

A HERO WILL RISE

The Book of Judges

Text

Judges 8:1-21

Topic

Gideon reveals that the two kings he has defeated and captured are the men who murdered his brothers

Title

"Hello. My Name is Gideon. You Killed My Brothers. Prepare to Die"

Introduction

What must have it been like to look up and see Hannibal marching an army of war elephants over the Pyrenees and the Alps into Italy?

Peter Jackson captured that kind of astonishment in *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*. Just when King Theoden of Rohan thought that his horsemen had turned the tide of the battle, horns were blown, and you saw the approach of what the Hobbits call oliphants. They came galloping along, with warriors riding atop them, crushing everything beneath.

The expression on Theoden's face captured all the intensity of the moment.

Hannibal Barca (not Lecter) is considered one of the greatest military commanders in history. One strategist pointed out that Hannibal never lost a significant battle during his entire time in Italy.

But as the years passed he found himself steadily further south, until he occupied just the toe of the Italian boot, leaving finally in 203BC to preside over his own country's surrender.

The writer of the article said, "Thus ended history's most flagrant example of winning all the battles but losing the war."

As we pick-up our study in the Book of Judges, Gideon and his army of three hundred men is pursuing a retreating army of Midianites. He seems to win all the battles, and to win the war, as the Midianite threat is overcome.

Trouble is, the skirmishes with the Midianites are not the only 'battles' that are waged in this account. Fellow Israelites decry and defy Gideon. The weapons they raise against him are not swords and spears; it's more psychological, we might say.

Gideon seems to lose those internal battles. Furthermore, when we get to the conclusion of his time of judging Israel, we'll see that, although he won the war against Midian, he loses the bigger, spiritual war. We'll read of him, "Gideon made... 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" (8:27).

As Christians, we are assured that the war is already won. Jesus has defeated sin and death and Hell.

We can read about the final days of mankind's rebellion against God and see it crushed, first temporarily at the Second Coming of Jesus, and then permanently after His one-thousand year reign over the earth.

The final incarceration of Satan and the fallen angels, along with all Christ-rejectors, is described for us in awful detail.

The work He has begun in us will most certainly be completed. We will be presented faultless and blameless before the throne of God. Our mansions in the golden city, New Jerusalem, will be waiting for us to inhabit for all eternity in perfect fellowship with God and one another.

We are in the odd situation, however, of being able to lose battles even though we've won the war.

Do you ever sin? Sure you do. The apostle John points out that "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (First John 1:8).

Jesus conquered sin at the Cross, and by His resurrection. We are crucified with Jesus; we are raised with Jesus. But we can still yield to our flesh, rather than to God, and sin - losing the battle even though the war is won.

I want to win the battles, not just content myself that the war has been decided. So do you. Let's keep that in mind as we work through our verses.

I'll organize my thoughts around two observations: #1 Your Battles Are Winnable, or #2 Your Battles Are Sin-Able.

#1 Your Battles Are Winnable

(v1-12)

Gideon was assured of victory in the war against Midian. A chapter earlier, God promised him, "By the three hundred men... I will save you, and deliver the Midianites into your hand" (7:7).

Along his way to victory, Gideon fought a few battles against his own countrymen. Not with swords, but with words. He seems to have won the first, but lost the rest.

They were all winnable, spiritually speaking.

Jdg 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.

God had given, and was still giving, Gideon a great victory that extended to all of the tribes. Instead of rejoicing, the men of Ephraim rebuked Gideon because they had not been prominent in the battle.

A little background on the Ephraimites:

- Jacob, when blessing the sons of Joseph, set Ephraim before Manasseh.
- Moses, in his last blessing, spoken of the ten thousands of Ephraim and only of the thousands of Manasseh.
- Joshua was of the tribe of Ephraim.
- The tabernacle for a long time was placed in Shiloh which belonged to the tribe of Ephraim.
- And, for a long period, their numbers very great so as to justify their being regarded as a leading tribe.

Ephraim was used to being prominent, to feeling first in line. Now feeling slighted, the men of Ephraim revealed what was truly in their hearts: pride and envy.

When you get overlooked in the church; or don't receive recognition; are you bitter that you have been overlooked, or treated less honorably, than you feel you deserve?

It may be that the Lord wants to show you what is in your heart. It's far more important to your spiritual life that you weed out pride and envy, than you receive some temporary honor or recognition.

Gideon only did what the Lord told him to do. Thus the Ephraimites were not rebuking Gideon, but they were rebuking God.

