

Material from Tim Kellers Leaders Guide on Living in Pluralistic Society

The failure of Gideon's house

Study 3 Judges 8:1 - 10:5

INTRODUCTION

Though Judges records a series of revival "cycles", the cycles become weaker as time goes on. Israel is on a downward spiral. We see this in the career of Gideon. For the first time, the people begin to "backslide" during the tenure of a Judge-Savior. And one of Gideon's sons, Abimelech, is a spiritual disaster when he becomes a ruler.

1. 8:1-17. Observe Gideon's response to the Ephraimites (vv.1-3) and the men of Succoth and Peniel (vv.4-17). a) How were the responses of all three groups to Gideon similar? b) What do you think Gideon was feeling on the inside when they dealt with these groups?

a) All three groups were showing Gideon a lack of respect. Ephraimites were essentially jealous. They wanted the glory. Their question: "*why didn't you call us to fight Midian?*" (v.1) is gratuitous. It is very unlikely that Ephraim would have responded to a call from Gideon or would have been willing to march under his command. Remember that Gideon was from a very low-status family in a low status tribe (6:15). Ephraim appears to have been one of the strongest tribes economically and militarily. Gideon (probably rightly) did not call on them because they would not have come with him. However, now they are very eager for "a slice of the pie". The victors over Midian would become very wealthy with all the booty and plunder. They were angry that they had not been brought in on the deal. Thus they are sharply criticizing Gideon, even though he is the victorious general. Actually they are really only confirming Gideon's original concerns. Even now they show him very little deference and respect, but rather they begin to berate and scold him. Despite all he has done for Israel, they will not give him any respect.

Succoth and Peniel, in a different way, also show a lack of respect in and gratitude to Gideon. They "*taunt*" (8:15) Gideon. In spite of his weariness and risk and the brilliance of his military work up to now, the towns refuse to give him supplies and support during his support. They say, "Do you have these Midianites in your hand? No? Then don't look to us for help!" They mock him and predict that he is not going to be able accomplish his objective — to overtake and capture them. If he doesn't accomplish his objective, the Midianites will regroup and return and destroy the towns that helped Gideon, as well as Gideon himself. So they are saying, "You've been lucky up to now! There is no way you are going to be successful. You are in over your head! Don't expect any help from us! Dig your own grave, mister. Leave us out of it." So again, Gideon finds that despite all he is accomplished, he still cannot command any respect from the people he has risked all to save.

b) Gideon's words and deeds give us some indication of what he was feeling. First, his pride has been very hurt. He very pointedly mentions how they *"taunted me"* (8:15). Despite all that he has done, he cannot command the admiration and honor he feels he deserves. Second, that hurt pride and "loss of face" has been turned into a violent rage. He tells Succoth that he will return to *"tear their flesh with desert thorns"* (8:7) and then he does so (8:16). The word *"tear"* means literally to "thresh". Grain was "threshed" out of its husks by pulling heavy, sharp objects over it. Gideon evidently "threshed" their flesh by flailing them with sharp thorns and briars. It is probable that all or most of them died. He also sacked and killed the men of the town of Peniel. So Gideon acted as a man who has experienced a painful loss of face or respect. He *"teaches them a lesson"* v.16 in respect by torturing and killing them.

2. 8:1-17 a) How is Gideon forgetting the "lesson of the 300" (7:2)? b) What kinds of emotions result when you forget God's grace?

a) In 7:2 God makes the startling claim, *"you have too many men for me to deliver Midian in their hands."* Why? *"that Israel may not boast against me that her own hand has saved her."* God says that there is a terrible spiritual danger involved in the reception of any blessing. Our hearts deeply believe that we can save ourselves by our own ability and power. So we use any victory in life as a confirmation of that belief. 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? Someone says: "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 be disabused of his illusion. He may realize that a person's dignity is not measured by his status or money, and he may realize that those things could never fulfill. No, the worst thing that can happen to him is "career success". Success will only confirm his belief that he can fulfill himself and control his own life. He will be more a slave to success and money than if he failed. He will feel proud and superior to others. He will expect deference and bowing and scraping from others.

