

LESSON 10: Gideon (Part 3)

JUDGES 6-8

GIDEON CONFRONTS THE MEN OF ISRAEL **Read Judges 8:1-17.**

The men of Ephraim (8:1-3)

The men of Ephraim take issue with Gideon for waiting until the eleventh hour to call for their help in the battle. They know nothing about what God has been doing in the situation – nothing about God's calling of Gideon, the sign of the fleece, the testing that God put the previous volunteers through when He chose the 300, or the fact that Gideon and the 300 didn't even fight a battle. They just stood around, made some noise, and listened.

1. **What is at the heart of Ephraim's grievance with Gideon?**

They didn't just want to be part of the chase. They wanted to be part of the battle. In their eyes, the battle held more glory, and they wanted a greater part of the glory for themselves. They are greedy and arrogant.

2. **How does Gideon respond to their grievance?**

He gives them an exceedingly soft answer. He reminds them that even though they were called only to the chase, they were still given an equal, if not richer, share of the reward in killing the two princes.

"... 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 8:2) Is not the gleaning—that which is taken last—better than the first?

This placates them. So long as they consider themselves to have gained ascendancy over Gideon and his men, they are content and subside.

The Ephraimites swept onto the scene in the eleventh hour, did their part almost effortlessly, and claimed the reward. Gideon and the 300 are still in the battle and must press on with great effort before they accomplish their mission and claim the reward.

Do you think Gideon and his men deserve a greater reward for having fought the more strenuous battle?

3. **Compare Gideon's calling of the Ephraimites to Jesus' parable about the workers of the eleventh hour (Matthew 20:1-16).**

There is a task that needs accomplishing in God's vineyard, i.e. Israel.

In Judges, it is the battle with the Midianites who are destroying the Land. Gideon and his 300 are pursuing two princes of Midian, which is the same task that the Ephraimites have been given.

In the parable, all the workers are contracted for a denarius regardless of time worked. It is about achieving a goal, not the money.

Workers are called at different times.

In Judges, Gideon calls the 300 and they begin the battle. Later, Asher, Naphtali, and the rest of Manasseh join. Finally Ephraim is called at the last.

In the parable, the landowner seeks workers at the 3rd, 6th, 9th, and 11th hours.

Gideon's men are the workers of the first hour who end up working the full day (they battle, chase, and battle again).

The Ephraimites are workers of the eleventh hour who only work for an hour (they are only part of the chase).

Here is the twist:

In the parable, the workers of the *first* hour are the one who complain.

In Judges account, it is the workers of the *eleventh* hour (the Ephraimites) who complain.

But they both complain for the same basic reason. They are not focused on the kingdom but on their own personal reward, as if the kingdom was determined by merit.

Gideon's men, having worked the whole "day," would have had every right to complain about the Ephraimites doing so little, and yet getting the honor of dispatching two kings. Gideon's men are still in the battle while Ephraim's work is done.

We might imagine them griping, "These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day." (Matt. 20:12)

But they didn't say that. The reason they were selected in the first place was because they were not glory seekers like so many in Israel (Judges 7:2). They cared only that the goal had been accomplished, personal glory aside.

Instead, it is the Ephraimites, who complain over not getting more of the action after working for only one "hour." Is that such a bad thing to complain about – that the LORD hasn't given His workers more work in field? It wouldn't be if their heart was in the right place. Their arrogance shows in how they reprimand Gideon. They are glory- and status-seekers at heart.

Verse 4 begins the details of the battle and implies that only Gideon and the 300 crossed the Jordan to do battle.

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

There is no mention of the Ephraimites or any of the other tribes continuing on with Gideon on the other side of the Jordan. There was more battle yet to be fought and two more kings to be taken, but it seems Ephraim settled for the honor they had already attained and walked away with a false sense of pride in their accomplishment. But they did not push on for the full reward.

