

## Judges 8A

- Last week Gideon won an improbably victory against a much stronger army
  - His tactics were inspired despite having virtually no army
    - And the Lord ensured his victory would be complete
    - Because the Lord intended to push the Midianites out of the land once and for all
  - As we've observed Gideon responding to the Lord's call, we've taken note of Gideon's weaknesses
    - His fearfulness to follow the Lord
    - His unfamiliarity with hearing and obeying the word of the Lord
    - His need for repeated reinforcement to trust the Lord's faithfulness
  - In that way Gideon is a poster child for the declining state of Israel in these days of judges ruling
    - Men do what is right in their own eyes, which means they are self-centered, self-righteous and far from God
    - Men are unwilling and unable to unify in service to God
    - And ungodliness and sin is continually present among the people
    - Only the Lord's grace and mercy has saved Israel from complete destruction or apostasy
- Given that this is the backdrop of Gideon's story, then it won't surprise us to learn that Gideon's success on the battlefield didn't transfer to his walk with the Lord
  - In fact, Gideon and his countrymen are going to quickly return to their true nature
    - And we see that slide beginning even as the battle is still raging
    - Let's rejoin Gideon's army as they press the fight against the Midianites

[Judg. 7:24](#) Gideon sent messengers throughout all the hill country of Ephraim, saying, “Come down against Midian and take the waters before them, as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan.” So all the men of Ephraim were summoned and they took the waters as far as Beth-barah and the Jordan.

[Judg. 7:25](#) They captured the two leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb, and they killed Oreb at the rock of Oreb, and they killed Zeeb at the wine press of Zeeb, while they pursued Midian; and they brought the heads of Oreb and Zeeb to Gideon from across the Jordan.

[Judg. 8:1](#) Then the men of Ephraim said to him, “What is this thing you have done to us, not calling us when you went to fight against Midian?” And they contended with him vigorously.

- As we read last week, Gideon calls the men of Ephraim to join the battle against the fleeing Midianites
  - Ephraim was the tribe on the eastern-most border of Israel’s land
    - So they were in the best position to stop the retreating enemy and put an end to them
    - They responded to Gideon’s call and quickly dispatch with most of the army
    - Most importantly, they kill the two leaders of Midian
  - When the Ephraimites delivered the heads of the enemy to Gideon, they come with a complaint
    - In v.8:1, they ask Gideon why he hadn’t included them in the original call to arms to battle the Midianites
    - Back in chapter 7 we read about Gideon calling up an army in response to the Angel of the Lord’s instructions

[Judg. 6:34](#) So the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; and he blew a trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called together to follow him.

[Judg. 6:35](#) He sent messengers throughout Manasseh, and they also were called together to follow him; and he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they came up to meet them.

- Notice the tribes that Gideon called were the tribes geographically located around the Jezreel valley
- Absent from the call was the tribe of Ephraim

- And they are now upset that they weren't included in the glory of this victory
- At this time in Israel's history, tribal leadership had yet to fully emerge
  - Some tribes were certainly larger than others and some had more resources than others
    - But we don't see one or two tribes leading the rest as will happen in later generations
    - And since this was a time when men did what was right in their own eyes, we can expect that some tribes were beginning to set their sights on power
    - There is no centralized leader, and nature abhors a vacuum
  - Perhaps the most politically ambitious tribe was Ephraim
    - It was one of the larger tribes and it was located in the middle of the land rich with resources
    - It fancied itself a contender
    - So as Israel wins this great victory over a hated enemy, Ephraim felt slighted to have been left out
    - So they contend with Gideon to reassert their power against this rising leader
- Let's pause for a moment to put their concerns in perspective
  - First, Ephraim had every opportunity to fight against the Midianites for the past seven years
    - No one prevented them from rising up to defend Israel
    - Or from organizing an army to defend the land
    - Of course, the Lord wouldn't have allowed them to do so if they had tried
    - But the point is they are only complaining after someone else had already done the hard work without them
  - And speaking of the Lord, they are ignoring the obvious fact that this wasn't a victory won by a large army that they were excluded from joining

- On the contrary, it was an army that God chose, not Gideon
- God made it purposely tiny and absent strong warriors
- So they can't act as if they were slighted by Gideon
- Finally, they are contending with Gideon as if they were the victims of unfair treatment by their brothers, having been left out in the battle
  - But in reality, the Ephraimites were the ones who were trying to gain the upper hand on their brothers
  - In a sense, they were upset at having been beaten at their own game
  - They wanted to be the dominant tribe in Israel, and this set of circumstances puts a kink in their plans
- Now remember all this contention happens while the fight is still unfinished, so Gideon can little afford to waste time deal with a mutiny in his own army
  - So let's look at how Gideon deals with the situation

**Judg. 8:2** But he said to them, "What have I done now in comparison with you? Is not the gleaning of the grapes of Ephraim better than the vintage of Abiezer?"

