

DHW

BIBLE STUDY CLASS

LESSON 7

JUDGES 8

INTRODUCTION

Gideon won a decisive battle against the Midianites at the valley of Jezreel but a number of the enemies managed to flee and cross the Jordan River. Gideon purposed in his heart to pursue the remaining Midianites and complete the task God had appointed him to do. Gideon was successful. Success is not always easy to handle for some people. How did Gideon handle his success? In this chapter, it is alarming to see the change that took place in Gideon's character and conduct. He was so different from the man who was introduced in chapter 6. He had described himself as one who was poor and who was the "least in my father's house" (6:15). But in this chapter, he had to face criticism from his fellow tribal brethren. When he requested for help from other fellow Israelites, they were not willing to cooperate with him. His victory over the remaining Midianites had given him tremendous honour and popularity. He could have retired in peace and ruled the people of Israel as their judge by calling them to be grateful to the LORD their God and to walk in His ways. Gideon was so tested and found to be wanting.

Unlike human writers who would always paint a glowing picture

of their heroes, the divine writer paints a true-to-life character of the "heroes" in the Bible, both their good and bad qualities. The reason is that God wants people to learn to do what is pleasing and approving to Him and not to do what is abominable in His sight. One of the things that ought to be learned in this chapter is how quickly human beings forget to show their gratitude towards God for what He has done for them. How easy it is to forget God as one climbs up the ladder of success. "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" so warned Paul. In addition, we learn about the devastating effects of compromise, defeat, and backsliding of Gideon in the later phase of his life.

The following outline facilitates the study of the chapter:

1. Gideon is criticized by Ephraim (vv. 1-3),
2. Gideon is denied cooperation by the men of Succoth and Penuel (vv. 4-9),
3. Gideon finishes off the Midianites (vv. 10-21),
4. Gideon is invited to rule over Israel as her king (vv. 22-23),
5. Gideon makes a replica of the priestly ephod (vv. 24-27),
6. Gideon passes away and Israel falls into idolatry (vv. 28-35).

STUDY THE WORD

Gideon Is Criticized by Ephraim

Gideon was pressing for time so that his pursuit of the Midianites could get speedily underway. The enemy had fled. His intent was to finish the task the LORD had commissioned him to do. But he was interrupted by the Ephraimites who

sharply criticized him. They chided him for not calling them to be part of his army in the battle against the Midianites. It must have been motivated by their pride. Their pride surely was borne out of the fact that Ephraim was the largest tribe. They could also claim their progenitor, Ephraim, who was a son of the distinguished Joseph and that the mighty Joshua belonged to the tribe of Ephraim. They could also take pride that the Tabernacle was located in their city of Shiloh. They had come to believe that they were the most important of the twelve tribes. Therefore, Ephraimites should be involved in all important tribal matters.

This interruption was more important than making an Ephraimites was unwarranted. Firstly, they did not make any effort to attack Midian on their own since they were the largest tribe. Secondly, they probably must have heard of Gideon's recruitment of the men of Israel to fight against the Midianites, but they did not send men to support. Thirdly, they did not know that God had reduced Gideon's army to a small band of three hundred. The victory was a decisive one, and all credit should be accorded to the LORD God. Ephraimites' accusation of Gideon was uncalled for and without any reason and purpose, but that they were just jealous and their pride injured.

Gideon could have responded with equal emotional heat telling them that they had not responded to his call for warriors in the first place. He could also defend himself and give the credit to the LORD God. However, Gideon's response could be commended. He spoke metaphorically by saying that

the mop-up operation by the Ephraimites—"the gleaning of the grapes"—was greater than the battle carried out by him—"better than the vintage of Abiezer" (v.2). Gideon further said that God had delivered the two princes Oreb and Zeeb into their hands, and what he was able to do could not be compared with them (v.3). Gideon's "soft answer" worked for the Ephraimites in cooling off their anger.

Gideon's answer was tactful and discretionary. He kept his emotions under control. He took care to answer wisely. Uppermost in his mind was the pursuit of the remaining Midianites and to finish them completely. This outburst of his own feelings although he had the right to do so. By minimizing the victory of the three hundred men, he was not minimizing God's victory. He said, "what have I done now" although he could have added that it was God who had done it. Though he dealt with the Ephraimites purely on a horizontal level, he managed to pacify the Ephraimites in order to move on in his chase of the Midianites.

Gideon is Denied Cooperation by the Men of Succoth & Penuel

Gideon and his three hundred men were in hot pursuit of the Midianites. They came to the Jordan River. They crossed it and came to the city of Succoth, a distance of about 80 kilometres from "the hill of Moreh" where they began (7:1). Gideon's men in keeping up with the pursuit were understandably weary and worn out. Gideon begged the people of Succoth for "loaves of bread" giving the

reason that they were chasing after Zebah and Zalmunna, kings of the Midianites (v.5). But the leaders of Succoth refused to give the supply of food for the three hundred men. It was unimaginable as their fellow Israelites had been fighting and freeing them from the oppression of the Midianites and they should be excited about it and should readily and freely give them what they asked for. They acted insensitively. They further insulted and mocked Gideon: “Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna now in thine hand, that we should give bread unto thine army?”(v.6). Gideon was enraged. He threatened them that when the LORD had delivered the two kings into his hand, he would return to Succoth and “tear your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers” (v.7b). The people of Succoth who professed to be the people of the LORD God would not lift a finger to help their fellow country men. They had no fear and respect for the LORD! Gideon pressed on with his army following the trail of the Midianites, tired and thirsty till they came to Penuel. He approached the men of Penuel for provisions for his weary men. But they answered Gideon the way as the men of Succoth did. An angry Gideon said that on his return after the battle, he would break down the tower in Penuel—the very tower which was their means of protection against the enemies. Gideon must have obtained food for his men and how he got them was not revealed. Probably some other cities responded favourably.

