

Dark Times. Broken People. FAITHFUL KING.

Week 5

Judges 7-8

Gideon rallied 32,000-foot soldiers to go against “the Midianites, the Amalekites and all the sons of the east” (Judges 7:12). While this seems like a large number, the Bible refers to the enemy “as numerous as locusts” (Judges 7:12).

I. Paralyzing Fear - Judges 7:1-15

Gideon was waiting on direction from the Lord. He was expecting to hear a brilliant military strategy that would allow his ill-equipped army to overwhelm Midianites who numbered about 135,000 men (see Judges 8:10) and untold camels, which “were without number, as numerous as the sand of the seashore” (Judges 7:12). The odds were four to one. The Lord did speak to Gideon, but he did not receive what he was expecting. The Lord told Gideon the size of his army was too great. Israel would be puffed up with pride and take credit for the victory.

The Lord said, “Now therefore come, proclaim in the hearing of the people, saying, ‘Whoever is afraid and trembling, let him return and depart from Mount Gilead’ ” (Judges 7:3). We can presume that, since fear is contagious, a frantic soldier could cause greater harm than good to his fellow comrades in arms (see Deuteronomy 20:1-8). For the good of the contingency, dismissing those who were gripped with fear at the prospect of facing combat, was a wise strategy. Gideon’s faith is growing as evidenced by the fact that he, being a man plagued with fear, did not lead the mass exodus himself! “So 22,000 people returned, but 10,000 remained” (Judges 7:3). Now the odds were fourteen to one.

Gideon’s courage was surely shaken as he watched two thirds of his army depart. We can only imagine his reaction when God told him that the number was still too high. God instructed him to take the remaining men to the spring where God would administer a test unbeknownst to the men. The water was in plain view of the Midianites so the men would naturally have their guard up as they drank. Three hundred men “who lapped [the water], putting their hand to their mouth” (Judges 7:6) were retained; the other men were dismissed. Now the odds were 450 to one! Apparently, the dismissed men did not return home, but remained in their encampment. It is unclear whether God was reducing the army to a crack commando team of 300 or if He chose the most unlikely candidates to battle alongside His reluctant leader. Gideon and his men had no other option than to depend totally on the Lord or perish. With such a small army under his command, we can assume Gideon had the chance to speak truth into the lives of his men and encourage them to take God at His Word. God had promised to deliver Israel from the Midianites. Their hope was in God alone. The “300 men took the people’s provisions and their trumpets into their hands” (Judges 7:8) and prepared for battle.

The same night the Lord said “Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hands” (Judges 7:9, underline mine). Gideon struggled to believe the Lord and was once again gripped with fear. We can

understand his reaction and even relate to his unbelief. Gideon, a farmer boy, was tasked with going against this formidable foe with 300 men in his rag-tag army. Graciously, the Lord offered to show Gideon how He was working behind the scenes, knowing this would bolster the courage of his reticent leader. God said, "Afterward your hands will be strengthened that you may go down against the camp" (Judges 7:11). Gideon and his servant, Purah, snuck into the enemies' camp and overheard two soldiers talking. One was describing his dream. The other exclaimed, "This is nothing less than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given Midian and all the camp into his hand." When Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, he bowed in worship" (Judges 7:14-15).

Gideon "returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise, for the Lord has given the camp of Midian into your hands" (Judges 7:15). Gideon's confession matched God's revelation. Fear in Gideon's heart had been overcome by faith, and he acted in obedience. May we walk in like manner! "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a strong mind" (2 Timothy 1:7, KJV).

II. Profound Faith - Judges 7:16-25

Gideon armed his men with trumpets, torches, and pitchers—a more unconventional military strategy cannot be imagined. It is very reminiscent of the battle of Jericho. Perhaps Gideon recalled this historical account of God's deliverance to strengthen his faith. His 300 fighting men were divided into three companies and positioned on the outskirts of the enemies' camp. On Gideon's signal the men blew their trumpets, smashed the jars, and shouted. "When they blew 300 trumpets, the Lord set the sword of one against another even throughout the whole army" (Judges 7:22). Each man stood in his place blowing his trumpet, waving his light aloft, and shouting the cry of victory as the Lord fought on their behalf.

In ordinary battle formation, only leaders gave signals with ram's horns, a system that avoided confusion. One ram's horn was used to gather Gideon's army (Judges 6:34); seven were used to conquer Jericho (Joshua 6:6). The point is that three hundred would signify to the Midianites a huge attack force immediately upon them. Despite the battle cry (a sword for the Lord and for Gideon!), no swords were included in their "armament."