**Judg. 8:3** "God has given the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeeb into your hands; and what was I able to do in comparison with you?" Then their anger toward him subsided when he said that.

- Gideon uses psychology to win them over
- Is not the harvest of Ephraim better than the harvest that Abiezar
- Abiezar is a common family name among the tribe of Manessah, which was one of the tribes that fought with Gideon in the Jezreel Valley
- So Gideon is asking who has obtained the better part of this victory, Gideon's army or Ephraim?
- And then Gideon points out that the Lord gave Ephraim the opportunity to take the lives if the two great leaders of Midian
  - So appealing to their pride, Gideon says didn't you get the better end of the deal?

- Instead of fighting the common soldiers in the valley, you fought the mighty leaders
- So consider yourselves as having been given the greater honor
- Clearly Gideon is appealing to their pride, using a little psychology to sooth their damaged egos
- And we're told it worked, and the Ephraimites go away satisfied
- At first, we might think, "Well done, Gideon."
  - After all, he diffused the situation and did so quickly
    - And while that's true, we need to notice how Gideon chose to respond
    - The request of these men was clearly wrong
    - They were thinking in a selfish, humanistic way about a great victory won by the Lord
  - Remember what the Lord said before he selected his final group of "warriors"

**Judg. 7:2** The LORD said to Gideon, "The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, for Israel would become boastful, saying, 'My own power has delivered me.'

- So the Lord selected 300 pitiful characters and sent them into battle without weapons
- And yet here we are with tribes arguing about who was more important in the fight
- Gideon does have the presence of mind to mention that the Lord delivered the leaders into the hands of Ephraim, but still he misses an opportunity here
  - Gideon should have turned the men's attention back to the Lord, as the Lord Himself was clearly intent on doing
  - Gideon could have told Ephraim you were not called to the battle because the Lord chose His army

- He could have called them to repent and seek the Lord's forgiveness for their pride and contention against the Lord's anointed
- As Moses told a group of Israelites who contended with his leadership in the desert

[Num. 16:28](#) Moses said, "By this you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these deeds; for this is not my doing.

[Num. 16:29](#) "If these men die the death of all men or if they suffer the fate of all men, then the LORD has not sent me.

[Num. 16:30](#) "But if the LORD brings about an entirely new thing and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that is theirs, and they descend alive into Sheol, then you will understand that these men have spurned the LORD."

[Num. 16:31](#) As he finished speaking all these words, the ground that was under them split open;

[Num. 16:32](#) and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah with their possessions.

- This is the way a man under the authority of God responds to those who contend with that leadership
  - And here we see that critical flaw of Gideon's walk emerge again
    - He doesn't live with a confidence in the Lord's power and might
    - He works to solve problems with human thinking and human logic
    - Psychology replaced scripture
    - Reliance on God's power was set aside and in its place, Gideon sought the power of his own wisdom and rhetoric
  - Meanwhile, the battle is still underway and the enemy isn't completely defeated as yet
    - So Gideon returns to the battle with a weary army
    - And amidst a contentious, ungodly culture seeking selfish needs above serving God

[Judg. 8:4](#) Then Gideon and the 300 men who were with him came to the Jordan and crossed over, weary yet pursuing.

[Judg. 8:5](#) He said to the men of Succoth, "Please give loaves of bread to the people who are following me, for they are weary, and I am pursuing Zebah and Zalmunna, the kings of Midian."

[Judg. 8:6](#) The leaders of Succoth said, "Are the hands of Zebah and Zalmunna already in your hands, that we should give bread to your army?"

[Judg. 8:7](#) Gideon said, "All right, when the LORD has given Zebah and Zalmunna into my hand, then I will thrash your bodies with the thorns of the wilderness and with briers."

[Judg. 8:8](#) He went up from there to Penuel and spoke similarly to them; and the men of Penuel answered him just as the men of Succoth had answered.

[Judg. 8:9](#) So he spoke also to the men of Penuel, saying, "When I return safely, I will tear down this tower."