When I am envious toward another or others, I am rebuking God, disagreeing with Him. I am revealing that I dislike His plans. That should worry me.

In the midst of the war he was told was won, Gideon found himself in a battle against his own countrymen. It always hurts when the conflict is internal, when it's in-house; but it is to be expected, seeing we are far from being finished.

Bumper sticker theology tells us, "Be patient; God's Not Finished With Me Yet." Or, "I'm Not Perfect - Just Forgiven."

How would Gideon handle this rebuke?

Jdg 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?*

Jdg 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 threw out an illustration from the vineyard, comparing his work as preliminary, and that of the Ephraimites as more crucial. He said that Ephraim's accomplishment of killing the two Midianite princes, Oreb and Zeeb, exceeded what he and his men had done.

Gideon and his men destroyed the rank and file of the enemy, while they had slain two leading generals, and doubtless, in doing so, had made a great slaughter of their followers.

The first slaughter commenced by Gideon and his men was the vintage, and the smiting down of many afterwards by the Ephraimites, was the gleanings.

It's undeniable that Gideon humbled himself, sought peace rather than to incite more conflict, and used a soft answer to defuse anger. He allowed the men of Ephraim to claim honor.

I have a hard time with this; and that's probably the point. The Ephraimites were clearly wrong, yet Gideon was conciliatory.

You can say the men of Ephraim were wrong; that they were in sin; that they needed to be rebuked. Maybe; but Gideon took the high ground, looking ahead to the greater victory that God was giving him.

He refused to fight his own countrymen when there was a greater enemy.

Dwell on this attitude in Gideon for a moment, because it's not going to last. Gideon is going to face a few more such battles, and he's going to lose them.

Jdg 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.

Another theme that runs through these verses is *perseverance*. Although victory had been assured, Gideon and his men had to pursue it, and they had to persevere.

In a passage that might allude to, and apply, this account in Judges, the apostle Paul described us, saying,

2Co 4:8 We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; *we are* perplexed, but not in despair;
2Co 4:9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed..

It's a poetic description of spiritual perseverance. You can be exhausted, ready to faint, while simultaneously be pressing hard after victory.

I'm tired of the Energizer bunny, but that's the idea. Except our "battery" is God the Holy Spirit. We just keep going forward, empowered by the inexhaustible Holy Spirit, trusting in our certain victory.

Jdg 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."

Jdg 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?"

Gideon did not have Zebah and Zalmunna in custody. The men of Succoth lacked faith in God to believe Gideon would prevail as promised. They thought the Midianites might mount a last stand and overcome Gideon. They wanted to remain neutral.

You can't be Switzerland when it comes to Jesus. If you're not for Him, you're against Him. You can't serve God and this world.

Miracles are great, but they mostly seem to harden unbelief. Gideon and his three-hundred man unarmed, unmounted army had routed over a hundred thousand heavily armed troops, who also had a multitude of camels to ride into battle as war machines.

It was unconvincing to the men of Succoth.

If you think Gideon is going to respond with another soft answer... Think again.

Jdg 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!"

OK, that's different. Sure, these guys were wrong; but where was the Gideon of a few moments ago?

Certainly Gideon's physical exhaustion was a factor. But it was no excuse. We just read, from the apostle Paul, how we are to persevere.

The weaker we are, physically, the stronger we can be seen to be, spiritually. We can do all things through Christ Who strengthens us.

Jdg 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.

Battle number three along the path to the winning of the war. Again it is fought against Gideon's own countrymen.

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

The "tower" might have been a fortress that the people of Penuel could retreat to in order to be kept safe. Gideon continued to be in a foul mood about the lack of support he was receiving.

Remember, Gideon was assured of victory. He needed to keep focused on God's provision for it, not the lack of cooperation he was receiving.

We minimize God to the extent we maximize the support we think we lack.

Jdg 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.

These guys had suffered considerable losses, but they still outnumbered Gideon fifty to one. To see them retreating is to know that they were infected with the terror of the Lord.

Being outnumbered means nothing to us. We are always, as Christians, going to be hard pressed on every side, surrounded by fierce spiritual foes. It only serves to make our victory all the more glorious.

Jdg 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.

It seems Gideon took a route they didn't expect, snuck-up on them, and attacked again at night.

Jdg 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.

Victory had been assured by the Word of God. Gideon persevered and experienced the promised victory.

He won, and he lost, battles along the way to victory. We're going to look at the losses in greater detail in a moment, but not before we dwell on the fact that the battles were all winnable.

In the end, Gideon didn't need supplying from Succoth, or from Penuel. It was to their shame that they refused to help. There was no need for Gideon to go all vindictive on them.