One commentary notes:

It is not difficult to imagine the confusion. Enemy soldiers were startled from the deepest sleep of the night. Suddenly from three sides three hundred trumpets sounded (each of which, they would expect, represented several hundred men), three hundred pitchers shattered in a sound like a thunderstorm, three hundred torches bathed the camp in just enough dim light so that, awake but bleary, everything around them looked like the enemy, and three hundred voices were screaming the Israelite battle cry as loudly as they could (W. Gary Phillips, *Holman Old Testament Commentary*, p. 114).

The enemy was routed and fled back toward their own territories. The men who had been dispatched to their encampment earlier joined in the fight and pursued them. Gideon invoked the help of the Ephraimites to cut

off the Midianite escape route across the Jordan River. They captured and executed two leaders of the Midianites. Our fearful leader has stepped into his role as a *valiant warrior* and led others to do the same. Profound faith in the Lord, combined with obedience to His Word, is contagious!

III. Faltering Finish - Judges 8:1-35

How I wish the story of Gideon ended with his radical victory of faith over fear. Regrettably, Gideon started well, but did not finish strong.

The Holman Old Testament Commentary explains:

This chapter records Gideon's reaction to five confrontations. The first time Gideon responds admirably but he quickly failed to maintain his walk of faith. In Galatians 3:3, Paul wrote, "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" Gideon fell victim to running well but failing to finish strong. Gideon appears in God's "hall of faith" recorded in Hebrews 11, but he failed to fully "run with endurance the race that is set before [him]" (Hebrews 12:1). The goal is to run well and finish strong. God recorded Gideon's victories and defeats as both a comfort and a caution to us. Paul wrote, "Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction" (1 Corinthians 10:11) (W. Gary Phillips, *Holman Old Testament Commentary*, p. 114).

A. The Devil After the Dove - Judges 8:1-3

There is a spiritual principle that has been dubbed "the devil after the dove." This refers to the extraordinary attack of the enemy that typically occurs right after a great spiritual victory. This truth is perhaps best displayed for us in the story of the temptation of Jesus after He had fasted for 40 days and nights (see Matthew 4:2ff). The Spirit had led Him into the wilderness where He was sequestered with His Father. At the conclusion of this time, Satan immediately tempted Him. A mountaintop experience with the Lord is often closely followed by an attack by the devil. It would appear that Gideon experienced this spiritual principle. Be forewarned. After every spiritual victory, be on guard against the enemy!

Following a great victory, Gideon was confronted by his fellow Israelites, the Ephraimites, who grumbled against his leadership "and they contended with him viciously" (Judges 8:2). While we don't know the reasoning behind this confrontation, we can assume it was motivated by personal jealousy and injured pride. They were the largest tribe, although none of them had initiated any attempt to rout the Midianites or volunteer to support Gideon's effort. And they missed out on sharing in the spoils of war, perhaps the single greatest motivator behind their complaint. At any rate, they felt Gideon had slighted them when he went to fight against Midian. Gideon graciously diffused the situation and "their anger toward him subsided" (Judges 8:3). Proverbs 15:1 says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." We would benefit from learning and implementing this truth!

B. The Leaders of Succoth - Judges 8:47; 13-16

A major blow had been struck against the Midianites, but the battle was far from over. Gideon and his troops crossed to the west side of the Jordan pursuing two Midianite kings. If Gideon and his army successfully captured or killed them, the enemy's power would be seriously crippled and eventually broken. He and his army were "weary yet pursuing" (Judges 8:4). When Gideon asked for provisions, the leaders of Succoth refused. Hospitality was one of the hallmarks of the Jewish culture, and custom demanded the Israelites meet the needs of strangers and relatives alike, making this denial even more offensive. The men of Succoth were skeptical of Gideon's ability to defeat the mega Midianite army, much less capture the two kings. They probably also feared reprisal from the Midianites if they aided and abetted Gideon and his entourage. They disrespected Gideon and disregarded his role as God's deliverer. Gideon left them with a threat, which he later made good on, torturing 77 men with "thorns of the wilderness and briers" (Judges 8:16).

