

Lesson 7

Gideon's Victory and Defeat

Judges 7-8

Introduction

The story of Gideon's deliverance illustrates the principles of faith, emphasizing God's desire for His people to rely entirely on Him. Here, we see how God reduced Gideon's army to ensure their victory was clearly attributed to divine intervention rather than human strength. It also notes God's accommodations for Gideon's hesitations, demonstrating patience and understanding towards his uncertainties. Furthermore, the preparations for battle illustrate the importance of faith and obedience in achieving victory, showcasing how God equips and guides His people through challenges.

7:1-18 – Gideon: Leader of an Unconventional Army

Military strategists want the best forces, weapons, and plans when going to war. They want every advantage on their side to make victory more likely. But God doesn't work like that. In this case, having superior forces would have been a problem. He wanted all the glory to go to Him when His people won a battle. If they won because they had more soldiers or better weapons, they would be proud and say they won by their power. Here, God is reiterating what he had told the people through Moses years before:

“When you go out to war against your enemies and see horses, chariots, and an army larger than yours, do not be afraid of them, for the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, is with you,” Deuteronomy 20.1.

So, the process of trimming down the battle force begins. First, there was a call for those who were timid and afraid to leave, resulting in the departure of 22,000 men, 7:3. Only 10,000 men remained. Next, God says that there are too many. So, Gideon is told to bring the troops down to the water, where they would be tested. God says:

“Separate everyone who laps water with his tongue like a dog. Do the same with everyone who kneels to drink.”
The number of those who lapped with their hands to their mouths was three hundred men, and all the rest of the troops knelt to drink water, Judges 7:5b-6.

Of the remaining 10,000 warriors, God sent 9700 of them home, leaving only the 300 who unconventionally lapped water. Now, imagine if you were Gideon at that moment. To reassure him, God commands him to sneak into the Midianite camp. The number of fighters was like a *swarm of locusts, and their camels were as innumerable as the sand on the seashore*, 7:12. When Gideon and his servant Purah arrived near the camp, they overheard two men talking about a dream one of them had. The second man explained that the dream was about Gideon's victory that God would give him, 7:13-14.

After overhearing a dream in the Midianite camp that boosted his confidence, Gideon worshiped God then and there for the assured victory. He returned to his camp energized, ready to share with his 300

men that Yahweh had destined them to conquer the Midianites. For the battle, Gideon creatively strategized to use psychological warfare rather than physical force. He organized his men into three groups, each armed not with conventional weapons but with a trumpet, a pitcher, and a torch hidden by the pitcher. They were to follow Gideon's lead closely, initiating their unique attack on the Midianite camp's perimeter, a location he had scouted earlier. The plan involved simultaneously blowing their trumpets, breaking the pitchers to reveal the torches, and shouting "For Yahweh and for Gideon!" to simulate a larger army and instill panic among the Midianites.

Judges 7:19-8:28 – The Defeat of Midian

7:19-22 – The Plan Works

Gideon's tactical plan was executed flawlessly. His forces approached the Midianite camp's edge at the start of the middle watch, right after the change of guards. At his command, the three groups blew their trumpets, shattered their pitchers, raised their torches high, and shouted their war cries. Stationed around the camp, the Israelites watched as the Midianites were thrown into chaos, mistaking the noise and lights for an attack by a vastly larger force. Believing they were surrounded, the Midianites panicked and fled towards the Jordan River through the Jezreel Valley. Proponents later celebrated this triumph as one of Israel's most significant victories, highlighted for its divine orchestration and strategic ingenuity.

7:23-8:3 – In Come the Reserves

After the Midianites were routed, Gideon called upon the reserve forces, initially dismissed, to join the chase. He specifically urged the Ephraimites, who hadn't been part of the first call to arms, to block the Jordan River crossings to prevent the Midianites from escaping. Given their proximity to the Jordan, the Ephraimites were strategically positioned for this task and successfully captured two Midianite leaders, Oreb and Zeeb, whose heads they delivered to Gideon.