Your battles are all winnable; they demand, however, that you walk in the Spirit, denying your flesh.

It's not an excuse, but I think sometimes we don't realize we are in a battle. The conflict we find ourselves in, at work or at home or in church, seems to be with others who we believe to in some way be wrong, or to be wronging us.

We need to be reminded that our battles aren't against those people, but against the spiritual forces at work. The weapons of our warfare are things like humility and peace - not revenge and retaliation.

Let's be winners.

#2 Your Battles Are Sin-Able (v13-21)

I know; it's not a real word. It is only to emphasize that you and I are still able to sin.

One commentary I read said this:

Jesus sets us free from sin (John 8:31-38) so that we are able to not sin (John 5:14; 8:11; First John 2:1). We may sin (First John 1:9) and salvation does not take away the ability to sin (James 1:12-15) but as we walk in the light, the blood of Jesus continues to cleanse us from all sin (First John 1:7). The believer does not *have* to sin (First Corinthians 10:13). We are able to sin though we are not to sin (First John 2:1-2; 3:4-10).

Gideon put on quite a sin-exhibition in the aftermath of victory.

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

Jdg 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.

Jdg 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?' "

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

Knowing you'd want gory details, I did some research on this:

When captives were thus put to death, the briers and thorns were laid on their naked bodies, and then some heavy implements of husbandry were drawn over them, so crushing them to death. Or sometimes they were whipped, stroke on stroke, with thorns and prickly plants. The Chaldee version has it, "I will mangle your flesh on the thorns, and on the briers." It was an old punishment "to tie the naked body in a bundle of thorns and roll it on the ground."

Whether Gideon killed these seventy-seven elders, or only severely maimed them, I think we'd all agree that this was not from the Lord. This was all Gideon, all flesh.

Interesting choice of words - "he taught the men of Succoth." Gideon could have taught them something amazing about God's faithfulness, about His mercy and grace. Instead he schooled them on revenge and retaliation. It was a stain on what God was doing in Israel.

It's remarkable, is it not, that in the midst of great spiritual victory, so much flesh can be present.

Ah, that's not just true of Gideon. You and I stand in great victory - victory in Jesus, my Savior forever. Yet believers are capable of terrible sins.

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

No matter how the men of Penuel had treated Gideon, they did not deserve this. The Angel of the Lord had not raised-up Gideon to slay Israelites.

Jdg 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."
Jdg 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."

Do you try to guess what is going on in a movie? In the latest Pirates of the Caribbean movie, one of the characters is trying to find out who her father is. *I know.*

In some previous raid on Israel, Zebah and Zalmunna had murdered Gideon's brothers. If this were a movie, the tagline might be, "This time, it's personal." (*Jaws - The Revenge*).

(BTW - The expression "sons of my mother" indicates that Gideon's father had multiple wives).

I'm intrigued by what Gideon said. If we take him at his word, he would have let them live, except he felt a duty under the Law as the avenger of the blood of his brothers.

He killed or severely maimed seventy-seven Israelite elders; he killed the men of Penuel. All because they had slighted him.

But he hesitated to kill the enemies of God, desiring to show them mercy, even though they had murdered his brothers in cold blood.

It gets weirder:

Jdg 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.

It's not like it was dove hunting, or the boy's first deer. Twice the writer emphasized the word "youth" to indicate this was an improper request.

Gideon was not exactly father-of-the-year material. Is this really the take-away Gideon wanted for his son?

Jdg 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 wanted honorable deaths - to be killed by the conqueror, not a mere boy.

Gideon showed honor and respect to these vicious enemies. I'm not saying God would have condoned it, but if you're going to use "thorns of the wilderness," use them on these guys.

Gideon took souvenirs of his kill. They would be physical relics of his victory.

Too bad he would become a relic by not emphasizing the spiritual side of his victory. Think of it this way: When we first met Gideon, he was a timid young man, afraid to be used by God. The Lord came upon him like a garment, transforming Gideon into what He called "a mighty warrior." But Gideon settled in to the physical, fleshly dimension of the victory, and will end up finishing poorly.

These camel ornaments represent his efforts of snatching defeat out of the victory he was promised.

You can call them battles, or circumstances, or situations, or trials, or testings. As you walk in the victory that is yours in Jesus, you'll encounter Ephraimites, and people from Succoth and Penuel.

Every battle, against every foe, is winnable, because you are permanently indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and you can be constantly infilled by Him.

We've won, in the end. Let's win along the way, and bring others with us to Jesus.