

“As the Sand That Is On the Seashore ”

The ninety-eighth in a series: “I Will be Your God and You Will Be My People.”

Texts: Judges 7:1-8:3; Revelation 20:7-10

Gideon is yet another in the series of Israel’s unlikely judges. By nature, Gideon was a timid man. The youngest son of Joash, on whose land stood a shrine dedicated to Canaanite gods Baal and Ashtoreth, Gideon’s family was an unimportant clan from the tribe of Manasseh, living near Ophrah in the Jezreel Valley. But when the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon and summoned him to be the next judge to rescue Israel from its current oppressor (the Midianites), Gideon is transformed from a double-minded man into a skilled leader, a man who will now guide Israel to a stunning victory over a vastly superior enemy. But once the peace is secured and Midian has been defeated, Gideon will use his power and prestige to take personal revenge on his enemies, and he will refuse to be Israel’s king. But when Gideon creates an Ephod (a priestly garment), which became an object of worship in Israel, and a snare to both Gideon and his family, his legacy is sadly tarnished. Yes, Gideon was transformed into a mighty warrior and he delivered his people while facing overwhelming odds. But Gideon is clearly a sinful man, and his time as judge reminds us that Israel needs a king, and that YHWH must send a Messiah to save his people from our sins, something no earthly judge can do.

As we resume our series on the Book of Judges, we are in the midst of that section of this book which deals with the life of Gideon. The story of Gideon has three main parts. In the first part of the story (6:1-8:3) we learn of God’s call of Gideon to be the fifth in a series of judges (deliverers). Throughout this first section, the focus is upon Gideon’s personal transformation from a timid man into a skilled warrior, as we read of YHWH’s stunning defeat of a vastly superior Midianite army. In the second part of the story (8:4-23), we will see how Gideon’s fame and power led to his own sense of self-aggrandizement, as Gideon’s legacy is greatly tarnished. Finally, we see the sad consequences of all of this in Judges 8:29-9:57 (the third part of the account of Gideon) with the account of Abimalech, Gideon’s son by a concubine. As one writer puts it, Israel’s history during the reign of Abimalech sounds more like a chapter from a Canaanite history book than the history of God’s covenant people.¹ Like the other judges we have seen, Gideon is a mixed bag. When given God’s Spirit, he acts heroically, yet by nature he is a weak and vacillating man, who, after defeating the Midianites, leaves the nation in as poor a shape (if not worse), than it was when God called him.

Before we turn to our text (Judges 7:1-8:3), in which we read of YHWH’s stunning defeat of the Midianites through an audacious plan on the part of Gideon, we need to recall the horrible circumstances facing Israel at the time of Gideon’s call. The Midianites had a long and rather friendly history with Israel until the time of the Exodus, when the Midianites tried to lead the Israelites away from YHWH (recounted in Numbers 25). Eventually, Israel defeated the Midianites as described in Numbers 31. By the time of Gideon (perhaps several hundred years later), the Midianites had regrouped and were seeking to settle an old score with the Israelites.

The Midianites were a semi-nomadic people who lived in the northern part of the Sinai desert and in Western Arabia. They had formed an alliance with another of Israel’s old enemies (the Amalekites), as well as a number of other unnamed tribes from the East. It is clear from the report in Judges 6, that God

¹ Block, Judges, Ruth, 308-309.

raised up this alliance to chasten his disobedient people (Israel). In his providence, YHWH directed these nations to enter Canaan and overpower Israel. A number of scholars believe that about this time there may have been a severe drought or famine in the area inhabited by these tribes, forcing them to look for relief in Canaan. When the Midianites crossed the Jordan and entered the promised land, the Israelites put up no organized resistance to the invaders. By the time of Gideon, the Midianites had been camped throughout Canaan for seven years, taking the bounty of the land for their own, while allowing their many animals to graze throughout Israel, destroying the land so that it was useless to the Israelites.