Despite their contribution, the Ephraimites were upset about being excluded from the primary battle, possibly feeling left out of the victory's spoils or insulted by the oversight. Gideon addressed their grievances by praising their crucial role in capturing the Midianite princes, arguing that their achievement was even more significant than the initial attack. He emphasized that since God granted the victory, no individual had grounds for boasting. Gideon's diplomatic approach alleviated their frustrations, highlighting the importance of maintaining unity and peace within the ranks, sometimes proving more challenging than facing the enemy.

8:4-12 – The Pursuit

Gideon, leading his 300 men, pursued the Midianites into the region of Transjordan. When they reached the Israelite city of Succoth, Gideon asked for provisions for his troops. However, the city's leaders refused his request, fearing retaliation from the Midianite kings Zebah and Zalmunna, who were still at large and considering their city's vulnerable desert border. They even mocked Gideon, leading him to vow retaliation upon his victorious return.

Continuing east to Penuel, Gideon encountered a similar refusal and responded with a threat to demolish the city's tower. Eventually, Gideon located Zebah and Zalmunna at Karkor, near Amman, Jordan. Despite being vastly reduced from their original numbers, the Midianite force was caught off guard and defeated, allowing Gideon to capture the fleeing kings.

This final victory over the Midianites was marked by a notable lack of support from the Israelite communities, including the Ephraimites, who were more focused on their status than the collective effort against the enemy, and the towns of Succoth and Penuel, which opted for neutrality to protect their security. This gives us an important lesson on leadership and perseverance: victories often come without broad support, and leaders must be prepared to act decisively and continue forward, even when support is lacking.

8:13-26 – After the Battle of Karkor

8:13-17 - Punishment of Israelite Cities

Upon his return, Gideon first addressed the cities of Succoth and Penuel, which had refused to support his campaign against the Midianites. In Succoth, he punished the city's elders with thorns and briers as retribution for their refusal to aid. In Penuel, he demolished the city's tower and executed the men, fulfilling his earlier threat. The reasons for the harsher treatment of Penuel remain unspecified, but both towns faced consequences for their betrayal during a national crisis.

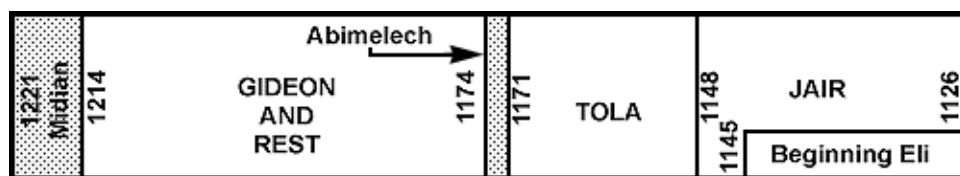
8:18-21 - Execution of Midianite Kings

Gideon also dealt with Zebah and Zalmunna, the Midianite kings responsible for his brothers' deaths. After revealing their crimes, Gideon intended for his son Jether to execute them, possibly as a means of dishonor or as a rite of passage. However, Jether hesitated due to his youth, leading the kings to ask Gideon to carry out the execution himself, which he did. Subsequently, he took ornamental crescents from their camels as trophies.

8:22-26 - Recognition and Refusal of Kingship

Following these events, the Israelites, in gratitude for Gideon's leadership and success, offered to make him their ruler, hinting at a desire for a monarchy. Gideon declined, insisting on the Lord's rule over Israel. Instead, he asked for a portion of the spoils, precisely one earring from each soldier's share, resulting in a substantial accumulation of gold that significantly enriched him.

8:27-35 – The Last Days of Gideon



**THE MIDDLE JUDGES
1221-1126 BC**

After defeating Midian, Israel experienced peace for 40 years until around 1174 BC. After this time, Israel faced continuous conflict, indicating the cessation of divine "rest" for a nation that had repeatedly misused it. A controversial act marred Gideon's later year: he crafted an ephod from his amassed gold shekels. Traditionally, an ephod was a priestly garment adorned with gold and jewels, signifying divine communication, and worn by the high priest. The specifics of Gideon's ephod and its resemblance to the traditional garment remain unclear, but it required substantial gold and was placed in Ophrah, Gideon's city. The motives behind creating the ephod are unknown; it might have been an attempt by Gideon to maintain divine dialogue or establish an alternate religious practice.

