

“The Lord Will Rule Over You ”

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

Texts: Judges 8:4-35; 1 Timothy 6:2-16

Like many of you, I recall hearing countless sermons throughout the years which were basically character studies of the great saints from redemptive history. One of those saints was Gideon. If all you had was Judges 6-7 and Hebrews 11, you could reasonably conclude that Gideon was a great man of God, whom God used to save Israel at one of the nation’s darkest hours. That’s why the Gideon Society chose his name when beginning their world-wide ministry of distributing Bibles. In fact, the Gideons tell us that “Gideon was a man who was willing to do exactly what God wanted him to do, regardless of his own judgment as to the plans or results. Humility, faith, and obedience were his great elements of character.” But when you read the rest of the story of Gideon—Judges 8:4-35—it becomes all too clear that Gideon was a sinful man who used his power to take revenge upon his enemies. It was Gideon who made an ephod (a priestly garment) which became a stumbling block for the people of Israel. Therefore, Gideon’s character should be studied by all of us. Why? Is he a role model? No. We study him because we are just like him. We too are sinful from head to toe, and the only truly good things we do stem from the fact that God works in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. When left to ourselves, we’ll do just as Gideon did—we’ll use the good gifts God has given to us for our own personal gain and benefit.

As we continue our study of the Book of Judges, we are in that section of Judges which deals with the fifth in the series of judges (deliverers) whom God sent to rescue his people from a cruel oppressor. In Judges 6:1-8:3 (the first part of Judges’ account of the life of Gideon), we have seen God take this timid man and transform him into a mighty warrior who devised an audacious plan to defeat the Midianites, who were brutally oppressing the Israelites, to the point that many of God’s people were forced to live in caves or hide in the mountains. We have seen that the vacillating Gideon repeatedly sought a sign from the Lord to confirm his call and ensure that YHWH would fight on Israel’s side. When Gideon learned from a Midianite sentry that YHWH was going to give Israel a stunning victory over a huge Midianite army, finally, Gideon was willing to do as the Lord had commanded.

As YHWH commanded, Gideon pared down his army from 32,000 to 300 men. This was to make it crystal clear that YHWH gave Israel the victory when Gideon led his men into the Midianite camp in the middle of the night when Gideon’s men sounded their trumpets, smashed jars, lit torches, and shouted their battle cry. The Midianites were caught completely off-guard and panicked when they thought that an enemy army was in the midst of their camp. As the Midianites fled *en masse* east toward the Jordan River from whence they had come, Gideon called out the Israelite army who chased the Midianites back toward the Jordan, while the men of Ephraim (a neighboring tribe) were sent ahead of the Midianite army to take and hold the crossing points on the Jordan River. The men of Ephraim managed to capture two Midianite princes Oreb and Zeeb, who, apparently had caused the Israelites much grief during the Midianite oppression. These two princes were beheaded, their heads were given Gideon as the spoils of war. Although Midian had been defeated, soon they will be eliminated as a threat to Israel.

As we move into the second section of the author of Judges’ account of Gideon (Judges 8:4-35), we find another side to Gideon as it becomes all too apparent that the timid man has become a cruel tyrant as Gideon begins to use his power to serve his own ends—not the ends of the nation.

In verses 4-5 of Judges 8, we learn that Gideon and his 300 men have continued their pursuit of the Midianites. *“And Gideon came to the Jordan and crossed over, he and the 300 men who were with him, exhausted yet pursuing. So he said to the men of Succoth, ‘Please give loaves of bread to the people who follow me, for they are exhausted, and I am pursuing after Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian.’”* The distance from the battlefield in the Jezreel Valley to Succoth across the Jordan River is about 40 miles. Gideon’s men crossed the Jordan, and then came to Succoth (“Booths”), which was part of that land allocated by Moses and Joshua to the tribe of Gad. But even though this land was under control of one of Israel’s twelve tribes, the inhabitants are very suspicious of Gideon and his men when they arrive, hot on the trail of the fleeing Midianites.

