

BIBLE BRIEFING

“To the Victor Go the Spoiled”

JUDGES 8

Introduction

Victory can be hard to handle. Victory can reveal character flaws; victory can set you up for temptations. Gideon did not handle his victory over the Midianites very well. In a sense, victory was his defeat.

We put Gideon’s battle against the Midianites on pause. Here is what happened (picking up the story in verse nineteen of Chapter Seven):

Judges 7:19 So Gideon and the hundred men who *were* with him came to the outpost of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, just as they had posted the watch; and they blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers that *were* in their hands.

Judges 7:20 Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers - they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing - and they cried, “The sword of the LORD and of Gideon!”

Judges 7:21 And every man stood in his place all around the camp; and the whole army ran and cried out and fled.

Judges 7:22 When the three hundred blew the trumpets, the LORD set every man’s sword against his companion throughout the whole camp; and the army fled to Beth Acacia, toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel Meholah, by Tabbath.

The surviving Midianites fled; and Gideon pursued them. We pick up the pursuit:

Judges 7:23 And the men of Israel gathered together from Naphtali, Asher, and all Manasseh, and pursued the Midianites.

Judges 7:24 Then Gideon sent messengers throughout all the mountains of Ephraim, saying, “Come down against the Midianites, and seize from them the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan.” Then all the men of Ephraim gathered together and seized the watering places as far as Beth Barah and the Jordan.

Judges 7:25 And they captured two princes of the Midianites, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. They pursued Midian and brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon on the other side of the Jordan.

Gideon began with an all-volunteer army of 32,000 men. God told him to send home anyone who was afraid. That left him with only 10,000 men. God whittled it down farther – to 300 men. The odds were such that no one could deny it was the Lord who had given them the victory.

Now that the glory belonged to God alone, it was time to involve the remaining tribes of Israel in the mopping up. There was plenty for everyone to do.

People get their eyes off of God, and His glory, and on to themselves. By ‘people,’ I mean, first of all, the men of Ephraim:

Judges 8:1 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.

Wait a minute. The men of Ephraim could have taken on the Midianites any time. Now that God had raised-up Gideon, and empowered him, and given him a victory... Now that they had been blessed to sever the heads of their enemies... They complained Gideon had not had the courtesy to include them in the initial planning stage.

Well, ***there was no initial planning stage!*** There was just God’s leading. The real problem with Ephraim was that God didn’t use them the way He used Gideon.

They were disgruntled. Their disgruntled complaint represents a million complaints Christians have when they ought to be rejoicing.

Judges 8:2 So 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 vintage of Abiezer?* Judges 8:3 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.

Gideon had driven Oreb and Zeeb to the men of Ephraim; they had killed them. It was an important part of God’s strategy – that they be right where they were at just that right time.

There's a place for common courtesy. There's a place for thoughtfulness. But sometimes, without any malice, you're just following God, and you don't cover all the touchy-feely bases that might wound someone with tender feelings.

Ronald Reagan is credited with saying, "There's no limit to what a man can accomplish if he doesn't care who gets the credit." So, too, there's no limit to what the Church can accomplish if we don't care who gets the credit – only that Jesus gets the glory.

Do what God sets before you. Don't second-guess His strategies by criticizing the way things were handled.

There was more agony ahead. From the disgruntlers, Gideon went to the discouragers:

Judges 8:4 When Gideon came to the Jordan, he and the three hundred men who were with him crossed over, exhausted but still in pursuit.

Judges 8:5 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."

Judges 8:6 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?"

These guys were not asked to fight – only to support the troops. They refused. They did not want to take sides until they knew the outcome of the battle.

You're never ready for discouragement to come from within your own ranks. It hurts so bad when your Christian brothers and sisters withhold their support.

Judges 8:7 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!"

The punishment was to lie face down on the ground while being beaten with thorns and briers. Then you'd be drug through the dirt until near death.

This is how you feel... But you can't say this; and you sure can't do this! Instead you learn to be content with the Lord's encouragement.

Discouragement is contagious:

Judges 8:8 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.

Judges 8:9 So he also spoke to the men of Penuel, saying, "When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!"

Notice that Gideon and his army received no supplies from these folks. By the time they reach their destination, they will have marched 150 miles, having exerted themselves in battle, with no sleep.

They went forward in the Lord's strength. Resources and supplies are wonderful, **but not always necessary**.

Judges 8:10 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.

Judges 8:11 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.

Judges 8:12 When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them; and he took the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army.

Gideon still only had 300 men; they were still totally outnumbered. Numbers no longer meant anything. It was all God's empowering.

Why do we get so wrapped-up in numbers as the sign of success and blessing? I can see it in the world of business, commerce, sports, and entertainment. *But never in the Church!*

Judges 8:13 Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from battle, from the Ascent of Heres.

Judges 8:14 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.

Judges 8:15 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?'"

Judges 8:16 And he took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and with them he taunted the men of Succoth.

Judges 8:17 Then he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

Some see this as a necessary discipline – to preserve a sense of God’s glory in the victory.

God would not have wanted His Judge to deliver Israel only to have them killed by a fellow Israelite. I’m going to suggest that Gideon was acting on his own – without direction from God.

Just because God is giving the victory, it doesn’t mean everything you do is being blessed.

Judges 8:18 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.”