This is why God wanted Gideon's victory to be so miraculous that everyone — including Gideon — would know it was an act of free grace. God wanted no one to begin to make an idol out of Gideon's military brilliance, nor an idol out of military power. He wanted no pride and arrogance to grow, which always leads to a violence. But we see here that despite all God's precautions, Gideon does expect honor and gratitude for what he has done. The people of Succoth and Peniel might be excused at disbelieving that Gideon with his little band would be able to finish off the Midianites. But Gideon does not say, "yes, I know it is hard to believe we can beat them. But it is all God's grace." Instead, he says essentially, *"you dare to doubt me? I'll show you my power when I get back."* Gideon's need for gratitude and respect shows that his success has been the worst thing for him. He is now becoming addicted and dependent on his success.

b) There are many answers to this question. Here are four possible ones. When we forget that we are saved by sheer grace, not by our performance, then —

- we may become filled with anxiety. "If I slip up, if I make a wrong move here, I could lose everything." But we must think, instead, "All the things I have are really gifts of grace. They aren't here because of my performance, but by God's generosity. He loves me enough to lose his only Son for me, surely he will continue to give me what I need. Console yourself"
- we may become filled with pride and anger. "I am not getting what I deserve! People are not treating me right! Who do they think they are?" But we must think, instead, "All the things I have are really gifts of grace. I have never gotten what I deserve — and I never will! If God gave me what I deserved, I'd be dead. Humble yourself."
- we may become filled with guilt. "I have blown it! My problems mean he's abandoned me." But we must think, instead, "All the things I have are the results of God's grace. I never earned them to begin with — so I couldn't have un-earned them. He accepted me long ago even though he knew I would do this. This was in my heart all along — I just didn't see it, but he did. He's with me now. Be confident, Self."
- we may become filled with boredom and lethargy. "Sure, I'm a Christian. Sure I have good things. So what?" But we must think, instead, "All the things I have — every one — is a gift of grace. The very fact I am a Christian is a miracle. Be amazed. Be in wonder, Self."

3. a) 8:1-17. Why do you think Gideon's response to Succoth and Peniel was different than to Ephraim? (refer to 7:24-25) b) 8:18-21. What do we learn here is the reason that drove Gideon with only 300 men to pursue relentlessly (8:4) and attack a superior (8:10) force? c) One commentator says that Gideon proves we must "beware of the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit!" What do you think that means? What does it mean for us?

a) So why does Gideon's responses become increasingly violent? Why does he control himself with Ephraim but grow increasingly uncontrolled as the chapter goes on? We should remember that Ephraim was simply a lot stronger militarily. They had already destroyed two of the kings of the Midianites (7:24- 25) while Gideon had as of yet not captured any. Perhaps Gideon was simply intimidated by them. He could not strike at them, because he didn't have the power. The snub and scolding by Ephraim was hard to take, but he held his tongue. However, now the "smart" of his humiliation before them made it harder and harder to take the taunts of Succoth and Peniel. Gideon simply stored his hurt and anger until the accumulated weight of it became too much for him to hold back. So the reason for Gideon's increasingly violent temper is the power of accumulated bitterness.

b) We get a shock when we get to 8:18. He asks them, "*what about the men you killed at Tabor?*" We here learn something that the narrator has not told us until now. These two kings had killed Gideon's brothers. And he admits (v.19) that he would not have destroyed them otherwise. In other words, Gideon's ruthless, remarkable pursuit and brave attack had really been motivated by a desire for personal vengeance. This is why Gideon now asks his oldest son, Jether, only a boy, to kill them. It would be both humiliating to the enemy to have a mere youth do the execution, and it would be "fitting" (in Gideon's mind) to have his son kill the murderers of his own uncles. But this

is also both bloodthirsty and cruel. Poor Jether is petrified, and so are Zebah and Zalmunna. (One commentator says that a boy could “hack and bungle the execution”. They urged Gideon to do the job, since it would be both less painful and less humiliating.)

c) Michael Wilcock writes:

Gideon has become, even on the testimony of his enemies, a man of majesty (8:18) and strength (8:21). But there is something less than admirable at the heart of him. For all the development of his great abilities. Beware the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit!

- Wilcock, p. 86.

The “gifts of the Spirit” are abilities for doing, while the “fruit of the Spirit” are character qualities of being. “Gifts” are God-given abilities to lead, speak, think, counsel and otherwise perform. “Fruit” are qualities of love, joy, peace, humility, unselfishness, and so on. One of the greatest dangers for Christians is to “rest on our gifts” while neglecting the cultivation of fruit. We may flatter ourselves because we help so many people, or because we are able to lead ministries, or because we have deep Biblical knowledge that therefore we are walking with God. But underneath we may be harboring selfishness, pride, rage, anxiety that is not being dealt with by prayer and God’s grace. Gideon is an example. He has become remarkable in his abilities. He is now a great leader, with God’s help. But he has not cleansed his heart of pride, fear, and anger with a knowledge of God’s grace. This means that we too must not neglect the “interior life” of prayer, repentance, and self-examination.