In the end, Gideon and his men accomplish the same goal as the Ephraimites. Both parties pursued two sets of princes and took their prizes, although one worked longer than the other to accomplish it. Like the workers in the parable, each got the same "wage" for their effort.

This episode with the Ephraimites and the parable both paint a portrait of people who do their work in the kingdom for wrong values, motivations, and goals - the right thing for the wrong reasons. (This is like Jesus' disciples fighting over who is greatest in the kingdom while Jesus Himself is trying to teach them the values of self-denial.)

There are those who want more honor because they have battled longer. (parable)
There are those who want more battle but only because they perceive it as more honor for themselves. (Ephraimites)

The whole point is how you weigh reward—by your own scales or God's scales. Where God sets one value on the work, man sets up a sliding scale based on comparison, and the reason for the comparison is to lift himself up above another man.

Though the Ephraimites came onto the scene last, they are the first to attain their reward. In Gideon's case, it pleased the Lord to give the workers who finished last the same glory as those who finished first.

4. **Recap: How many were called and how many were chosen? (Judges 7:3, 7)**
32,000 were called, 300 were chosen.
5. **Why were so many cut? (Judges 7:2)** Because they would have taken glory for themselves instead of giving it to God.
6. **Gideon called Ephraim to battle untested. Would Ephraim have made the original cut?**
Doubtful. We should note that Gideon waited for the Lord to test the people and took His direction over who to cut or not cut. This time Gideon himself calls for Ephraim who has not been tested at all. He does it for expedience, but without asking the Lord, and it has some consequences.

Questions for Reflection:

In the midst of battling the external oppressors, a leader can find himself battling a second front—this time with his own people. Brothers who should be helping and supporting the effort add to the conflict and oppression when they decide to pursue what is right in their own eyes and let their Canaanite side rule them.

- How do you respond when your co-laborers in ministry get angry with you because they covet a more prestigious role in the ministry than you are giving them?

When necessity arises and immediate help is needed to spearhead a ministry objective, filling the slot with untested volunteers may get the job done, but may also bring you some grief.

- How is Gideon's experience with the men of Ephraim a warning to leadership?

Recap Judges 7:22. Israel chased the Midianites from **Beth Shittah** (house of wood) toward **Zerereah** (oppression/fortress) as far as **Abel Meholah** (meadow of dancing) by **Tabbath** (celebration)

The battles in the “house of wood” and the “fortress of oppression” have been won as far as the outside enemy is concerned. But now Gideon and his 300 cross the Jordan and come to Succoth and Penuel. Succoth will be another picture of a house of wood and Penuel will be another picture of an oppressive fortress, except the battle will not be with the Midianites this time, but with Israel.

In places where Gideon and his weary men should have been received with celebration, rest, food, and comfort, they get none. Instead, they find themselves fighting another version of these battles, this time with their own countrymen.

The men of Succoth and Penuel.

7. Why Succoth? What does Succoth mean to Israel?

Succoth is the original site where Jacob put up booths for his cattle and built a house for himself. Succoth (or Sukkot, pronounced sue-coat) is the plural of *sukkah* or “booth,” a temporary, makeshift shelter made from whatever brush or branches are at hand and often used for animal shelters. A *sukkah* can also refer to a thicket or overgrowth of branches that creates a shelter.

Succoth embodies a very particular picture that begins with Jacob in his big tent with his flock resting in *sukkot* around him. That picture becomes part of the Exodus experience—as Israel wanders in the wilderness, they paint this picture of God in His big tent surrounded by His flock camped in *sukkot* around Him.

When Israel comes into the Land, that picture then carries into the Feast of Tabernacles (aka Sukkot) where God’s children gather together to camp in *sukkot* around His tent after the harvest. Sukkot is a time of rest and rejoicing in God’s provision and protection with the *sukkah* tents are decorated with the fruits and greenery of the harvest.