Gideon and his men were hungry. Gideon asks the city council of Succoth for provisions so that he and his men can continue their pursuit of the two kings of Midian (Zebah and Zalmunna), who, so far, have not suffered the same fate as their sons Oreb and Zeeb. Together with their underlings (the princes Oreb and Zeeb) Zebah and Zalmunna were responsible for the marauding bands of Midianites and Amelakites who spent seven years oppressing the Israelites until YHWH finally routed the Midianite army through Gideon’s daring ploy. Gideon’s request from the city council of Succoth (his own countrymen) is a legitimate one. Gideon could have just have taken what, but he doesn’t. He demonstrates great respect.¹

The same does not hold true for the officials of Succoth, who flat-out reject Gideon’s request. *“And the officials of Succoth said, ‘Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your army?’”* It is difficult, if not impossible, to tell whether their answer is merely sarcastic, or if they are actually questioning the honor of Gideon’s men. It could also be that the reticence shown by the men of Succoth stems from the fact that they live across the Jordan from the rest of Israel (relatively close to the Midianites) and they may have had a genuine fear that if they help Gideon and his men, something bad might happen to them should Gideon fail to catch Zebah and Zalmunna. What if Zebah and Zalmunna escape from Gideon and they return to Succoth and take revenge against them for having helped Gideon? It is hard to be sure of the exact circumstances here.

But we do know their answer angers Gideon, whose diplomatic manner is gone as he responds to the officials of Succoth in kind. *“So Gideon said, ‘Well then, when the Lord has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, I will flail your flesh with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers.’”* In effect, Gideon tells the leaders of Succoth that he will take the law into his own hands and punish his own countrymen. Once Gideon catches the two Midianite kings, he threatens to return to Succoth and flail the men of Succoth with whips made from desert shrubs. Angry at this show of disrespect, Gideon moves on to the next village for provisions. *“And from there he went up to Penuel, and spoke to them in the same way, and the men of Penuel answered him as the men of Succoth had answered.”* Stunned by a yet second unwarranted rejection from his own countrymen, Gideon makes a similar threat to the men of Penuel, who likewise have rejected him. *“And he said to the men of Penuel, ‘When I come again in peace, I will break down this tower.’”* Gideon sees this too as a personal insult.

In light of these two incidents, it is clear that the tribal structure of Israel is coming apart at the seams. One Israelite tribe refuses to help another, because they have different and conflicting interests. The reaction of the Israelites to the east of the Jordan (in Gad) is completely unlike the reaction of the tribes in the northwest (Zebulun, Naphtali, Asher, Manasseh) who immediately rallied to Gideon’s call for help. The reaction from the tribe of Gad to Gideon’s request seems to a kind of turning point in the

¹ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 289.

narrative. From Gideon's threats against the men of Succoth and Penuel (who, granted, treated him poorly), it is clear that Gideon views his 300 man force as a private army. Instead of seeking God's will as to how to proceed—as he had repeatedly done earlier—suddenly, Gideon is making threats against his fellow Israelites and operating in terms of personal interest. Whatever anointing Gideon possessed from the Lord, it is now likely gone. Gideon's 300 men are doing Gideon's will, not the will of YHWH.²

Pressing on, Gideon soon captured his two targets. As we read in verses 10-12, "*Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor with their army, about 15,000 men, all who were left of all the army of the people of the East, for there had fallen 120,000 men who drew the sword. And Gideon went up by the way of the tent dwellers east of Nobah and Jogbehah and attacked the army, for the army felt secure. And Zebah and Zalmunna fled, and he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and he threw all the army into a panic.*" Karkor is about 100 miles to the east of the Dead Sea, and to the northwest of the Midianite homeland. Taking the route used by the trading caravans, Zebah and Zalmunna had managed to escape with their remaining 15,000 men.

The vast majority of the Midianite force (120,000) had either been wiped-out by the 32,000 man Israelite army when they tried to cross back across the Jordan, or, as is also possible from the text, the combined Midianite army (with their allies the Amelakites, and a number of unnamed tribes to east) had turned upon each other during the panic and fought among themselves. In any case, the 120,000 man Midianite army had now dwindled down to about 15,000 men. Gideon and his men eventually caught up with Zebah and Zalmunna and their army just to the north of what is now the city of Amman, the capital of Jordan. Once again, Gideon and his men were able to take the Midianites by complete surprise, throwing the already demoralized Midianite army into yet another panic, as well as capturing the two hated kings, Zebah and Zalmunna. Midian will no longer be any kind of a threat to Israel.

