

Week 9 - Gideon's Decline - Judges 8:1-32

Scripture Reading: James 2:14-26

Introduction

During the War of 1812, control of Lake Erie was vital to the supply of British forces stationed along the Detroit River. And from the beginning of the war, the British dominated Lake Erie, but in the spring of 1813 Oliver Hazard Perry, commander of the American naval forces on the lake arrived to challenge the British.

After a brutal battle in which Perry's flagship was heavily damaged and 80% of his crew were casualties, his forces were able to defeat the British causing Perry to send what has become a famous dispatch to Major General William Harrison. The dispatch began: "We have met the enemy and they are ours."

In 1970, cartoonist Walt Kelly - the creator of the comic strip Pogo - parodied Perry's dispatch for an Earth Day poster in which he perfectly summarized mankind's tendency to be the creators of our own problems.

The poster shows a dejected Pogo looking at a garbage-strewn landscape and declaring: "We have met the enemy and he is us."

It seems that we are often our own worst enemy - we just can't seem to get out of our own way when it comes to godliness.

When we first met Gideon two weeks ago, we were confronted by a timid, defeated man doing what he could to survive. And over the past two weeks we saw him repeatedly exhibit distrust of God and reluctance to act as he repeatedly put God to the test to gain reassurance that God would do what God had said he would do.

We saw how God was gracious toward Gideon in allowing himself to be manipulated and put to the test as he granted all of Gideon's requests and repeatedly reassured him.

God even went so far as to provide for Gideon before he asked in the case of the Midianite sentry's dream.

And we saw how Gideon, in spite of his reluctance and fear, worshipped God and put his trust in God into action each time once he had been reassured - which is commendable.

After all, courage isn't the absence of fear but acting in spite of fear and obedience might just be all the more praiseworthy if it's obedience in spite of doubt.

But at the end of chapter 7 we saw a change begin in Gideon as he seemed to forget God and act on his own initiative and in his own strength.

Sadly, things only get worse in Judges 8 as Gideon faces new challenges and, except for the first one, they are challenges that he handles badly.

Previously, I shared with you how Gideon is the pivotal major judge in the book of Judges.

And in the account of Gideon we see a stark change that will prevail for the remainder of the book.

God's presence along with his power is the emphasis of the first half of the Gideon narrative just as they are for the first half of the book of Judges itself.

But in the last part of the Gideon cycle what becomes predominant is God's absence and that will prove to be the theme for the remainder of the book as well.

We will also see the orientation of the book change from an outward focus where the conflicts are external to an inward focus where the conflicts are within the family of Israel.

But the most obvious change we encounter as we begin reading chapter 8 is the change that has come over Gideon.

Whereas he was fearful and reluctant in the extreme in chapters 6-8, he is portrayed as exceedingly confident and even ruthless in chapter 8 - and Gideon's worst enemy will be the man looking back at him from the mirror.

The first thing we encounter in chapter 8 comes as a bit of a surprise after the rousing victory over Midian - Ephraim is mad at Gideon and they confront him angrily

I. Ephraim's hostility

Ephraim's hostility is surprising given their eager participation in running down the two Midianite commanders and taking control of key territory that we read about in Judges 7:24-25

The fact that they are now complaining after playing such a significant role in the victory over the Midianite forces is puzzling at first but the reason becomes clearer as we reflect on the passage

They are bent out of shape because Gideon either didn't call them out to fight alongside Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali or instead of them

Simply put, Ephraim's feelings were hurt and their pride was wounded

Ephraim had the luxury of a central position among the tribes of Israel and had been shielded from many of the invasions from Israel's hostile neighbors so they had experienced more freedom and power than their brethren

They had helped out with Ehud and Barak when they were delivering Israel so they felt snubbed and were insulted when Gideon failed to call on them earlier

Actually, the verbiage used to relate their confrontation with Gideon - in which they "accused him fiercely" in asking "What is this you have done to us?" - seems to indicate they felt more than snubbed

They angrily accused Gideon of taking deliberate action against them

We aren't told why Gideon didn't call on Ephraim when he sent for troops so that will have to remain a mystery

But the fact is that Ephraim interpreted it as being malicious and they were ticked off about it

It's unwise to become angry quickly and to register every negative thing that happens as a deliberate, calculated wrong against us

Solomon penned a warning against easy anger in **Ecclesiastes 7:9** saying that "*anger lodges in the heart of fools*"

And **Proverbs 15:18** tells us that "*A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger quiets contention*"

As we have seen in God's dealings with Gideon, God is slow to anger and so should we be but, in this, we often prove to be our own worst enemy