The Midianites plundered everything they could get their hands on, and things were so bad that in Judges 6:3 we read that many of the people of Israel were forced to hide in caves or live in the mountains to escape. In fact, when Gideon is first introduced in Judges 6:11, he's said to be grinding wheat in a winepress so as to keep the fruit of his labor hidden from the Midianites who were marauding throughout that part of Israel. Gideon's efforts to hide his wheat is an indication to the reader of both Gideon's timidity, as well as how difficult things had become throughout all of Israel. Since Gideon's home is in Ophrah in the northwestern portion of Israel, and quite far from the Jordan River and southeastern frontier where the Midianites lived, we see the far-ranging extent of the Midianite occupation.

When the Angel of the Lord (the preincarnate Christ) first appeared to Gideon, Gideon dares to question the Angel of the Lord about why, in Gideon's estimation, God had abandoned Israel. Gideon even dared to ask the Angel for a sign so that Gideon might be assured that the Angel was indeed the messenger of YHWH. But when Gideon brings a present (a meal) to the Angel, and then fire consumes the food when the Angel touches it with his staff, Gideon is convinced that this was indeed the Angel of the Lord and that he was very fortunate that the Angel had not struck him dead. When the Angel appeared to Gideon later that night, Gideon was commanded to use two of his father's bulls to tear down the shrine to Baal and an Ashtorah pole that had been built on his father's land. Gideon did as the Angel commanded, but Gideon tore down the high place under cover of darkness. He also sacrificed one of his father's prized bulls as a burnt offering (a sin offering) as commanded. But Gideon made sure he did this so that his father and the citizens of Ophrah couldn't see him do it. In this we see Gideon's willingness to do the Lord's will, yet we see his fear of his father and his neighbors.

When the sun came up the next morning, and the citizens of Ophrah saw what had happened to their beloved shrine, they demanded that Gideon be put to death, when in fact, the Mosaic law required that it was those who led Israel after false Gods who were to be put to death. That no one could remember what the law of God required of the people of Israel, is a clear and tragic indication as to how far Israel had fallen into unbelief and apostasy—this is what we've been calling Canaanization. Once vindicated by his father before the citizens of Ophrah, Gideon (which is a nickname meaning "hacker") is renamed "Jerubbaal." This is a confirmation of Gideon's call to become the next deliverer of Israel. At this point, the Lord is said to have "clothed" Gideon with the Holy Spirit, and this formerly timid man was soon sounding the war trumpet throughout the entire region, summoning the men of Israel to take up arms to fight against the Midianites, who had assembled a formidable army in the Jezreel Valley, including their allies the Amalekites and others from the East.

Although Gideon was sounding the battle trumpet, summoning the armies of Israel for war in the face of this serious threat, Gideon returns to his double-minded and vacillating ways. Soon he is pleading with YHWH to give him yet another sign—that of the famous fleece. On two consecutive nights the Lord graciously responded to Gideon's doubts, confirming Gideon's plea to leave the fleece dry while the ground around it was wet, while on the next night, the fleece was wet, while the ground around it remained dry. This is not a sign of faith, but a sign of Gideon's own double-mindedness. With his

courage steeled, Gideon was finally ready to lead the man of Israel into battle—the theme of Judges 7.

It is with all of this in mind, that we to the first part of our text—Judges 7:1-18, when Gideon assembles the army of Israel and is then ordered to pare it down to a mere 300 men.

The men from Naphtali, Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun learned of the presence of a Midianite army and quickly assembled under the leadership of Gideon. No doubt, they knew that a battle was inevitable and that the final outcome was in doubt. As we read in verse 1, *“Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the people who were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod. And the camp of Midian was north of them, by the hill of Moreh, in the valley.”* That the author of Judges uses both names for Gideon here, is clearly indicative of Gideon’s double-mindedness. That Gideon is the one to lead this army is also indicative in the fact that Gideon has responded to God’s call to lead Israel. The spring of Harod is directly opposite the place where the Midianite army is camped. While it is a well-watered and an easily defensible position, the name “Harod” is related to the Hebrew verb “to tremble.”² This is quite fitting in light of the fear then sweeping through the Israelite armies upon seeing the strength of the Midianite army, despite YHWH’s assurance that Midian will be completely defeated.