Meanwhile, on his return trip to Ophrah with his two captives in tow, we see yet another hint of the dramatic transformation of Gideon in verses 13-14. "*Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres. And he captured a young man of Succoth and questioned him. And he wrote down for him the officials and elders of Succoth, seventy-seven men.*" On his way home, Gideon and his men passed by Succoth, where they came upon a young man from the city who was then forced to write down the names of seventy-seven men who were, no doubt, the leaders of Succoth. Such men were usually the heads (elders) of the various clans who lived near the city. These men would gather at the gate of the city and conduct the city's business, much like a modern city council.

Presumably using the list of names Gideon had gleaned from the young man, we read in verses 15-17, that Gideon, "*came to the men of Succoth and said, 'Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, about whom you taunted me, saying, 'Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hand, that we should give bread to your men who are exhausted?'* And he took the elders of the city, and he took thorns of the wilderness and briers and with them taught the men of Succoth a lesson. And he broke down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city." Gideon's personal threats were carried out with great vengeance, as he openly taunts the men of Succoth, flogging them just as he had threatened to do earlier.

Next, Gideon went to Penuel and destroyed the city's tower (probably the main part of the city's defensive perimeter) and then ordered the death of all the men in that city. Mind you, while the men of Succoth and Penuel should have come to Gideon's aid, these people were not Canaanites. These men

² Block, Judges, Ruth, 290.

were Gideon's fellow Israelites. While some of the commentators speak of this event in terms of Gideon keeping his word and punishing these men because their offence against him was so great, I think the text is demonstrating that the timid man (Gideon) has become a cruel and blood-thirsty warlord, exacting revenge upon his brethren for simply not complying with his request for supplies.³ The story of Gideon has indeed taken a dark and very disturbing turn. Gideon has taken the law into his own hands, he has used his army to exact revenge, and there is not one hint that Gideon sought the will of the Lord before engaging in this cruel and tyrannical behavior.

Gideon's dark side surfaces again as Gideon now exacts revenge upon the two Midianite kings who brought so much suffering to Israel. Even here it is clear that Gideon is not concerned with the execution of justice, but with taking revenge. We see this in the question Gideon puts to his captives. "*Then [Gideon] said to Zebah and Zalmunna, 'Where are the men whom you killed at Tabor?'*" Tabor has not been mentioned so far. That something personal is going on can be seen with Zebah and Zalmunna's answer. "*They answered, 'As you are, so were they. Every one of them resembled the son of a king.'*" Something tragic happened at Tabor, instigated by the two Midianite kings. Although they attempt to flatter Gideon by telling him that his demeanor and appearance is that of a king, in effect, Zebah and Zalmunna tacitly admit to having put these men to death. There are no specifics given, but it is clear from the exchange between Gideon and his captives, both know exactly what had transpired.

In verse 19 we finally learn the reason for Gideon's question and the motive behind his desire for revenge. "*And [Gideon] said, 'They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the Lord lives, if you had saved them alive, I would not kill you.'*" Now, we see why this is so personal for Gideon. Zebah and Zalmunna had killed his own brothers. Had they spared his brothers' lives, Gideon would have let them live, but since they killed his siblings, Gideon pronounces the sentence of death upon them, using a solemn oath—as the Lord lives, you will die. No longer is this about justice, it is now about revenge. And Gideon invokes the name of the Lord to do so.

Refusing to do the deed himself, Gideon commands his own son to put the two kings to death. "*So [Gideon] said to Jether his firstborn, 'Rise and kill them!' But the young man did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a young man.'*" Using this embarrassing moment to show their defiance in the face of imminent death, we read in verse 21 that "*then Zebah and Zalmunna said, 'Rise yourself and fall upon us, for as the man is, so is his strength.'*" And Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and he took the crescent ornaments that were on the necks of their camels." Clearly, this is deeply personal. Hearing the insult from his captives, in great anger Gideon killed the two Midianite kings with his own hand, taking the crescent ornaments from the king's own camels as a final act of revenge. The timid man who hid his grain in a winepress, became a mighty warrior. Now he is a cruel tyrant, exacting revenge upon his own people as well as his personal enemies. The transformation of Gideon is complete and the picture is not a pretty one.⁴

³ Contrast the approaches of Cundall, Judges & Ruth (118-119) with that of Block, Judges, Ruth, who sees Gideon as an out of control general, no longer acting according to the rules of civility or nationality (292-293).