Background Note:

The ephod of the high priest (Exodus 28) was a breast plate that covered the wearer’s front and back. It was covered with ornamental gold patterns and studded with gems. On the front of the breastplate were the Urim and Thummim — two stones that were used to receive ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers from God. (Many believe that they were two sided stones, much like coins. When they were ‘flipped’, two ‘up-sides’ meant yes, two ‘down-sides’ meant no, and a mixed result meant ‘no answer’.) Gideon’s ephod (8:24-27) was some sort of reproduction, and it was an effort to ascertain God’s answers to their questions. People came to worship it as an idol.

4. 8:22-35. a) Why did Gideon decline the offer of kingship? b) How could Gideon resist the invitation to rule in the place of God (v.22) yet worship an ephod in the place of God (v.27)?

a) Gideon is offered the kingship of all of Israel. The offer in v.22 is for one man to be the ruler of all the tribes, and to have that rule be a dynastic one, passing on down to Gideon’s descendants. This is a major departure from the rule of the judge. A judge was anointed by God as evidenced by his (or her) abilities to deal with the crisis at hand. But kingship would be appointed by human beings and would pass on down to others

automatically. The purpose of kingship over judgeship was ostensibly stability. But Gideon rightly discerns the underlying motivation for kingship. The people want a king rather than to be ruled directly by God (v.23). In other words, Gideon realizes that Israel's problems had not been due to the fact that they needed a stabilizing human king, but they were due to the fact that they had not obeyed their true, divine king fully. The desire to create a human king was really a slap in the face of God. It was an implicit statement that their problems had come because of their inadequate forms of government, rather than from their lack of loyalty to the Lord.

Ultimately, the desire to have a human king was really the desire to "wrest control" of their governance away from God. With a king, there would be no need to wait for God's choice of a savior. So the desire of kingship is another effort at self-salvation. They do not want to be dependent on God's grace and salvation.

b) Ironically, Gideon almost immediately contradicts the very thing he has just said. He asks for a financial reward for their deliverance. Then he takes the new wealth and creates his own copy of the ephod of the high priest, which is at the Tabernacle in Shiloh (18:31). The ephod was something that designated the true tabernacle where God chose to dwell, and it was also a way to discern God's will in times of crisis. But Gideon, in order to enhance the standing of his own house, makes his own copy. This means that he essentially sets up his own rival tabernacle. This is just as much a way of trying to "control" God as setting up a kingship. (In many ways, it is even more overt!) Gideon wanted people to come to him for God's guidance, instead of the tabernacle God himself designed. Gideon was using God to consolidate his power, instead of serving God.

How could Gideon do this? It is simple. He knew something intellectually which had not really gripped his heart. He had a mental grasp of the doctrine of God's grace, 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. A good example of this is Galatians 2:14. Peter believes the gospel that we are saved by sheer grace, so no one Christian is no better than any other. But though he knows this in his head, he instinctively recoils from eating with Gentile Christians. (He had been trained all his life to believe that pagan Gentiles were unclean and morally inferior to Jews.) Paul confronts him and says, "you are not walking *in line with the gospel*." What Peter knew quite well in his head he still had not completely grasped internally. Therefore he was functionally operating in a different way than he taught with his head and mouth. It is the same here. Gideon had enough idea about the dangers of self-salvation to reject the kingship, but he fell into idolatry somewhere else.

5. a) What good thing becomes an "ephod" and a "snare" in your life? b) How is prosperity a greater spiritual test than adversity?

a) This story means that any good thing can become a "snare" to us. When we think of "idolatry" we think of the worship of terrible blood-thirsty deities. But here, the worship of the priest's ephod is a way to tell us that very good things can be, in many ways, worse snares. God wants us to have friends, to have family relationships, to use our

gifts in vocation and career—but this shows us vividly that we can make these good things into ways to control God and to put him in our debt and to save ourselves through our performance. Anything that we use in that way “snares” and enslaves us. We have to have them, we have to succeed because they are the way we are going to make it in life.

This story is a very vivid warning for also for Christians who are the most active in church and ministry. The Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon once warned his ministry students, “don’t go into the ministry to save your soul”. He knew that it was very possible to actually rely on your service to God *as* your salvation. You can very easily “rest spiritually” in your service to God as the reason he should favor you and help you and bless you. That is to make Christianity a savior rather than Christ. It is to worship the priest’s ephod. How subtle. How deadly.

b) Thomas Carlyle was reputed to have said: “only one in a hundred passes the test of prosperity”. When Gideon was a reluctant, frightened recruit he so deeply distrusted his own competence that he needed multiple assurances from God that he would be helped by divine grace. But by the end of his life, Gideon has built an empire and is pursuing advantage for his own family and his own glory rather than God’s. He no longer goes to God for assurance. He is quite sure of himself, and so he falls.