Gideon, however, shows remarkable restraint and a good deal of diplomacy in this situation

And he gives us a textbook example of **Proverbs 15:1** - *A soft answer turns away wrath*

Gideon does three things that serve to mollify Ephraim:

He minimizes his personal role in comparison to theirs, he flatters them with a proverb, and he shows them how God has given them the real prize in allowing them to take the Midianite commanders

The Ephraimites were pacified by Gideon's supreme skill as a diplomat and the tempest passed

But something subtle but significant is revealed about Gideon as we note that all of his arguments were psychological and not theological as he didn't explain being directed by God and God's desire to overthrow Midian with a small force

Again, it's as if Gideon has forgotten that God was a part of the picture and the one truly responsible for the victory

The next section of the narrative seems to flow naturally from Judges 7:22-23 where the text relates how Gideon called out the previously dismissed troops to hunt down the fleeing Midianite remnant and to block their escape

And the account that picks up in 8:4 parallels the account in chapter 7 but with some striking differences

God isn't involved in the telling of this phase of the plot at all - God has gone silent and, except for Gideon's glib mention of him that we will look at in a bit, God's name is absent along with his activity

Also, Gideon has undergone a radical transformation as he has turned into a brutal aggressor

We saw Gideon mature from being fearful and reluctant as he became a resolute agent of God willing to take on the vast Midianite army with 300 men armed only with trumpets, torches, jars, and voices

We even got to see Gideon as a sensitive diplomat as he skillfully dealt with Ephraim

And we see him in verse 4 [**Judges 8:4**] as a dogged pursuer physically exhausted but determined to finish the fight

But we are going to see something else emerge in the verses that follow - we are going to see Gideon's harshness

II. Gideon's harshness

But the most shocking thing to be revealed is that Gideon moves from being harsh with Midian to being harsh with his own people

Looking down to verse 10 [**Judges 8:10**] we see Gideon and his 300 men are, having dispatched 120,000 of the enemy are pursuing two Midianite commanders who are still leading 15,000 troops

Succoth was a Jewish village or city that was some 40 miles and across the Jordan from the hill of Moreh where the main battle had been engaged

But Gideon and his men are exhausted from the battle and the subsequent chase so Gideon made what appears to be a reasonable request for refreshment from their fellow Jews living in Succoth

As the commander of a group of soldiers passing through on official business, Gideon could have likely confiscated whatever he needed but it appears Gideon was still acting diplomatically at this point by explaining and asking

Surprisingly, the officials of Succoth rejected Gideon's request quite bluntly by basically asking why they should help him since Gideon and his men hadn't yet succeeded in their quest

Either they hadn't heard about the 120,000 casualties Gideon and his men had left in their wake without losing a man themselves or they didn't care since the job wasn't yet done and two commanders with troops were still free

But, for some reason, they soundly rejected Gideon's request for sustenance for his troops

In mild defense of the officials of Succoth, they may well have been hesitant to aid Gideon's forces out of fear of the Midianites should Gideon fail in his quest to put an end to them - they could regroup and return to punish them

Whatever their reason, the people of Succoth weren't responsive to Gideon's request and when we compare their response to that of those who answered Gideon's earlier call to arms, we have to wonder if their rejection might reflect the fact that Gideon is no longer clothed by the Holy Spirit - it's conjecture but it's also possible

But upon hearing their impertinent response, Gideon throws diplomacy out the window and threatens to thrash them with briars and thorns when he returns victorious

And he moves on to the city of Penuel with the same request and the same response and a similar threat of retaliation - this time that he would tear down their defensive tower on his return

Verses 10-12 contain the account of Gideon's further pursuit and capture of the two commanders which threw the Midianite forces into a panic leading to him securing victory over them

And, beginning in verse 13, we see Gideon was a man of his word as he returned with the Midianite commanders in tow to carry out his vengeful punishments

He seized a young man of Succoth along the road and forced him to write down the names of the town officials and elders who totaled 77 men who he assembled before him when he arrived

And whereas our ESV Bible says he “taught them a lesson” what he did was thresh them with switches made of desert thorns and briars

I’ll let you decide if Gideon’s punishment of the officials and elders was warranted and just

After all, the time of the Judges wasn’t like today - they were in the midst of the Iron Age which was a rather dark and brutal time and the officials of Succoth had, in effect, aided the enemy by denying Gideon’s request

Without a doubt, the form of punishment Gideon inflicted was harsh - Plato described it in his *Republic* as a punishment reserved for the worst offenders