Gideon Finishes Off the Midianites

The two kings of the Midianites, Zebah and Zalmunna, were in Karkor together with their soldiers. The armies of the Midianites were left with about fifteen thousand, having lost one hundred and twenty thousand men. That number still outnumbered Gideon’s army by fifty to one! Gideon launched his attack on the armies of the Midianites and decisively defeated them. Thus the task of destroying their oppressors was complete. Zebah and Zalmunna made a last attempt to escape but it was futile. They were finally captured. Gideon took both kings with him on his return from the battle field to Succoth and Penuel as he had promised.

On the return journey, Gideon caught a young man of Succoth. Gideon questioned the young man who told him all the names of the leaders and elders of the city, seventy seven of them. On entering Succoth, he displayed Zebah and Zalmunna before the people and threw back their earlier challenge to him. The seventy seven leaders and elders must be shaking in fear. Gideon carried out his word by torturing them with thorns and briers. In Penuel, he also carried out his threat. He destroyed the tower, and slew the men of the city. He punished Penuel more than he had threatened them.

Gideon set up a public trial to try Zebah and Zalmunna. He asked the two kings what men did they slay at Tabor. This apparently must have referred to an incident in which these two kings were directly involved and responsible. They answered that the

men who were executed were men who looked like Gideon, each of them resembled like a prince. Gideon said to them that those men were his brothers, the sons of his mother. If they had not slain his brothers, he would not kill them. Now he had no choice but to execute them. He commanded his firstborn son, Jether to draw his sword and kill the two kings. Jether could not bring himself to execute the two kings because he was still very young. Zebah and Zalmunna told Gideon to play the man and kill them. The reason why the two kings instigated Gideon to kill them instead of his son was because it would be a shameful and a dishonourable way to be killed by a young man instead of by a military general. Gideon got up and slew Zebah and Zalmunna. It seemed strange that Gideon took the *saharon*, crescent shaped ornaments, which were on the necks of the camels (v.21).

Gideon Is Invited to Rule over Israel as Her King

The enemy had been defeated and Israel enjoyed peace in the land. Then the men of Israel proposed to Gideon that he ruled over them, and his son, and his grandson also. The reason for the proposition was because Gideon had delivered them from the hand of Midian. This proposition was not right on two counts. First, it was not Gideon who delivered Israel from the Midianites. It was God who delivered Israel and ensured their security and safety from the enemies around them. In proposing Gideon to be their king, they believed that a single ruler could lead their combined forces and prevent any future domination by other nations. The

second was that the men of Israel were proposing a monarchy-form of government like the Canaanites who lived among them. They also wanted a hereditary dynasty; a proposition not only to have Gideon as their king to rule over them but also his son and his grandson. This was not in accordance with the will of God. Israel was to be a nation ruled by God Himself rather by any human king.¹ They wanted a king and not God to rule over them instead of a king under God to rule over them. Gideon's answer projected this understanding: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you" (v.23). God might not be visible to Israel but He was very much active in her affairs. Israel was His subjects. God meant Israel to be a theocracy.

Gideon Makes a Replica of the Priestly Ephod

Having declined the offer to be made king of Israel, Gideon compromised by asking the men of Israel to give him the golden earrings which they had taken from the war booty. They willingly gave the golden earrings to him. The total weight of the

¹Deuteronomy 33:26 *There is none like unto the God of Jeshurun, who rideth upon the heaven in thy help, and in his excellency on the sky. 27 The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy them. 28 Israel then shall dwell in safety alone: the fountain of Jacob shall be upon a land of corn and wine; also his heavens shall drop down dew. 29 Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the LORD, the shield of thy help, and who is the sword of thy excellency! and thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee; and thou shalt tread upon their high places.*

earrings they collected for him was “a thousand and seven hundred shekels of gold.” This was a large collection of gold. Included in the collection were ornaments, pendants and purple robes which were worn by the kings of Midian, and ornamental crescent chains around the necks of the kings’ camels. Gideon wanted to live like a king.