Whatever it was for the ephod led to idolatrous worship among the Israelites, becoming a "snare" to Gideon and his family. This incident manifests a departure from genuine worship, as Gideon inadvertently became a religious innovator rather than a reformer committed to guiding Israel back to authentic practices.

Gideon's later life was marred by decisions that veered away from the ideals he initially upheld. He took multiple wives and had concubines in various cities, fathering seventy sons. He ignored God's warning against Israel's leaders multiplying wives, a directive even more critical for those not in kingship positions. Furthermore, Gideon named one of his sons "Abimelech," meaning "My father is king," which paradoxically contrasted with his public refusal of kingship. This act highlighted a discrepancy between his stated beliefs—that God alone should be king—and his lifestyle, which mirrored a king's lifestyle. This inconsistency between belief and behavior illustrates the challenges many face in aligning their actions with their convictions.

Gideon's story concludes by reflecting on his legacy, reminding us that even the most revered figures can succumb to greed, desire, and pride. Gideon passed away at a significant age and was buried in Ophrah, in his father's tomb. His story warns about the dangers of personal failings overshadowing one's achievements and the importance of living according to one's professed beliefs.

What's In This for Us?

Divine Strategy Over Human Might: Gideon's victory, achieved with only 300 men against a vastly superior force, underscores the principle that God's plans often defy human logic and rely not on strength but faith. This teaches us to trust in God's guidance, even when it seems counterintuitive, recognizing that victory comes through obedience rather than our capabilities or resources.

The Importance of Humility and Dependence on God: Gideon's army's reduction and unconventional means of victory highlight the necessity of humility and total dependence on God. They remind us that acknowledging our limitations and relying on God's power is essential for true success in our battles.

God's Patience and Accommodation: Gideon's hesitations and requests for signs demonstrate God's patience and willingness to meet us where we are, reinforcing the idea that God understands our doubts and fears. This should encourage us to approach God openly with our uncertainties, trusting in His patience and guidance.

The Dangers of Success: Gideon's later life illustrates how even the most faithful can falter, particularly when success leads to pride, deviation from worship, and self-reliance. His story warns us about the dangers of forgetting God's role in our victories, emphasizing the need to remain vigilant in our faith and humble in our successes.

Conclusion

Gideon's story is a historical account of Israel's deliverance from the Midianites and is also a great source of spiritual lessons for Christians today. From his initial doubts to his strategic triumph and the complexities of his later years—we learn about the importance of faith, obedience, humility, and the dangers of complacency and pride. His life emphasizes that God's ways often transcend our understanding and that reliance on God's guidance can lead to extraordinary outcomes.

It also cautions against the temptations that can follow success, reminding us that spiritual vigilance and humility remain crucial, even, or especially, in victory. Gideon's legacy is a reminder that while God can use anyone to achieve His purposes, the true measure of leadership is found not in the magnitude of our achievements but in the steadfastness of our faith and the integrity of our character.

For Reflection

1. How do Gideon's initial reluctance to lead and his requests for signs from God reflect our struggles with faith and obedience?
2. In what ways does the story of Gideon challenge our understanding of strength and victory, especially in seemingly insurmountable contexts?
3. Gideon's army was reduced to 300 men to ensure God received the glory for their victory. How can this principle be applied today, where success is often attributed to human effort alone?
4. Gideon's army's unconventional tactics led to a significant victory. What does this tell us about God's and human strategies for solving problems?
5. Discuss the role of humility in Gideon's story. How does his journey from doubt to leader demonstrate the importance of humility in spiritual growth and leadership?
6. Gideon's later actions, including making an ephod and taking many wives, had negative consequences. What lessons can we learn from the pitfalls of his successes?
7. How does Gideon's story illustrate the dangers of deviating from God's commands, even after experiencing God's faithfulness and deliverance?
8. The Ephraimites felt slighted for not being included in the initial call to battle. How does Gideon's response to their complaint teach us about resolving conflicts within the local church?
9. Gideon named his son Abimelech, which means "my father is king," despite declining the title of king for himself. What does this reveal about the complexity of human nature and the struggle to align actions with beliefs?
10. Reflecting on Gideon's story, how can we ensure that our actions consistently reflect our faith and trust in God, especially after experiencing success or spiritual highs?