In many ways, adversity is not as spiritually dangerous as prosperity. In adversity we are shown our true weakness and need for God. In adversity, we come to see the things our hearts trust rather than God. In prosperity, we are not forced to see any of this. We saw in early chapter 8 that Gideon had neglected to work into his heart what he had learned that night of the trumpets — that God’s salvation was by grace. Continued success enabled him to continue to neglect the examination of his own heart. In the end, Gideon did not change Israel because his own heart was not changed.

6. 9:1-57. a) How is the story of Abimelech distinctly different than that of every other leader we have profiled? b) Why would the narrator devote so much space to this? c) How did Gideon’s actions sow the seeds for the disaster of Abimelech (8:29-31) d) How does the parable of the bramble bush (vv.7-21) shed light on the meaning of the narrative?

a) Up until this chapter, there has been a very familiar cycle or sequence. First, the people fall into sin, then they cry out to the Lord for help. Third, God raises up a Judge or savior who then leads a rescue. But now we have a complete departure in the person of Abimelech. First, why he rises. Every other figure is brought into leadership by God. But this man — Abimelech — is brought on to the scene because he is a son of Gideon. Second, how he governs. The other figures govern on the basis of some revelation from God. But here authority is not a matter of judging or delivering but rather is a naked exercise of power. Third, his source of strength. It takes some time for the reader to realize that nowhere in this narrative, from 8:34 to 10:6 is the Lord mentioned by name.

b) What we have is a picture of society and leadership with God completely out of the picture. There is nothing more important to see.

c) Gideon lived the life of an Eastern potentate, having many wives and concubines. This always is destructive to the lives of the women and children. Abimelech means “my father is king” — a very odd name, considering that Gideon turned down the kingship. It may mean that Gideon was very proud of his power and/or wished he had been made king. Abimelech, as a mixed race child of a concubine, would have certainly had lower status growing up. His resentment and lust for power and respect would bear bitter fruit.

d) The trees are looking for a king. The olive tree, the fig tree, and the vine all produce very valuable products. Oil, figs, and wine were the staples of the Palestinian economy. If anyone should be king of the trees, they surely are qualified. But finally, the bramble bush volunteers to be king. But the bramble bush does not provide anything useful for anyone. First, it is too short and scraggly to provide shade from the heat, and the only thing that can come out of it is not oil or fruit, but fire. Bramble bushes often caught fire which spread to the other plants and trees to destroy them. Wise horticulturists always removed bramble bushes that were growing near any valuable plants. So the kingship of the bramble bush will inevitably lead to disaster. Only fire can be the fruit of such a plant.

Jotham is simply saying that “your sins will find you out”. Evil always destroys itself. Breaking God’s laws set up strains in the fabric of the universe that will always lead to disaster. Gideon’s actions distorted the heart of Abimelech. Abimelech’s rise to power sowed the seeds of the destruction of Shechem. There is no escape for or from evil.

7. 10:1-5. What is so striking about the simple record of the two judges, Tola and Jair?

These verses don’t tell us much about Tola and Jair, but they tell us volumes about God.

The terminology that Tola “*rose to save Israel*” and that “*he led Israel*” is the same language used of Deborah in 4:4-5. Remember that Deborah was, possibly the best of the judges, and here we see that God has raised up someone else who saved and led Israel in the same way.

But why? Did Israel cry out asking for mercy and help? No. If anything, the ninth chapter of Judges is the bleakest in the whole book. The people have completely abandoned God. He is not even named in the narrative. They have sunk to the depths and they are not even crying out in repentance, yet God sends them back to back (Tola, then Jair) Judge-Saviors. This is astonishing. Justice demands, surely, that this people be cut off. By rights, Israel should not survive as a nation. Yet God responds by sending 45 years of peaceful administration under these two men.

Here we see what we have seen all along — the tension between the conditionality and the unconditionality of God’s dealing with his people. On the one hand, he has allowed them to get very “burned” by their sin. They chose a bramble-bush as king, and

whenever we sin, fire comes out from it and burns us painfully. Yet now he responds by sending salvation *unconditionally*. In fact, it is probable that the only reasons the Israelites repent in chapter 10 (and they do it very thoroughly, we will see) is because God through Tola and Jair has provided “space” — rest — that enables repentance and renewal to grow again. Tola and Jair is sheer grace — they are not a response to *anything* good that Israel does at all.

Is God being unjust? If we did not have the New Testament, we would have to conclude that he is. Only the cross will show us that God’s truth and justice are not being abandoned in favor of his mercy. Because of the death of Jesus, God is both “just” and “justifier” of those who believe (Romans 3:26). It also means that we have the confidence that he will never leave us or forsake us.