When the time came for battle, YHWH completely surprises Gideon with the news that Gideon’s army is too large—it must be pared down. *“The Lord said to Gideon, ‘The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”* Gideon and the men of Israel must learn the difficult lesson that YHWH’s power is made perfect in human weakness. When we are weak, we must rely on the power of God. YHWH does not want the men of Israel boasting about the forth-coming victory which is sure to come. He wants the size of the army of Israel decreased, so that when it is all over, there will be absolutely no doubt that YHWH alone has given Israel the victory. He is Israel’s shield and defender. YHWH alone can give Israel the victory.

YHWH gives Gideon the following command in verses 3-7. *“Now therefore proclaim in the ears of the people, saying, ‘Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home and hurry away from Mount Gilead.’ Then 22,000 of the people returned, and 10,000 remained.”* The 10,000 men who remained were still too many. *“And the Lord said to Gideon, ‘The people are still too many. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there, and anyone of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall go with you,’ shall go with you, and anyone of whom I say to you, ‘This one shall not go with you,’ shall not go.”* So he brought the people down to the water. *And the Lord said to Gideon, ‘Every one who laps the water with his tongue, as a dog laps, you shall set by himself. Likewise, every one who kneels down to drink.’ And the number of those who lapped, putting their hands to their mouths, was 300 men, but all the rest of the people knelt down to drink water. And the Lord said to Gideon, ‘With the 300 men who lapped I will save you and give the Midianites into your hand, and let all the others go every man to his home.’”* We can only imagine Gideon’s stunned reaction as YHWH pares does his army of 32,000 down to a mere 300! Using these 300 men who cupped their hands to drink, YHWH will save the entire nation. And so as we read in verse 8. *“So the people took provisions in their hands, and their trumpets. And he sent all the rest of Israel every man to his tent, but retained the 300 men. And the camp of Midian was below him in the valley.”* How on earth will 300 men defeat the huge Midianite army that awaits just down the hill to the north? From a human point of view, this was an impossibility.

YHWH will now reveal to Gideon the way this will come about in verses 9-14. *“That same night the*

² Block, Judges, Ruth, 275.

Lord said to [Gideon], 'Arise, go down against the camp, for I have given it into your hand. But if you are afraid to go down, go down to the camp with Purah your servant. And you shall hear what they say, and afterward your hands shall be strengthened to go down against the camp.' Then he went down with Purah his servant to the outposts of the armed men who were in the camp. And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the people of the East lay along the valley like locusts in abundance, and their camels were without number, as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance. When Gideon came, behold, a man was telling a dream to his comrade. And he said, 'Behold, I dreamed a dream, and behold, a cake of barley bread tumbled into the camp of Midian and came to the tent and struck it so that it fell and turned it upside down, so that the tent lay flat.' And his comrade answered, 'This is no other than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given into his hand Midian and all the camp.'" Upon hearing the dream of one of the Midianite sentries, Gideon knows that victory is assured.

The timid man is now fully confident and ready to lead his men. As we read in verse 15, *"As soon as Gideon heard the telling of the dream and its interpretation, he worshiped. And he returned to the camp of Israel and said, 'Arise, for the Lord has given the host of Midian into your hand.'"* Gideon makes immediate preparation for battle. As we learn in verses 16-18, *"And he divided the 300 men into three companies and put trumpets into the hands of all of them and empty jars, with torches inside the jars. And he said to them, 'Look at me, and do likewise. When I come to the outskirts of the camp, do as I do. When I blow the trumpet, I and all who are with me, then blow the trumpets also on every side of all the camp and shout, 'For the Lord and for Gideon.'"* Gideon's small force of 300 will seem like a mighty army when they rush the Midianite camp in the dead of night. The worst thing that can happen to an army is for panic to sweep through its ranks. If the deception works, 300 hundred men will sound like a mighty host and if they catch the Midianites by surprise, maybe they will break and run.

As we will see in verses 19-23, the outcome is exactly what YHWH had promised to his people. As a sign that YHWH always keeps his promises, the powerful Midianite army now threatening Israel will be swiftly eliminated. As we read in verses 19-21, *"So Gideon and the hundred men who were with him came to the outskirts of the camp at the beginning of the middle watch, when they had just set the watch. And they blew the trumpets and smashed the jars that were in their hands. Then the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the jars. They held in their left hands the torches, and in their right hands the trumpets to blow. And they cried out, 'A sword for the Lord and for Gideon!'"* Waiting until the darkest hour of the night (between midnight and 2:00 A.M.), Gideon and his men successfully approached the perimeter of the Midianite camp. Getting into place, they 300 blew their horns, smashed their jars, held their torches high, and then shouted out the battle cry.

