at the cross, redeeming us from slavery to sin and Satan. He will act as avenger at His final coming at the "great day of his wrath":

- **Revelation 6:9-10** - "And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"

Gideon tells his first-born son Jether to slay them, for the purpose of adding the disgrace of falling by the hand of a boy.

Judges 8:20-21 - "And he said unto Jether his firstborn, Up, and slay them. But the youth drew not his sword: for he feared, because he was yet a youth. Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, Rise thou, and fall upon us: for as the man is, so is his strength. And Gideon arose, and slew Zebah and Zalmunna, and took away the ornaments that were on their camels' necks."

- i.e. they wanted to be dispatched with sufficient strength so their death would be quick.

The Hebrew pronunciation of these Midianite names Zebah and Zalmunna is intended to convey contempt.

Zebah = "sacrifice, victim"

Zalmunna = "shade withheld" - More likely the name was *Şalm-na'*, which appears to contain the name of the god *Şalm*, who is mentioned in 5th-century B.C. Aramaic inscriptions. The Assyrian is *Şalmu*, i.e. 'the dark' (a name of the planet Saturn, identified with the god)

These defeated enemies of Israel reappear in **Psalm 83**, where they serve as examples of God's ultimate victory, along with Deborah and Barak's victory over Jabin and Sisera:

- **Psalm 83:9-13** - "Do unto them as unto the Midianites; as to Sisera, as to Jabin, at the brook of Kison: Which perished at Endor: they became as dung for the earth. Make their

nobles like Oreb, and like Zeeb: yea, all their princes as Zebah, and as Zalmunna: Who said, Let us take to ourselves the houses of God in possession. O my God, make them like a wheel; as the stubble before the wind."

Gideon's Temptation

Judges 8:22-23 - "Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian. And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you."

Gideon was a judge, and he was to have the usual leadership role and the responsibility of settling disputes and making decisions, under the greater authority of God himself. Israel's government was a theocracy. But this offer was for him to rule as king and found a dynasty. That honor of a dynasty was for the future, and reserved for the House of David and the Messiah.

"neither shall my son rule over you" - Abarbinel thinks he spake as a prophet, and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; for after his death neither Jether his eldest son, nor any of the rest of his legitimate sons, ruled over them; for they were all slain by Abimelech, the son of his concubine, who was made king.

The Idolatrous Ephod

Judges 8:24 - "And Gideon said unto them, I would desire a request of you, that ye would give me every man the earrings of his prey. (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)"

Judges 8:27 - "And Gideon made an ephod thereof, and put it in his city, even in Ophrah: and all Israel went thither a whoring after it: which thing became a snare unto Gideon, and to his house."

This was supposed to commemorate their great victory over the Midianites. But "all Israel" went a "whoring after it."

Possibly they, and Gideon too, began to see the victory as something *they* accomplished rather than a gift from the hand of God. Again, the judges reflect only some aspects of Jesus. They are always flawed and weak reflections of the Messiah as deliverer.

Why do things like this ephod and the brass serpent Moses held up in the wilderness become objects of idolatry?

- **2 Kings 18:4** - Hezekiah "removed the high places and broke the sacred pillars, cut down the wooden image and broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made; [for until those days the children of Israel burned incense to it], and called it Nehushtan ("piece of brass").

Good things can become idols. A moment of revelation in our lives (like Jacob at Peniel) or an incident of deliverance (like holding up the brass serpent) can become the focus, instead of seeing through all these to Jesus. Religious customs, traditions, or leaders can take on enormous importance until we can see them as just *Nehushtan* ("a piece of brass"). Then you can break it down into its parts and maybe it becomes something you can use rather than to worship, fear, serve or be in awe of.

Judges 8:28 - "Thus was Midian subdued before the children of Israel, so that they lifted up their heads no more. And the country was in quietness forty years in the days of Gideon."

"they lifted up their heads no more" - This was the final end of the Midianites as a threat to Israel.

Gideon left a seed of trouble after him - his son by a concubine, Abimelech.

Judges 8:31 - "And his concubine that was in Shechem, she also bare him a son, whose name he called Abimelech."

Backsliding to Baal

Judges 8:33-35 - "And it came to pass, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the children of Israel turned again, and went a whoring after Baalim, and made Baalberith their god. And the children of Israel remembered not the LORD their God, who had delivered them out of the hands of all their enemies on every side: Neither shewed they kindness to the house of Jerubbaal, namely, Gideon, according to all the goodness which he had shewed unto Israel.

Baal-berith = "lord of the covenant," also worshipped by the Philistines and the Shechemites.

Baal-berith also called "El-berith" was identical, according to the Rabbis, with Baal-zebub, "the ba'al of flies," the god of Ekron (II Kings i. 2). He was worshiped in the shape of a fly; and so addicted were the Jews to his cult (thus runs the tradition) that they would carry an image of him in their pockets, producing it, and kissing it from time to time. Baal-zebub is called Baal-berith because such Jews might be said to make a covenant (Hebr. "*Berit*") of devotion with the idol, being unwilling to part with it for a single moment (Shab. 83b; comp. also Sanh. 63b). According to another conception, Baal-berith was an obscene article of idolatrous worship, possibly a *simulacrum priapi* (Yer. Shab. ix. 11d; 'Ab. Zarah iii. 43a). This is evidently based on the later significance of the word "*berit*," meaning circumcision. - *Jewish Encyclopedia*