With the gold which he received, Gideon made an “ephod.” An ephod was designed by the LORD God to be worn only by the high priest. In it were the Urim and Thummim which were a pair of devices by which the high priest would ask for the counsel of the LORD God.² Gideon made the ephod and put it in Ophrah, his own hometown. This was a very unwise thing to do. Though he declined the proposal to be the king of Israel, he asked for a collection of golden earrings and other royal paraphernalia which greatly increased his finances and treasury. Then he made the priestly ephod which he placed it in his own hometown thereby posing himself as the high priest. The ephod became a spiritual trap for all Israel; for the children of Israel made their “pilgrimage” to Ophrah instead of Shiloh to worship it. Israel committed spiritual adultery, an abomination

² Exodus 28:30 And thou shalt put in the breastplate of judgment the Urim and the Thummim; and they shall be upon Aaron's heart, when he goeth in before the LORD: and Aaron shall bear the judgment of the children of Israel upon his heart before the LORD continually.

Numbers 27:21 And he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask *counsel* for him after the judgment of Urim before the LORD: at his word shall they go out, and at his word they shall come in, *both* he, and all the children of Israel with him, even all the congregation.

before God. It was also a snare to Gideon and to his family. It was sad indeed.

All these things seemed to betray the real desire of Gideon’s heart. He changed his lifestyle to that of a king and priest. He kept a harem which normally was associated with kings and not with ordinary men, not to mention that he had earlier said to the Angel of the LORD that he came from a poor family. The last shred of evidence that betrayed his desire to be a king was when he named his son “Abimelech” who was born by a concubine in Schechem. The name “Abimelech: translated literally, “my father is king.” So, whenever people asked his son what his name was, he would say “my-father-is-king.” This was a far cry from the Gideon who was first introduced in chapter 6—a fearful, humble, and poor man who depended and trusted the LORD. His victory, his riches, and his popularity caused his spiritual down slide.

Gideon Passes Away and Israel Falls Again into Idolatry

Gideon ended his life on a sad note. For forty years Israel experienced quietness under his judgeship. But his term of office did not make a deep impact on the nation. He did not leave a lasting legacy. He lived like a king. He kept a harem of many wives. Polygamy was never God’s intention for marriage. He had seventy sons by them, and not to mention the son by a concubine in Schechem, named “Abimelech.” He died of old age in his hometown where he was buried in his father’s sepulchre (tomb). After his death, the children of Israel soon turned again to idolatry by

worshipping the gods of the Canaanites—Baalim and Baal-berith. They had forgotten the LORD their God, who had freed them from the oppressions of their enemies on every side.

PRACTICAL VALUE

Gideon began well in his life as a humble, timid, and hardworking young man who cared for the people of Israel. God called him to deliver His people from the Midianites. He proved to be a good and obedient servant of God who delivered the powerful Midianites into his hand. His victories became a snare to him. He showed his arrogance by over punishing the men of Succoth, and in the case of Penuel, he overstepped his own threat by killing the men of the city. The moment he coveted the royal paraphernalia of the Midianite kings, and his desire for gold and riches, and the making of an ephod, the spiritual down slide was certain. He forgot the LORD God and he left nothing for Israel after his death. It was a sad ending. The Christian life is not a short sprint but a marathon. It is a long distance race to the finishing tape. It is to grow steadily, little by little each day of our life, every moment and day living our best for the glory of God. It is difficult but the end is rewarding and satisfying. A Christian must not forget God and the Lord Jesus Christ who had saved him from eternal damnation and being blessed with many things.

Another of Gideon's flaws in his character after his decisive victories over the Midianites was his arrogance. It was so evident in his encounters in Succoth and Penuel. He

was so quick to kill the people of God. Satan, the adversary, "as a roaring lion" keeps looking for Christians whom he can discourage and destroy.³ Paul warns (1Cor. 10:12): *Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall.* How many a Christian has fallen into this trap.

On the other hand, the conduct of the men of Succoth and Penuel was unthinkable. They were Israelites, the people of God, who had freed them from the oppressions of the Midianites through Gideon. They should have willingly and warmly extended their hospitality to Gideon, who was actually on a mission on their behalf to complete the task given to him by God that would ensure their continued security and safety. But they refused to help and even mock Gideon. This conduct is so true in many churches today. Members of the church who should be supporting and encouraging their pastor and leaders who are working and serving for their spiritual well-being, turn against them criticizing them. It is all right if their criticisms were legitimate and constructive and for the good of the church. But it was a totally different thing if the criticisms are petty and self-serving. Usually such criticisms came from Christians who do not faithfully and diligently read and study the Word of God on a daily basis.

³ 1 Peter 5:8 Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour:

2 Corinthians 2:11 Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices.

They formed their own ideas and are too ready to compromise with the ways of the world. Satan looks for such self-confident and proud professing Christians to divide and destroy the unity of the body of Christ. Take heed.

Finally, there is an absence of a word of spontaneous praise, gratitude and thanksgiving to the LORD God after the resounding victory against the powerful Midianites. He was unlike Deborah, the prophetess, who sang the song of victory and gave praise to the LORD. There was not such outburst of joy and praise to the LORD in this chapter. Christians must always remember to thank the LORD for all that He had done for us. Whenever we observe the Lord's Supper, we should lift our hearts with praise and thanksgiving to God for His love and goodness not just on that day but every day of the week, and throughout our life! This remembrance of the LORD is indeed a means of grace to strengthen our faith and increase our love for our LORD, for His Word, for His Church, for His people, for His work, and for His service.
AMEN