The Midianites were caught completely unawares. The result of Gideon's plan was that panic swept throughout the entire Midianite camp. In the last half of verse 21 and following, we read how this came to pass, *"Every man stood in his place around the camp, and all the army ran. They cried out and fled. When they blew the 300 trumpets, the Lord set every man's sword against his comrade and against all the army."* Gideon's men held their place on the perimeter, while the Midianite panic was so great that as their soldiers were awakened to the sounds of an enemy army in their camp, they struggled to get their gear and take their places, only to see others fleeing for their very lives. That kind of panic is disastrous to an army and it spread almost instantaneously. The Midianites put up no defense at all, assuming that all was already lost. Under those circumstances the only thing you could do was flee.

In fact, we learn in verse 22 that *"the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the border of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath."* While we don't know with any certainty where these places were,

we do have some clear indication from what follows that the Midianites fled toward the East, hoping to escape back across the Jordan River, where they might find safety in the desert.³

Seeing the dreaded Midianite army in full flight, Gideon forgets (or neglects, as the case may be) the Lord's instructions. Instead of finishing the job with the 300 men as the Lord instructed, Gideon now summons those same men who had originally assembled for battle, but who left camp, or who were sent home at YHWH's command. And so it is with a new-found zeal and courage, we read in verse 23 that *"And the men of Israel were called out from Naphtali and from Asher and from all Manasseh, and they pursued after Midian."* This was now truly a rout—the Midianite army never was able to regroup. In fact, given the flight of the Midianites toward the Jordan from whence they had come, Gideon saw an opportunity to wipe out the whole lot of them. And so according to verse 24, *"Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, 'Come down against the Midianites and capture the waters against them, as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan.' So all the men of Ephraim were called out, and they captured the waters as far as Beth-barah, and also the Jordan."*

Ephraim is located in the hill county to the south of the Jezreel valley. While the Israelite armies from the northern tribes would pursue the Midianite army toward the east, the men of Ephraim are to get ahead of the Midianite army and take control of the crossing points along the Jordan River. That would effectively cut-off the Midianites, preventing them from escaping back across the Jordan. In verse 25, that is exactly what happened. *"And they captured the two princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. They killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and Zeeb they killed at the winepress of Zeeb. Then they pursued Midian, and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon across the Jordan."* Not only had the entire Midianite army been routed by 300 men, they had been chased out of the Jezreel Valley all the way back to the Jordan River. What is more, two Midianite princes (Oreb—"raven," and Zeeb—"wolf") were captured by the men of Ephraim and beheaded. This was a total victory, and those princes who had so cruelly oppressed the people of Israel (forcing them to hide in dens and caves) have been defeated and their heads were now in possession of the men of Ephraim, the grizzly spoils of war.

Here, we come to a bit of a postscript in the story. In Judges 8:1, we learn that the men of Ephraim are angry with Gideon and come to complain about the way in which he has led the Israeli forces. *"Then the men of Ephraim said to him, 'What is this that you have done to us, not to call us when you went to fight against Midian?' And they accused him fiercely."* These men were very angry. Their complaint is that when Gideon originally summoned the men of Israel to take up arms against the Midianites, they were not included. In fact, the battle was already over and the Midianites were fleeing toward Jordan when Gideon's messenger finally showed up, asking them to cut-off the Midianites at the Jordan River. These men not only see it as a snub, they see as a matter of personal honor. Did Gideon not trust them? Did Gideon think them weak? And why didn't Gideon involve them in the battle, waiting until the last minute to summon them to take up arms?

Gideon now demonstrates a fair bit of diplomatic skill. His reply is very wise. *"And [Gideon] said to them, 'What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the grape harvest of Abiezer? God has given into your hands the princes of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb. What have I been able to do in comparison with you?'"* Gideon starts by minimizing his own

³ Block, Judges, Ruth, 283.

role in comparison to what the men of Ephraim have been able to do.⁴ He then offers a proverb in which he compares his own clan with that of Ephraim, and uses it to point out that the significance of his clan pales in comparison to the men of Ephraim. Sounding like a clever politician disarming his critics, Gideon then flatters them by acknowledging that they have produced the real spoils of the battle, the heads of Oreb and Zeeb, who must have been hated by the Israelites. Finally Gideon restates his own insignificance in what has just transpired. Throughout this Gideon shows his skills as a leader.