- Notice that Gideon is still working with just the 300 men he started with
  - Remarkable, he hasn't lost a man even in the midst of battles and a long walk through the hill country
    - Now he has reached the Jordan river,
    - After such a long and fast movement, Gideon's men are exhausted
    - And in particular, they are weak from a lack of food on the March
  - So as they cross the Jordan they reach Succoth, which is a city on the East side of Jordan in the territory of Gad, and they ask the Gadites for support
    - Gideon's men were refused any bread at Succoth and again at another town called Penuel, which is another 5 miles east
    - The people living in these towns were Israelites
    - But they lived close to the tribal territory of the Midianites
    - So it's not terribly surprising these Jews wouldn't help Gideon's army
    - Helping Gideon meant to make enemies with the Midianites
  - The Israelites in these towns must have taken one look at Gideon's 300 weary men and concluded that there was no way Gideon was defeating the Midianites

- So they decided to cast their lots with the Midianites on the presumption that Gideon would be defeated in the end
- With his pride wounded, Gideon reacts in anger and making threats against the people in these towns
  - He says he will beat the elders of the city with thorns and briars
  - We're talking about a scourging that would have left them bloodied and their flesh torn
  - The thorns of Palestine are cruel and capable of tearing skins in deep gouges
  - And the people of Penuel would see their city defenses torn down which would leave the people vulnerable to attack
- Moments earlier, Gideon had confronted the rash and impulsive pride of the Ephraimites, and now he's displaying much the same weakness himself
  - His pride has got the better of him
    - His army is pitiful, since that's the way the Lord wanted it
    - And their success has come entirely because the Lord willed it
    - But now's he's acting as if his army is deserving of respect
    - And when the respect fails to materialize, he doesn't point the people to the Lord
    - He boasts of his ability to conquer and defeat and makes threats to prove his strength
  - Do you notice how the Lord is farther and farther from Gideon's mind and ways?
    - Once the Lord granted the victory, Gideon's perspective begins to change
    - From meek and insecure servant of God, he's now become a arrogant and boastful man
    - In both cases, he was forgetting the power and pre-eminence of God
    - In the first case, he couldn't muster confidence in the Lord's power to accomplish great things with him



- And now he can't see how he needs the Lord's help for anything
- Instead of threatening the people for bread, Gideon could have appealed to the Lord for that help
  - And when the people frustrated the needs of his army, Gideon could have looked to the Lord for retribution
  - Instead, Gideon is simply acting like the very enemy he's working to defeat
  - Given that Gideon is a judge in this time, you might think he would react with a little more mercy to his own people
  - After all, didn't the Lord react in grace and mercy to Gideon when he couldn't see the potential for the Lord to defeat a stronger army?
- Gideon's missteps are good examples of how anyone can operate outside the counsel of the Lord
  - Some fail in the beginning
    - Like Gideon, they lack confidence in the Lord's power to work great things through weakness
    - They make excuses, demand proof, hesitate in the face of clear direction
    - And when they do this, these brothers and sisters lose an opportunity to demonstrate faith and testify to the Lord's power
  - Other fail in the end
    - They start well, confident in the Lord and His faithfulness
    - They know His power and are content to work in it
    - But then success comes as God permits
    - And somewhere along the way, they stop seeing their successes as the product of God's grace
    - And they start assigning that success to themselves
  - In the first case, we lack the faith to see suppress fear and doubt
    - In the second case, we lack faith to suppress our pride and arrogance

- Gideon unfortunately has been guilty of both
- He lacked faith in the beginning and he lacks humility now

**Judg. 8:10** Now Zebah and Zalmunna were in Karkor, and their armies with them, about 15,000 men, all who were left of the entire army of the sons of the east; for the fallen were 120,000 swordsmen.

**Judg. 8:11** Gideon went up by the way of those who lived in tents on the east of Nobah and Jogbehah, and attacked the camp when the camp was unsuspecting.

**Judg. 8:12** When Zebah and Zalmunna fled, he pursued them and captured the two kings of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, and routed the whole army.

**Judg. 8:13** Then Gideon the son of Joash returned from the battle by the ascent of Heres.

**Judg. 8:14** And he captured a youth from Succoth and questioned him. Then the youth wrote down for him the princes of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men.

**Judg. 8:15** He came to the men of Succoth and said, "Behold Zebah and Zalmunna, concerning 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 weary?'"

**Judg. 8:16** He took the elders of the city, and thorns of the wilderness and briers, and he disciplined the men of Succoth with them.

