

With all the judges before Gideon, once God has rescued his people from oppression to idols and to enemies, the only further detail the writer of Judges gives us is the length of the peace they enjoyed under that judge's leadership. With Gideon, it is not so simple. Israel is on a general downward spiral. And we see two things for the first time in the career of Gideon: the people of Israel beginning to backslide during, rather than after, the rule of a judge-saviour; and, secondly, there are deep flaws in the judge-saviour's rule.

1. The Danger of Success (vv. 10-21)

You will remember from last week that, as Gideon pursued the Midianites, and, in particular, Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian, he threatened to punish the Israelite towns, Sukkoth and Peniel, east of the Jordan, for refusing to provide food for his force of 300 exhausted men. Out of fear for their safety (from revenge attack by Midian), or was it their faithlessness (?), they had refused and so Gideon vowed to inflict punishment on them when he returned in triumph - by punishing the 77 elders of Sukkoth with desert thorns and briars and by tearing down the tower of Peniel. When he returns in triumph, his punishment on Peniel goes further than vowed as he not only pulls down the tower but also kills all the men of the town.

Verses 18 and 19 add a new detail to the narrative. It appears that the Midianite kings, Zebah and Zalmunna, had killed Gideon's own brothers, and that their deaths are what has made him so determined to catch them. Gideon's ruthless, remarkable pursuit has been motivated less by a desire to complete the deliverance of God's people than by a drive for personal vengeance - for the honour of his own family. This is why Gideon asks "Jether, his oldest son" to kill them (v. 20) - he wants to humiliate these kings by having them killed by a mere boy. In the end, Gideon performs the execution himself (v. 21), and with their deaths, victory is complete. But its manner points to a future under Gideon which will not be marked by real peace.

Gideon's need for honour and respect - and his violent, bitter rage at those who fail to give it to him (whether that be the town of Peniel or the two Midianite kings) - shows that his success in battle has been the worst thing for him. He has become addicted to and dependent on his success. There is a terrible spiritual danger involved in the receiving of any blessing. Success can easily cause us to forget God's grace, because our hearts are desperate to believe that we can save ourselves. God-given victory can easily be used to confirm the belief that, in fact, we have earned blessing for ourselves, and should receive the praise and glory for that success. For example, imagine a man who works extremely hard at his job because he needs to prove himself through financial success. What is the worst thing that can happen to him? The obvious answer is career failure. Of course, someone who is basing their happiness and identity on their work will be devastated by career failure. But at least, through the failure, he may stop idolizing career advancement. He may realize that status and money could never fulfil him. No, the worst thing that can happen to him is career success. Success will only confirm his belief that he can fulfil himself and control his own life. He will be more a slave to success and money than if he had failed. He will feel proud and superior to others. He will expect deference and even "bowing and scraping" from others.

Back in Judges 7: 15, when he and his servant Purah heard the dream of one of the Midianite soldiers and its interpretation, Gideon knew his own weakness and understood that victory could only be by God's grace and so he worshipped and honoured God. But that is the last time we see him doing that! Now, as chapter 8 draws to a close, he worships success and the honour it will bring him. He has forgotten who it is that called him, equipped him, reassured him, and won the battle against Midian for him. We, too, find it all too easy, don't we, to forget that everything about our salvation, and all of our good works, are gifts of grace, not of our own success? As Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus: "it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's

(Judges 8: 10-32; Philippians 2: 5-11)

workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2: 8-10). We need to remember that we are saved by grace when we fail. But we need to remember it much more when we succeed!