Then Gideon moved on to Penuel where he carried out his threat to tear down their tower but then Gideon went even further as he killed the men of the city - most likely that means he killed the officials of Penuel

Justified or not, the picture of Gideon here isn’t pretty

These were his fellow Israelites and not Canaanites and Gideon is portrayed as a general who is out of control and not bound by rules of civility and who shows no loyalty to his own people - let alone mercy and compassion

If the people of Succoth and Penuel acted as they did out of fear I find Gideon’s behavior to be all the more egregious when we remember how God treated Gideon in his moments of weakness and doubt

I don’t want to be too harsh with Gideon because he suffers no rebuke at all in the pages of God’s Word for these actions - they are simply recorded

But his behavior reminds me of Jesus’ story about the servant who was forgiven an enormous debt being harsh with a friend who owed him a small one and I find it distasteful as it contains, at best, equal measures of revenge and mercy

We come next to Gideon’s handling of the two Midianite commanders and while it goes about the way we would expect it to go, the account does contain an element of surprise

Gideon begins by questioning the two men about some men they had killed - which seems quite odd and something of a taunt as if they could undo the damage they had inflicted and be spared

Again, this exposes a unpleasant side of Gideon

We see the commanders respond in a flattering way that also contains a subtle put-down as they simultaneously speak of the regal bearing of the men, and Gideon, while at the same time calling them “sons of a king”

And, of course, a son of a king is always inferior to the king so their words carried a double meaning

However, what is surprising is that we discover that the Midianites had previously killed Gideon’s brothers - his full brothers from the same mother - that fact might well have accounted for Gideon’s fear of the Midianites

But now that the two commanders are captive and powerless, Gideon gives them a death sentence and seeks to humiliate them by having a boy, his firstborn son, kill them

The young man is afraid to kill them, however, and the commanders called upon Gideon to do his own dirty work and make their deaths more honorable - a task that Gideon carries out with dispatch

So once more, while we must conclude that Gideon dispensed justice here, we can’t help but see that it’s tainted by blood vengeance and wonder which carried more weight with Gideon - God’s justice or his own vengeance

And so the Midianite crisis is put to an end but we are left with a nasty taste in our mouths by the way Gideon has turned out - he is not exactly the attractive hero we would have preferred

But that’s only our reaction reading this through modern eyes and it seems that Gideon’s countrymen were quite impressed with him and his achievements

They responded to his resolution of the Midianite occupation by offering dynastic reign over them to him and his descendants

Surprisingly, there isn't even a hint of concern about the propriety of offering hereditary rule to Gideon and his heirs. There is no indication that God has chosen Gideon to be king or that the Israelites were even concerned about that little detail.

Perhaps they were encouraged to make the offer due to the excitement of victory and the fact that Gideon claimed the crescent ornaments from the Midianite camels for himself - after all, they were the ornaments of rulers.

And while Gideon appears to piously refuse their offer we are going to see that his "rejection" wasn't really that at all. Gideon actually displays a large amount of hubris, or excessive pride and self-confidence that doesn't match his words.

III. Gideon's hubris

When we read verse 23 [**Judges 8:23**], we see Gideon verbally reject the offer of kingship and his rejection looks to be straightforward and correct as he asserts:

I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you.

On the surface, Gideon's rejection looks great but we can't help but note what he doesn't say as well as what he does.

Notice that he didn't correct the statement that he had secured the victory and give the glory to God as he had when he was confronted by the Ephraimites - it seems that now he is prepared to take credit for the victory.

And he merely expressed what amounted to a weak cliché about God being ruler over Israel.

But what speaks even louder than his words - both spoken and unspoken - are his actions.

Consider Gideon's actions thus far in this chapter:

He has been very harsh in his treatment of his countrymen.

He has allowed his actions to be driven more by his personal agenda than God's or even Israel's.

He has treated his brothers' deaths as if they were royal assassinations giving him the royal right of vengeance.

And he has claimed for himself the symbols of royal authority from the enemy.

Do those not sound like the actions of someone who sees himself as a ruler?

Now, in verse 24 which comes immediately on the heels of his verbal refusal [**Judges 8:24**] we see him request tribute from the spoil of his men.

That is nothing more than a request of submission and the amount of gold that he receives when they willingly comply amounts to a royal treasure of roughly 42.5 pounds of gold.

Just to put that into perspective a bit, that would come to almost 1.25 million dollars at today's gold prices.

And that doesn't include the gold crescent ornaments that Gideon had already claimed for himself along with their royal garments and jewelry.