**Judg. 8:17** He tore down the tower of Penuel and killed the men of the city.

- From this point, Gideon pursues the remaining 15,000 men of the Midianite army
  - He and the rest of Israel have already killed 120,000 men
    - So these final 15,000 will not be a problem as the Lord appoints
    - Once again Gideon uses sound tactical judgment when attacking a superior force
    - He performs a flanking maneuver to attack from the east rather than from the west as the Midianites expected
    - And he routs the rest of the Midianite army
  - Now he captured the two kings of Midian
    - Earlier Ephraim killed the two leaders or captains of the army
    - Now they've captured the kings of the people
    - Their names mean Victim and Protection Refused, which sound like descriptions of the cities that refused to help Gideon

- Perhaps Gideon changed their names to memorialize what he's planning to do to the cities that refused him aid
- As Gideon goes back, he takes a route called the Ascent of Heres, which is a road that runs nearby the two towns he visited earlier
  - As he approaches the town, he captures a boy from the town of Succoth
    - Gideon forces the youth to tell him the names of the elders of the town
    - Then Gideon appears outside the town with the two captured kings in chains
    - And then Gideon reminds the town what they said earlier, taunting Gideon
    - In effect, Gideon is pointing out that they doubted his ability to capture the Midianite kings
    - And so now he was proving he could do it
  - Once more, does this look like the actions of a man who recognizes that God won this battle?
    - It's helpful to remember that these Israelites didn't express a lack of confidence in God
    - They had no confidence in Gideon, and they shouldn't have had much confidence in Gideon as long as Gideon was pointing to his own power
    - Had Gideon pointed to God and demanded they have faith in God, then his indignation would have been justified
    - As it was, it was merely a wounded ego at work
  - So Gideon takes his revenge against both cities, including putting to death the men in Penuel, which is a severe penalty
    - Gideon is looking more and more like a man drunk on power and success
    - And certainly not like a man living in the grace and counsel of the Lord
    - Notice that the Lord is never heard to give Gideon any instructions concerning these cities

- Gideon appears to be going rogue here
- Next, Gideon takes the kings back into Canaan to Ophrah

**Judg. 8:18** Then he said to Zebah and Zalmunna, “What kind of men were they whom you killed at Tabor?” And they said, “They were like you, each one resembling the son of a king.”

**Judg. 8:19** He said, “They were my brothers, the sons of my mother. As the LORD lives, if only you had let them live, I would not kill you.”

**Judg. 8:20** So he said to Jether his firstborn, “Rise, kill them.” But the youth did not draw his sword, for he was afraid, because he was still a youth.

**Judg. 8:21** Then Zebah and Zalmunna said, “Rise up yourself, and fall on us; for as the man, so is his strength.” So Gideon arose and killed Zebah and Zalmunna, and took the crescent ornaments which were on their camels’ necks.

- Gideon interrogates the kings asking them about some Israelites they killed at Mt. Tabor
  - We don’t know more about that moment except what’s said here
  - From the kings’ testimony, it appears that the Midianites executed some of Gideon’s own brothers in Tabor at a time in the past
  - They describe the brothers as being like Gideon, as men resembling sons of a king
  - That phrase indicates that Gideon was a man with an imposing stature
  - Not small and weak but tall and statuesque
  - It would seem his physique contrasted with his inward weaknesses
- That’s a theme in the book of Judges and into 1 & 2 Samuel
  - The outward appearance of men is not a fair measure of their inward strength
  - Outward strength is a matter of the flesh
  - But inward strength is a matter of spiritual strength
  - As we move through the judges we’re going to see great physical strength at times

- Nut that outward strength will be coupled with spiritual weakness
- But now the strong Gideon sees an opportunity to exact revenge on the Midianite kings for their deaths
  - So Gideon orders his own son to kill these men to revenge the honor of his brothers
    - In that ancient east, it was considered great dishonor for a man to die at the hands of a woman or youth
    - Since these men had killed Gideon's brothers without provocation, Gideon was seeking to end their lives in a dishonorable way
    - But when he ordered his son to kill the men, his son was too afraid to do it, since he was a youth
    - The Hebrew word for youth can be translated child
  - Even allowing for cultural differences, Gideon's choice to involve his young child in this brutal act was an indication of his bloodlust and poor judgment
    - He's so absorbed in defending his dead family that he puts his living family in jeopardy
    - And when his young son recoils, Gideon has no choice but to act himself
  - After the kings are dead, Gideon takes a booty the two crescent shaped ornaments hanging around their camels' necks
    - These would have been valuable since they belonged to kings
    - So they make for reasonable compensation
    - But they also a premonition of things to come for Gideon
- Gideon is a judge over a freed Israel and he has won a decisive victory by the hand of God
  - But he's a man deceived by pride and drunk on power
    - And though he is still seeking to follow God, his spiritual immaturity is impeding his walk