Judges 8:19 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.”

Judges 8:20 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.

Judges 8:21 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.

Zebah and Zalmunna remind me of Klingon’s. They want to die honorably – killed as they deserve, by the victor.

Gideon wants to give his kid a taste of battle... But he’s sort of a sissy. Think about it: Gideon had recently been hiding in a winepress, threshing grain. God had transformed him into a mighty man of valor. The kid needed the Holy Spirit – *not* a hands-on in executing your enemies.

Get on board with emphasizing spiritual things to your kids.

Judges 8:22 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.”

Judges 8:23 But Gideon said to them, “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you.”

Why can’t we recognize God working through someone without putting them up on a pedestal?

For his part, Gideon refused to be made king. God never intended Israel to have a king. He wanted to rule over them. Later, they would demand a king; and God would concede. But the king they chose for themselves would be Saul. Their choice would be based only on outward appearances.

As Christians, we sometimes want to appear like the world. We want to appear just as successful; just as intellectual; just as wealthy; just as... Whatever. It can be embarrassing when you don't have the trappings and trimmings. For many years, as we met at the 'Y,' we were held in suspicion – even by other Christians.

In a way, I wish we could end the story of Gideon right here – at his high point. We can't. The Bible is too honest; it's too real. Gideon refused to be the king; but he went on to act like one. It is easy to appear humble; it can be hard to be humble.

Judges 8:24 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 golden earrings, because they *were* Ishmaelites.

Bling was big in their culture! Earlier you saw crescent ornaments on the necks of the [camels of Zebah and Zalmunna](#). Now you learn that it was customary for Midianite men to wear earrings. (The Midianites were from Ishmael; hence, also called Ishmaelites. It's like the Italians being called Europeans).

Judges 8:25 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.

Judges 8:26 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.

Pretty hefty earrings: The gold alone weighed about 50 pounds!

Listen: Earrings... Piercings... Tattoo's... Brandings... There are a lot of things we could argue about. Let's not.

Judges 8:27 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.

The spoil elevated Gideon above the people he was called upon to lead. Not a good idea. A general rule of thumb is that Christian leaders who make a living from the gifts of God's people should live at the level of their own people - not below or above.

An **ephod** was a vest-piece of clothing worn by a priest. Gideon set up a place of worship. God had ordained worship at Shiloh, *not* in **Ophrah**. This was idolatry; and it led to idolatrous practices. **Played the harlot** might simply mean that, by worshipping in the wrong place, the Israelites were encouraged to worship as they pleased – rather than according to God's Word. It might also mean they adopted pagan practices – often involving sexual immorality.

Jon Courson points out that God often begins with a **man**, whose **ministry** leads to a **movement**. So far, so good. But if the movement becomes a **monument**, it will eventually become a **mausoleum**. Man, ministry, movement, monument, mausoleum. It has sadly been repeated throughout Church history.

Judges 8:28 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.

God was merciful to Israel. Even though Gideon was faltering as their Judge, God gave them peace.

We think God must act and react according to our timetable. We see someone who is prospering, and we think God is blessing him. We see someone in adversity, and think God is condemning him. God has His own timing that is not bound by our time frames.

Gideon's downward spiral continues:

Judges 8:29 Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and dwelt in his own house.

Jerubbaal is another name for Gideon. Back in Chapter Six, when he had torn down the altar of Baal, he had been nicknamed **Jerubbal** – from words meaning *contend* and Baal, the pagan god.

Too bad Gideon was not living up to his previous reputation.

Judges 8:30 Gideon had seventy sons who were his own offspring, for he had many wives.

Judges 8:31 And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, whose name he called Abimelech.

Judges 8:32 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.

The Old Testament never directly condemns polygamy. The New Testament does in Matthew 19:4-6 and First Timothy 3:2). The Old Testament does show the bitter fruit of it. We never find a healthy family life where Old Testament men take more than one wife.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee:

God did not create several Eves for Adam. He created only one. God did not remove all of Adam's ribs. God took out only one rib.

The name **Abimelech** means *My father, a king*; Gideon intended that his son would take a leadership role in Israel after Gideon himself was gone.

It's interesting that **Abimelech** was born to a concubine outside of Israel. In Israel, Gideon refused to be called king. Outside of Israel, he wanted pagans to think of him as Israel's king. What he *renounced* among God's people was *pronounced* among the heathen. He was leading a dual life.

Through his career, we see Gideon as a man who slipped from great heights of faith, to a place of outright apostasy and rebellion against God. No Judge left Israel in worse condition than Gideon.

It isn't enough for us to begin well with God; we must continue on throughout our whole Christian life. Gideon, in his later years, could only look back on his great deeds for God, for they were all in the past.

Judges 8:33 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.

Judges 8:34 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;

Judges 8:35 nor did they show kindness to the house of Jerubbaal (Gideon) in accordance with the good he had done for Israel.

Conclusion

You can put a positive spin on some of these episodes in Gideon's life. But all five confrontations in this chapter – with Ephraim, Succoth, Penuel, Zebah and Zalmunna, and then Israel – reveal deep character flaws.

It points to something important: There is a work God wants to do *through* you... And, more importantly, there is a work God wants to do *in* you.

God did a great work through Gideon; but Gideon did not allow God to do much of a work in him.