Even the name he gave to his son in verse 31 [**Judges 8:31**] gives him away as Abimelech means "my father is king."

Gideon's words may have said "no" but every one of his actions said that he already saw himself as Israel's king.

But what Gideon did next was even more egregious - he took the gold and made it into an ephod that turned into an idol for Israel.

In all other Old Testament mentions of an ephod, it is a breastplate of gold that was part of the priestly garment.

You can find it described in detail in Exodus 28.

Scholars are divided as to whether this object, that our author calls an ephod, was like the other mentions of an ephod or whether it was something else.

So let's cut Gideon some slack here and say that he wasn't illicitly taking on the role of priesthood in Israel in addition to taking on the role of king

The sad reality is that, even if his motives were completely pure, the result of Gideon's creation of this ephod and his erecting it in his hometown of Ophrah was devastating to the spiritual life of Israel

Because we read in verse 27 [**Judges 8:27b**] that

All Israel whored after it there and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family

Maybe Gideon didn't mean to make an idol

Maybe he only meant to erect a symbol to remind Israel of God's intervention on their behalf and God's rule over them

Or maybe he did seek to recreate the ephod of the priesthood that contained the stones used to determine God's will and Gideon wanted to be able to do the same so he could rule properly

But in making it and setting it up as he did, Gideon actually created a snare to himself and all Israel as he effectively led them back into idolatry

Some scholars go so far as to suggest that what our author calls an ephod was in reality part of a shrine Gideon erected to honor Baal

That would be the ultimate irony seeing as how Gideon had previously torn down the Baal shrine at God's command but it would explain the Israelites' ready response to it

Perhaps the lesson to be learned here is that good intentions are no substitute for obedience and Gideon erred again because he failed to consult the Lord

The author closes out the life of Gideon by announcing that Midian was subdued and Israel was able to raise their heads once more and that they enjoyed peace for 40 years while Gideon lived

And after a brief recitation of Gideon's prosperous and royal life after Midian, we read that Gideon died at a good old age and was buried in the tomb of his father, Joash

We'll end our study there today and pick up the account of Gideon's son, Abimelech in chapter 9 when I return three Sundays from now

Conclusion

It would be an understatement to say Gideon has proven to provide a mixed legacy

Over the past two weeks we've seen Gideon exhibit timidity and unbelief alongside worship and obedience

He has proven to be valiant in God's service once he was properly assured of God's presence and power but he has also shown himself to be prone to forget God once a crisis is past

Perhaps the most accurate assessment we can make concerning Gideon is that he started weakly, was strong in the middle, and ended badly

But God still used him in spite of his flaws

Not only that, God was gracious and patient with Gideon as he nurtured him every step of the way to achieve victory over Midian through him

In the Gideon account we've been shown a great deal about human nature that should serve as a cautionary tale for us

But we have also been shown a great deal about the nature of God that should give us confidence and hope

And, since God didn't see fit to hammer on Gideon, I suggest that we would be wise to do likewise opting instead to look at each facet of Gideon honestly and critically so as to learn from his strengths and weaknesses

Since this is a Sunday where we will be observing the ordinance of the Lord's Table, I want to touch on one more thing that we have seen begin in the book of Judges because it's a thing that will only continue to get worse

And that is the division in Israel that started to occur in the Gideon cycle

From this point on, we will see the cracks between the tribes and clans grow wider and wider

And there is nothing that our enemy, Satan, loves more than to see God's people divided and fighting with one another

When our unity is fractured and we are at one another, we cannot possibly fight effectively against him

So he will do everything he can to foment distrust and enmity among the people in the pews

It doesn't matter at all to Satan why we are divided - in the case of Ephraim it was there wounded pride and hurt feelings and the same is true in many churches today

In the case of Succoth and Penuel it was another cause but the result was the same - disunity

We talk often about the need to examine oneself before partaking of the elements of Communion and most of the time we have in mind doing business with the Lord over unrecognized or unconfessed and unrepented sin

But today I would like for you to think about unity in the church and speak to the Lord about that issue also

I think we do pretty well here at Brick for the most part but perhaps you know of something that I don't

Perhaps you are carrying a grudge or have something against a brother or sister that you know you should deal with

Let me encourage you to make amends sooner rather than later and deny the devil a foothold in our spiritual family

The Lord's Table is a time of remembrance but it is also a time for recommitment as we recall what the Lord has done for us

The Worship Team is going to come and, after I close in prayer, we will sing *They'll Know We Are Christians* as we prepare to participate in the Lord's Supper

Let's pray