But it is what Gideon doesn't say that is troubling. When the Midian sentry spoke of Israel's God in verse 14, he used the name Elohim, not YHWH. Here, Gideon speaks of God in the same impersonal way. What does this tell us about Gideon? Furthermore, he never appeals to the fact that YHWH has given him his Spirit, and that YHWH called him to his current role. Gideon seems to have forgotten all about the fact that YHWH led him to reduce his army to 300 men before routing the Midianites, so all Israel would know that YHWH is the Lord. Gideon may be a skilled leader, but he's obviously forgotten the source of his great victory, and even though this episode ends positively when we read "*then their anger against him subsided when he said this,*" it is clear that the nation of Israel is divided, some want to fight when need be, others are unwilling. No one it seems, remembers God's covenant or the promised blessings and curses. In fact as we move into the next section of Judges—Gideon's life after this incident—and we will witness the nation continue its slide into unbelief and apostasy. And Gideon will do nothing to stop it. Indeed, it is Gideon who creates a cause for stumbling when he takes revenge upon his enemies and builds an Ephod (a priestly garment) which the people of Israel are soon worshipping.

IV. What then do we take with us from this passage?

Gideon's role in the defeat of the Midianites points us in two directions. As we see God raise up Gideon to rescue Israel from the Midianites, we see yet again that YHWH will not allow Israel's unbelief to frustrate his redemptive purposes. Even though Israel has fallen on hard times and even though the downward spiral will continue, God will allow his people to come under the covenant curse, while at the same time preserving his elect and continuing to prepare the way for a king (the monarchy) and a Messiah (Jesus Christ). Throughout all of this, God is working out his sovereign purpose.

If YHWH will do this for Israel how much more will he do this for the church. In Revelation 20:7-10, John speaks of a final eschatological battle at the end of the age. When John speaks of this battle, he speaks of the enemies of God as so numerous "*their number is like the sand of the sea.*" Indeed, this language is taken from Judges 7:12, when Gideon and his men looked out upon the Midianite army which threatened Israel's very existence. As we turn to our New Testament lesson, John is describing a similar situation for the church at the time of the end. When the thousand years (the inter-advental age) are over, John sees the following. "*And when the thousand years are ended, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations that are at the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them for battle; their number is like the sand of the sea. And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city.*" This is almost identical to the Midianite threat facing Israel in the days of Gideon. The dragon (Satan) had been allowed to assemble a Midianite army who oppressed Israel for seven years. If God had not raised up Gideon and his 300 men, all would have been lost. But YHWH would never allow that to happen.

At the time of the end, a similar thing will happen. John tells us that Satan will be released from the

⁴ Block, Judges, Ruth, 285.

abyss, that he will organize the nations against God's people, and just as in the days of Gideon, their number will be like the sand on the shore. But because we know the story of Gideon and the defeat of the Midianites, we know how the final battle will turn out as well. John foresees a victory even more dramatic than that of Gideon's. Says John *"but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."* Just as the Midianites could never defeat Israel—although God used them to chasten his disobedient people—so too, Satan can never defeat the church of Jesus Christ. It was Jesus himself who told us in Matthew 16:18, the gates of hell will not prevail against his church. And it is in Revelation 20:7-10 we see the outcome of the final battle.

Although the dragon rages and oppresses the people of God at the time of end, and a great apostasy occurs, nevertheless it is clear who wins in the end. This time it will not be Gideon's men who sound the trumpets. This time, it will be the heavenly host who sound the trumpet. And on that day, those who hate God and his Christ, will be forced to bow the knee and confess that Jesus Christ is the king of kings and Lord of Lords.

While Gideon's victory was stunning because the Midianites were as numerous as the sand of the sea and Israel stood no chance against, on the last day when the trumpet sounds the armies of heaven will appear in the sky and Jesus Christ will return in all his glory, and we will triumph in the end.