⁴ Block, Judges, Ruth, 295-296.

As the account of Gideon’s military career comes to an end, in verses 22-35, the focus shifts to Gideon’s legacy in Israel. This too is not a pretty picture.

While the author of Judges is not terribly impressed with Gideon’s behavior, the people of Israel see in Gideon a man who might be able to lead the nation. According to verse 22, “*Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, ‘Rule over us, you and your son and your grandson also, for you have saved us from the hand of Midian.’*” It is clear that Gideon’s role in Israel’s stunning defeat of the Midianite army, along with the death of the dreaded princes Oreb and Zeeb, and kings Zebah and Zalmunna, has led the people of Israel to admire Gideon greatly. Fearing that yet another neighboring tribe would come and do what the Midianites had done, the Israelites want Gideon to rule over Israel. This would unify the nation.

While the word “king” is not used here, it is clear that “kingship” (the establishment of a monarchy) is what the people of Israel have in mind, because the Israelites do make it clear that they want Gideon’s own sons and grandsons to be his successors. Ironically, Gideon himself may have triggered this when he took the crescent ornaments (royal symbols) from the two Midianite kings. If the Midianites had kings, why couldn’t the Israelites? The sad fact is that there is no indication that this was YHWH’s doing, rather the people of Israel are rewarding Gideon because he led the nation to a great victory, and they are counting on Gideon, not YHWH, to defend them in the future.⁵

Gideon’s response to the offer is yet another indication of how Israel’s judges are a mixed bag. In terms of his reply to the people’s request, Gideon’s answer (in verse 23) is straightforward. “*Gideon said to them, ‘I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you.’*” Gideon knows that YHWH has not sanctioned this, and he says wants no part of it. YHWH is Israel’s king. So far, so good. But again, it is what Gideon doesn’t say that raises questions. And while Gideon defers and refuses to be king, he makes no mention of YHWH’s role in Israel’s victory. While the Israelites praise Gideon for the victory over Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah, and Zalmunna, the reader already knows that much of Gideon’s bravery was really a desire for revenge. While Gideon is often praised for refusing to be king when he acknowledges that YHWH alone is king, there is the sense here that while Gideon is not willing to be king, he is already functioning as one.⁶ And the sad fact is, the people of Israel should be praising God, not Gideon, for the victory over the Midianites.

Gideon’s response is technically correct, but what comes next shows us that Gideon’s actions don’t match his words. As we read in verses 24-25, “*And Gideon said to them, ‘Let me make a request of you: every one of you give me the earrings from his spoil.’ (For they had golden earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.) And they answered, ‘We will willingly give them.’ And they spread a cloak, and every man threw in it the earrings of his spoil.*” When Gideon asks his men for their spoils of battle, they submit to him, just as one would submit to a king. When Gideon receives their gold, he’s doing what every other king in that era did—stocking his royal treasury. “*And the weight of the golden earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple garments worn by the kings of Midian, and besides the collars that were around the necks of their camels.*” All of this is packed with royal symbolism. Yes, Gideon has stated he does not want to be king, because YHWH is Israel’s king. But yet the whole time, Gideon’s acting like Israel’s king.

⁵ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 296-298.

⁶ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 299.

It is what Gideon does with the gold collected from his people that reveals the depths of his sense of self-importance. According to verse 27, *“and Gideon made an ephod of it and put it in his city, in Ophrah. And all Israel whored after it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and to his family.”* An ephod was the high priest’s breastplate and garment. Not only did Gideon have no right to create such a thing—In Exodus 28, God had commanded Moses to make an ephod for use by the high priest only, and Gideon wasn’t Moses, nor a high priest—this is the saddest indication yet of Israel’s spiritual health. What is worse, we are told that all Israel came to worship Gideon’s ephod.