Except here in Gideon’s day, the Midianites have taken all the harvest, fruit, and leaves. The picture of Succoth as a place of celebration and rejoicing, rest, provision, and protection is gone. Succoth has reverted to the character of “houses of wood” like the ones from their wilderness wandering.

8. Under whose protection and provision have the men of Succoth sought “shade”?

A fruitless, leafless existence is what life had become under Midianite oppression, and yet, instead of seeking shade under God’s protection and provision, the men of Succoth have taken shelter under the great Midianite tree, whose *pe’orah*—exalted leafy branches—God is sending Gideon to cut down, namely, the Midianite princes, Zebah and Zalmunnah.

Zebah means **deprived of protection**, as a sacrificial animal.

Zalmunna means **deprived of protection**, in the sense of being without shade.

9. Why Penuel? What does Penuel mean to Israel?

Penuel is the place named by Jacob when he wrestled with God and prevailed, though it left him broken. The name means “facing God.” Penuel is a place where blessing is bestowed on those who cling to God in the midst of their struggle with Him, and in spite of the brokenness they endure at His hand.

Penuel was once a place of where Jacob came face-to-face with his Savior. But this generation does not have an experiential knowledge of God or the Savior, they are walking according to what is right in their own eyes, and they are no longer clinging to God as Jacob had.

Tower, in the Hebrew, is *migdal* which comes from the root, *gadal*, which means “to become great or important, promote, make powerful, praise, magnify.”

10. How does glorification fit into the picture?

The men of Penuel have built a symbol of power and glorification of themselves over the site that should have been a humbling reminder to cling to God for provision and protection. From their tower, they now look down at Gideon, their savior, and speak loftily—deprecatingly—to him.

11. Gideon doesn't deal with them immediately. What does he promise he will do when he returns?

To Succoth: *“I will tear their flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers!”*

To Penuel: *“When I come back in peace, I will tear down this tower!”*

Question for Reflection:

- Where do you seek shade in life?
- Are the people who oppress you also the ones on whom you depend for shelter and needful things?
- Can the fear of losing what little you have keep you in oppression?
- **Read Matthew 25:30-46.** How do the men of Succoth model this parable?
- When a fellow believer has looked down on you loftily or spoken to you loftily, what kind of response did it provoke in you?
- Have your words ever provoked that reaction in others?
- Does a self-righteous stance create more conflict or bring peace?
- Does it add to oppression in a believer's struggle or relieve it?
- Does it help or hinder the Savior's mission?

The Final Battle Read Judges 8:10-17.

Midianites have gone to ground at Karkor. They started with an army of 120,000 but are now reduced to 15,000 – still more than Gideon's 300.

12. What do the names Nobah, Jogebehah, and Karkor mean and how do they add to the picture?

Nobah means "barking."

Jogebehah means "lofty" or "haughty."

Karkor means "foundation" in the sense of being "dug in" or entrenched.

Gideon and the 300 pass by Succoth and Penuel without receiving any help. Now they skirt around **Nobah** and **Jogbehah** by following a nomad trail. They catch Midian where they feel secure. To win the battle, Gideon and the 300 must undermine the Midianites' "foundation" and rout them.

13. How do the "barkers" and the "lofty" add to the Midianites' feeling of (false) security?

The "barkers" and the "lofty" are watchmen of sorts. The "barkers" raise the alarm when the enemy is near, and the "lofty" have the advantage of seeing from a high plane and can see more clearly.

14. Watchmen are described as barkers. In Isaiah 56:10-12, why do the barkers cease barking?

"His watchmen are blind, they are all ignorant; they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber. Yes, they are greedy dogs which never have enough. And they are shepherds who cannot understand; they all look to their own way, every one for his own gain, from his own territory. 'Come,' one says, 'I will bring wine, and we will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink; tomorrow will be as today, and much more abundant.'" - Isaiah 56:10-12

Watchdogs aren't always on watch. They can be sleeping. They can be distracted and grow lazy with too much feasting. They aren't overly discerning—they will bark at the enemy, but also the neighbors, other dogs, squirrels, doorbells—whatever thing comes into their territory, whether it is an enemy to you or not. Sometimes they bark just to hear their own voice.