2. It's Tough to End Well (vv. 22-27, 29-32)

Now, as we come to verse 22, Israel asks Gideon to be a king: "The Israelites said to Gideon, "Rule over us - you, your son and your grandson - because you have saved us from the hand of Midian". Just as Gideon had begun to forget who it was who gave victory over Midian, so had the rest of Israel. The people reasoned, "Gideon, you should be our king because you beat Midian". Israel wanted to reject God's method of ruling his people. A judge is called and anointed by God, to deal with the crisis at hand and to lead the people back to living under his rule. But if Gideon says "Yes", Israel will have a king appointed by humans, and rule will be hereditary, passing down to the next generation of the king's family. Gideon discerns the underlying motive for asking for a king - they want to be ruled by a man, not by God (just like the nations, the peoples around them). With a king, they would not need to look to God for salvation, and wait for him to send a saviour. The desire for a king is actually another effort at self-salvation. Gideon turns down their request: "I will not rule over you.....The Lord will rule over you" (v. 23). They don't need a king to obey - rather they need to obey the King they already have - Yahweh, the Lord!

Verse 23 is really the last time that Gideon remembers who God is and who he is. Ironically and tragically, he almost immediately contradicts what he has just said. He has refused to be their king because that position and honour belong to God alone - but then he starts to assume the honour due to a king. He asks for a financial reward for their deliverance from the Midianites and becomes a very rich man (vv. 25-26). Then, we are told, "Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town" (v. 27).

What is going on here? The ephod was part of the high priest's clothes. It was a sleeveless tunic worn over his other garments. It was made of costly and colourful materials - gold, blue, purple, scarlet, fine linen. Attached to the ephod was a breastplate in which 12 precious stones (representing the 12 Israelite tribes) were set in four rows. There was a pocket or pouch in the breastplate which contained the Urim and Thummin - two stones that were used to receive "Yes" or "No" answers from God. The ephod was worn by the high priest in the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting where God was present among his people, which at this point of time was located at Shiloh (Judges 18: 31). The ephod designated the true place of God's dwelling, and was a way to discern God's will in times of crisis.

Ordinarily, the ephod would be with the current high priest wherever the ark and tabernacle were located - namely Shiloh. In making his own copy, Gideon essentially sets up his home town as a rival place of worship. He wants to encourage people to come to him for guidance, to see his home town as the place where God can be found. Gideon has used God to consolidate his own position, instead of using his position to serve and be used by God. What was the effect of this? "All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there" (v. 27). The judge was supposed to turn people from unfaithfulness to the true God. Gideon actually leads them into unfaithfulness!

Christians today do not deal with ephods, high priests, or tabernacles and yet we may have this same thirst for more. We may long for more than what God has already given to sustain us and to provide nurture and direction. Sometimes Christians are not content merely to walk obediently in line with God's Word, trusting God's providence and goodness to direct them in the proper path. No, rather, they want more - they must have a specific, direct word from God about what they should do in their particular situation or problem. So they say, "The Lord said to me that I should....."or" God/the Holy Spirit spoke to me, telling me that.....". Be careful of wanting more than God has provided lest you be led astray! I would even suggest that we go ephod-making in the way we ignore God's provision of the Lord's Supper as the means of Christian renewal. Often retreats or

(Judges 8: 10-32; Philippians 2: 5-11)

calls for people to come forward after a service and rededicate their lives to Christ can involve neglecting God's wonderful provision in the Lord's Supper. Surely the Lord's Supper is God's instrument for rededication which was given to us by Christ and has stood from the birth of the church. Each time it is served it is a clear call to every Christian present to offer himself or herself once again to the Lord. I am not saying that Christian retreats, for example, are an exercise in idolatry. What I am saying is many Christians no less than the Israelites of Gideon's day have a passion for enriched extraordinary experiences while virtually ignoring the rich normal means of grace God has provided - in particular, the Word of God and the sacraments.