C. The Men of Peuel - Judges 8:8-9; 17

Gideon and his army went on to Penuel and requested rations from them. He received a similar snub. Enraged, Gideon threatened to return and remove their tower, which was their single source of military defense against their oppressors. For a second time Gideon left a town of fellow Israelites with a threat. When Gideon returned "he tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city" (Judges 8:17). Strange behavior from a deliverer from Midianite oppression. In anger, he is torturing and massacring, not his enemies, but his Israelite brothers! Beloved, it is difficult to reconcile Gideon's actions toward these two Israelite cities. Following his great victory of faith, we see erosion in Gideon's character evidenced by changes in his actions and reactions.

The next thing you know we see glimpses of pride, anger, self-interest, ingratitude, and vengefulness in Gideon (Dark Times. Broken People. Faithful King, p. 112).

D. Zebah and Zalmunna - Judges 8:10-12; 18-21

Gideon returned to his home, having captured two Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna. He brought his prisoners of war back with him along with all the spoils of war they had gathered. Unbeknownst to most, Gideon had a personal matter to settle. These two kings had killed his brothers at Tabor in what appears to have been some type of public execution. Gideon instructed his young son to kill the two kings. Death at the hand of a young boy would have been particularly humiliating to the Midianite kings, but the child was afraid (it is likely the stronghold of fear had passed from father to son). Gideon dispatched both kings by running them through with his sword. And "he took the crescent ornaments which were on their camels' necks" (Judges 8:21). This detail is very telling as it reveals an ever-widening chink in the spiritual armor of Gideon.

E. The People of Israel - Judges 8:22-31

Due to Gideon's popularity, the men of Israel asked Gideon to set up a dynasty and rule over them. Since God had been raising up judges to rule Israel, their request for Gideon and his descendants to become their reigning monarchs is especially concerning. Had Israel learned nothing? Gideon reminded them that God was their King. To accept their request would be to dethrone God, and Gideon would have no part in that. However, we are troubled by Gideon's request. "I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil" (Judges 8:24). Grateful to be freed from the oppression of the Midianites, the people were only too thrilled to fill Gideon's coffers. "The weight of the gold earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the neck bands that were on their camel's necks" (Judges 8:26). Gideon refused to be installed as a king, but the wealth he amassed allowed him to live like one, which is unseemly for a judge and retired military leader.

From the gold "Gideon made . . . an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household" (Judges 8:27). How far Gideon has fallen! Fear, which seemed to dog his steps until he had a breakthrough with the Lord, was not his undoing. Rather it was the enticement of pride, power, possession, and position that led him to abandon his faith-walk. James 4:4 says, "You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

Under Gideon's leadership, "the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon" (Judges 8:28). Gideon missed a great opportunity to bring reformation and possibly facilitate national revival in Israel. He had overcome his paralyzing fear and learned to operate in faith, but at the crossroads of decision Gideon chose badly. Deuteronomy 30:15-20 says, "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the Lord your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the Lord your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them."

Gideon's decision to abandon his walk with the Lord had both personal and national consequences. Gideon's life became increasingly carnal. He took many wives as well as a Canaanite concubine. The result was 70 sons. He financed a lavish lifestyle for his family, thinking he had bought them security and peace. Sixty-nine of his sons would be killed by their half-brother Abimelech, who would in turn die a terrible death. His family knew years of hurt and heartache. The nation suffered in like fashion. At his death, "the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals" (Judges 8:33) and "did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side" (Judges 8:34).

Wiersbe observes:

The great victory over Midian gave Gideon good reason to call the nation back to the Lord and obedience to His Law. But instead of using the occasion for God's glory, he used it for his own profit; and the nation eventually lapsed into sin again (*Be Available*, p.76).

The seemingly progressive revelation of Gideon's life grieves us as we reflect on a man who was so mightily used of the Lord. A man who overcame his national tendency towards fear to rise above it in faith. A great and courageous leader who inspired his men to exercise their own faith in the Lord and gain the victory against overwhelming odds. A man who is listed in Hebrews 11:32 and held up as an example of faith. And yet, despite his strong showing as a man of faith, he did not continue to pursue his relationship with the Lord and gradually he succumbed to pride and the indulgences of the flesh. While we mourn the latter days of Gideon, we must be careful to examine our own hearts for we are just as vulnerable to the enemy's attack and just as likely to fall into temptation. The cautionary tale and life lesson of Gideon is to run well **and** finish strong. We are called to operate in the grace of the Lord, not rely on His mercy because of besetting sins. Paul admonishes us to "walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory" (1 Thessalonians 2:12). In the midst of dark days and broken people, may we honor the high calling of our FAITHFUL KING!