The Return of Gideon and the Judgment of Succoth and Penuel.

Gideon and the 300 caught the enemy where they felt secure, routed them at their "foundation," and captured Zebah and Zalmunna. Then Gideon marched them back to Succoth and Penuel.

15. How did Gideon deal with the men of Succoth and Penuel when he returned?

He "taught" the men of Succoth – scourged them with the whips made of thorns and briers.

16. Why did he kill the men of Penuel when he said he would only tear down the tower?

Self-righteous people usually fight having their towers torn down, instead of humbling themselves as they should.

Question for Reflection:

- When God sends someone to tear down our tower of self-righteousness, do we fight them? To what end?
- What form do the “barkers” and “lofty” take in the battle we face?

We do not see hand-to-hand combat so much as we fight a war of words and ideologies. Our world is full of barkers. They are on social media, TV, news stations, blogs, etc. Not a day goes by when someone doesn't raise a howl over something social injustice or conspiracy (real or imagined). They are noise makers that demand our attention, and we can get sidetracked into fighting a battle with the barkers rather than pursuing the real enemy, which is why the enemy likes to put them up as a front that we have to overcome.

If you can get past the barkers, you must then contend with the lofty—the experts, the scientists, the psychologists, the strategic marketers, and all those who purport to have the higher or broader view of things. The enemy hides behind these as well.

GIDEON'S LEGACY Read Judges 8:18-35.

17. How do Zebah and Zalmunnah describe Gideon?

They describe him as the son of a king.

18. Why doesn't Gideon kill them himself? Why give the task to Jether?

It is the act of contempt by a superior toward an inferior. It is one thing for a king to be killed on the battlefield against seasoned warriors or even by another king as equals. It is a slap in the face for a king to be killed by a young boy in front of everyone.

Jether means the “remainder, remnant, excellence, or abundance”—the legacy. What remains of a man's excellence and abundance is embodied in his children and passed on to the next generation. Jether is Gideon's son—the son who must step into his father's shoes and take up the fight in the next generation. The whole point of these oppressions is to teach the next generation how to war.

19. Is Jether's youth a reason not to engage the enemy, or is it a failing on his part? To be standing in Succoth with his father and the 300 means that the Jether must have followed his father in battle, so he cannot be so very young as to lack the physical strength. In terms of his faith, he is no younger than his father really.

Gideon had not seen the Lord in battle, but stepped out in faith and is victorious. Jether has seen his father step out in faith, yet refuses to follow his example. While we might make an allowance for youth, it is a failing on Jether's part. This will be the last we see of the young man. His refusal to fight will eventually get him killed by his own half-brother.

20. How does the son's refusal to step up affect the father in the face of his enemies?

The father had already fought and won the battle. It is to the father's glory that the son should take up the sword and finish the fight. It is humiliating for Gideon. Because of his son's failure,

Gideon's own reputation is on the line. He will take glory for himself against his enemies personally.

21. **How does Gideon respond? (v23)** He gives glory to God by refusing the kingship for himself and his sons. (Jether is definitely not king material.) He declares God king, and yet makes himself a golden ephod out of the enemies' golden earrings. (This is reminiscent of Aaron making the golden calf out of golden earrings in the wilderness journey.)
22. **What things has Gideon made in the narrative?** The named altar (God is Peace), an unnamed altar, a golden ephod.
23. **The ephod became stumbling block for Gideon and his house where the others did not. Why?** Because it was a tribute to Gideon and not to God. I think his desire to make a legacy for himself with the golden ephod was a reaction to the humiliation he felt when his son—who should have been his legacy—failed to step up and deal with the enemy.
24. **The text switch between the names Jerubbaal and Gideon in verses 29-35. What happens when the hero (Jerubbaal) returns home and becomes just a regular man (Gideon) again? How long do men like Gideon remain heroes in people's eyes?**

As soon as he dies, he and his family are forgotten.