And in vv. 29-32 Gideon continued to act more and more like a king. His family arrangements - he had 70 sons by many wives, and one by a concubine - were those of someone aspiring to kingship. He even called his illegitimate son, "Abimelech" (v. 31) which means "My father is king"! What Gideon has rejected in name - being "king" over Israel - he then lives out in reality. Yet all this is only a few verses since Gideon turned down the kingship because "The Lord will rule over you"! How could Gideon refuse to become a king because he knows God is King, and then act like one? Quite simply, he knew something intellectually which had not really gripped his heart. He had a mental grasp of the doctrine of God's grace and rule, and he could give the right answer in some situations. But his heart had not really understood how this truth worked itself out in all of life. There was a huge and growing gap between what he believed about God in his head, and the motives of his heart and the actions of his hands. Most of us know the struggle to make our practice (v. 27) as good as our theology (v. 23). It is always a danger for us that, after being used of God in some way, we mouth humility but we practice pride. Gideon's mistake was a failure to live out what he knew to be true - what Paul in Galatians 2: 14 called a failure to "walk in line with the gospel". This shadow of inconsistency and disappointment frequently hangs over God's servants. Gideon was hardly a rare exception - we see it, too, in the lives of kings like Solomon, Jehoshaphat, Uzziah and Hezekiah who, though basically faithful, all marred that faithfulness in some way before the end of their reigns.

The 19th century preacher, Charles Spurgeon, once warned younger Christians, "Don't go into the ministry to save your soul". He knew it is very easy for us to use church leadership not to serve and honour God, but to win influence and honour for ourselves. Of course, like Gideon, we still say that God is King - but we want people to look to us for guidance, for answers, for salvation. We need to be needed. But how wonderful to look at the One each of the judges of Israel is a shadow of and see how he used his position. Unlike Gideon, he had every right to command service as a King - after all he is the very Son of God. Unlike Gideon he is the tabernacle, God's ultimate dwelling-place on earth. Yet Jesus resisted Satan's temptation to rule in power over the nations (Luke 4: 5-8), because he "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10: 45). Indeed, "He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2: 8). He has ransomed us from our self-honouring reactions to success, and our self-hating responses to failure. He used his position as the Son of God to free us from needing respect or being crushed by lack of it. In him, God has given us the right to become children of God. And, indeed, through faith in him that is what we are. Here is the One - Jesus Christ our Lord - to whom we rightly should come in worship and adoration.

3. Tragic Loss (v. 28)

Finally, we meet a tragic loss implied in v. 28. "During Gideon's lifetime, the land had peace forty years". This means that the land had rest from war. No enemy incursions, no invaders stripping the land of its produce, no pillaging in villages. There is reason to underline 8: 28 - it is the last note of rest in Judges. After v. 28 the land no longer recovers its rest. This is a gift Israel loses - and enjoyment she forfeits. Contrary to some, Judges does not follow a recurring cycle of rebellion, repentance, rescue and rest but charts the progressive disintegration of a people who will not serve the God who saves

(Judges 8: 10-32; Philippians 2: 5-11)

them. People who by persisting unfaithfulness and disobedience despise God's gift will find that gift withdrawn.

A young boy in Grade 4 was given a weekly allowance of \$10 by his father. The only requirement was that he tithe the amount to the church, leaving him with \$9 per week. His father expected him to save some money each week - putting it in his money box. However, the young boy and his best friend who walked to and from school together each day, loved all sorts of lollies and decided that twice a week after school - on Tuesdays and Fridays - they should visit the Candy Shop in the Mall and enjoy themselves. This went on for about 3 months when the best friend's mother made a comment to the boy's mother and the boy's father found that the money box was virtually empty. Suddenly there was no more allowance. Privilege abused - and removed.

So it is with Israel. After this the land will no longer recover its rest. Judges will show that God's mercy is deep but not easy going. It is tender but will not be trampled. It doesn't say to us "though it makes him sad to see the way we live, he'll always say, "I forgive" but rather "do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?" (Romans 2: 4).

It is tough to end well. If we are honest, we all know that. Our only assurance lies in the promise, "He will keep you strong to the end" (1 Corinthians 1: 8). But in Judges it will get worse - just wait till "My-father-is-king" becomes king!

Amen

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