The bitter irony is that the same man who was given God’s Spirit and who delivered Israel from the dreaded Midianites, is now acting like a king and even creates an idol—an idol which soon became a snare to both Gideon and his family. A snare has to do with Israel’s involvement with paganism and is something which leads God’s people away from him.⁷ As we read in verses 29-31, the downward slide continues. *“Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house. Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech.”* Even though Gideon refused to be king, he establishes a royal dynasty of sorts in his own hometown, he takes a Canaanite concubine in addition to his wives—in direct violation of the Mosaic commandment not to do so. Sadly, this Canaanite woman will give Gideon a son, Abimelech (whose name means “My father is a king”). As we will see when we return to our series, Abimelech will wreck havoc upon the nation and upon Gideon’s entire family.

In verse 28, we learn that Gideon secured forty years of peace for the people of God—*“So Midian was subdued before the people of Israel, and they raised their heads no more. And the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon.”* But the closing verses of the story of Gideon, tell us that while Gideon may have believed God’s promise, his legacy in Israel is at best a mixed bag. According to verses 32-35, *“And Gideon the son of Joash died in a good old age and was buried in the tomb of Joash his father, at Ophrah of the Abiezrites. As soon as Gideon died, the people of Israel turned again and whored after the Baals and made Baal-berith their god. And the people of Israel did not remember the Lord their God, who had delivered them from the hand of all their enemies on every side, and they did not show steadfast love to the family of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in return for all the good that he had done to Israel.”* Because he’s mentioned in Hebrews 11, Gideon believed God’s promise and led Israel to victory over their enemies. But Gideon also left the nation in poorer shape than he found it. His own people turned on him—a sad reminder that those who exploit their power are inevitably hated by those whom they rule. Gideon is a justified sinner and while he rescues the nation from peril, his own sin causes his downfall. Once again, we see that it will take God in human flesh to save us from our sins.

What, then, can we take with us from this passage?

In 1 Timothy 6, the apostle Paul warns us of many of the same things that Gideon brought upon Israel. He speaks of men who *“teach a different doctrine [which] does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness.”* Ironically, Gideon did this very thing when he built an Ephod and took a Canaanite wife, both of which became a matter of stumbling to Israel and were direct violations of God’s commandments.

What is more, Gideon certainly did not heed the important principle behind Paul’s words in verses 6-10. *“Now there is great gain in godliness with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world, and we*

⁷ Block, *Judges, Ruth*, 300.

cannot take anything out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.” Gideon loved his power, and he used his position of authority to do pretty much his own thing—like create an Ephod, relocate the center of Israelite life to his own hometown, and attempt to establish a royal dynasty of sorts—even though he denied that is what he was doing. Just as Paul warns that riches can be a snare to us, Gideon’s power was a snare to him. In all of this, Gideon is an example to us, because he is just like us! He is the perfect example of how power corrupts and how the blessings of God can become a snare to us, if we forget the source and purpose of those gifts. Gideon is the perfect example to us of how not to take for granted God’s work in our lives, and use it for personal gain and advantage. I guess we won’t come up with a “What would Gideon do?” wrist-band any time soon.

No doubt, Gideon confessed the truth when he stated to his fellow Israelites, “the Lord will rule over you.” But then Gideon acted like a king. Like the rest of Israel’s judges, Gideon is both saint and sinner. Contrast this to our blessed savior, Jesus, whom Paul says humbly stood before Pilate (a Roman bureaucrat) and gave a good confession. Jesus could have summoned a legion of angels. He could have brought down the palace on Pilate’s head. But no, Jesus humbled himself to fulfill the commandments of God, and was willing to even go to the cross, where he saved us from our sins. It was this same Jesus who was the LORD who ruled over Israel in the days of Gideon. It was this same king who laid down his life for our sins and was then raised from the dead. Beloved, Jesus is that Lord who rules over you, and unlike Gideon, Jesus both made the good confession, and then fulfilled all righteousness through his perfect obedience.

Therefore, with Paul, let us all confess that [Jesus] *is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.*