Question for Reflection:

- Why might parents feel shame and humiliation when their children fail to follow in their footsteps in the faith and take up the battles?
- How do they overcome these feelings without stumbling?
- How must Christ feel when we fail to take up the commission He has given us, after the battle He waged to assure us victory?

"If God is with us, then why is all this happening to me? Where are His miracles? Why has He not kept His promise?"

If you are asking these questions, then you are at the same place Gideon began. Gideon went from a man convinced God had forsaken him to a man who stood before an overwhelming enemy with courage. He tells his men "Look at me and do likewise . . ." Let's look at what Gideon models for us in dealing with oppression.

What is our reaction when Christ turns to us and says, "Okay, let's deal with your oppression. Get yourself in order, get your house in order, and then we'll tackle the rest of the world."

Getting yourself in order . . .

- What if that means acknowledging that you got yourself into oppression because you were doing what was right in your own eyes? Are you prepared to admit that and take the steps needed to repent and resolve those issues?
- Are you ready to submit to Christ's kingship over you, embrace His values, and fight the battle?

Getting your house in order . . .

- What if that means confronting family members with sin?
- Are you ready to reestablish boundaries in your own house?
- Are you ready to face a possible fight with outsiders over the right to live your faith, even within your own home?

Battling the enemy . . .

- How did Gideon battle?
- Based on Gideon's experience, what should you be prepared for?
 - Feeling weak against the enemy. God's ways of fighting are not man's ways. God uses weak people and unconventional weapons as strengths in battle.
 - Feeling like you are groping your way in the dark. This battle is not won by the sight.
 - Listening—listen to God, listen to leadership—and act on what you hear.
 - Standing where you are, do what you can with what you have been given.
 - Being broken. You might not win the physical fight, but you will win the spiritual war.

Securing Borders

One key aspect in all of these oppressions is the need to secure and maintain borders and boundaries where the Enemy is not allowed to come. Gideon had to re-establish and secure the boundaries of his nation, his own home, and even his own person when people would lift him up above his station.

- What kinds of boundaries do we have to establish and maintain?

My thoughts: We are not Israel. We are not battling a physical enemy for a physical kingdom in this age. However, there are physical boundaries that we must maintain for us to live as believers, such as the right to live our faith in our own homes.

If we have been granted the freedom in our nation to worship God and live out our faith, then that is a liberty we fight to protect. We fight the erosion and intrusion of those who would take that liberty from us, but we fight in a way that is glorifying to God.

We also fight the battle within ourselves. We maintain the integrity of our own borders in terms of relationship boundaries, behavioral boundaries, and ideological boundaries (worldview).

Gideon's narrative is magnificent in its depth and breadth of application. It has taken us deep into personal challenges, addressing both physical and spiritual issues on a personal, community, and national level. It presented us with some remarkably relevant social issues to consider, offered a model for encouragement, the steps for dealing with oppression, and the picture of a future Messiah.

One Final Scenario

God raises up a Gideon—a man tagged for a particular ministry purpose and to whom He gives a particular vision. The man embraces the mission, and God blesses him in his ministry to the point where people begin to view him as a great leader and mighty man of faith. He draws great crowds, donors give much money to his ministry, and he does much good for the Kingdom.

As the man grows older, he is expected to pass on his ministry to, let's say, his sons. But they have neither the vision or mission from God, and none are willing to step up.

When the man dies, he is mourned briefly, and then comes the question over what to do with his ministry (which has now grown to the proportion of a small kingdom). A fight ensues over who will step into his shoes and take over his ministry, sometimes within the family, sometimes by those outside the family.

Why is there a fight? What are they really fighting over? They fight, not because they have been given the mission by God, but because the ministry carries a reputation and honor that they themselves have not had to earn or been able to earn by their own merit.

Enter Abimelech.