

Judges 8B

- There's an old saying about power
 - Power corrupts and absolutely power corrupts absolutely
 - In some ways, Gideon is a good illustration of this adage
 - The complicated hero of our story began in a meek manner
 - He described himself as the least in his family
 - And he described his family as the least in his tribe
 - But then the Angel of the Lord appeared to Gideon and called him valiant warrior
 - And certainly Gideon was valiant
 - But we remember he found his courage only after the Lord had to persuade him in a variety of ways
 - Still, he entered into difficult circumstances and acted bravely
 - Then last week we found Gideon heady with his amazing victory
 - We might think Gideon would be quick to cite the Lord for his success
 - But instead, Gideon looked like a man drunk with power
 - He threatened his Jewish brothers and ultimately made them pay for defying his authority
 - Certainly, he should have held them accountable
 - But his manner and words are troubling to say the least
- And when we stopped last week, Gideon had killed the two leaders of Midian and taken their valuable medallions
 - These items were valuable and a minimum reparation for the wars of the Midianites
 - But it's also a bad omen for what will follow in Gideon's life and the people of Israel

- Gideon is about to create a stumbling block for the people

[Judg. 8:22](#) Then the men of Israel said to Gideon, "Rule over us, both you and your son, also your son's son, for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian."

[Judg. 8:23](#) But Gideon said to them, "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the LORD shall rule over you."

[Judg. 8:24](#) Yet Gideon said to them, "I would request of you, that each of you give me an earring from his spoil." (For they had gold earrings, because they were Ishmaelites.)

[Judg. 8:25](#) They said, "We will surely give them." So they spread out a garment, and every one of them threw an earring there from his spoil.

[Judg. 8:26](#) The weight of the gold earrings that he requested was 1,700 shekels of gold, besides the crescent ornaments and the pendants and the purple robes which were on the kings of Midian, and besides the neck bands that were on their camels' necks.

[Judg. 8:27](#) Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household.

[Judg. 8:28](#) So Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not lift up their heads anymore. And the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon.

- After the death of the kings, some of the leaders of Israel who had accompanied Gideon east of the Jordan make a proposal
 - They see Gideon as the clear leader of the nation at this point
 - He's led a daring defeat of their chief rival
 - He's the hero of the moment, and they're ready to begin a dynasty around Gideon
 - In v.22 these men ask Gideon to rule of them
 - But not only Gideon, but also his sons
 - The reference to Gideon's sons implies a dynasty, a monarchy in which the family would continue to rule from generation to generation
 - This is the first time in the history of Israel that any man has been offered the opportunity to be a king over Israel
 - This is a sentiment that's going to grow over time among the people
 - As they get father from the Lord in their hearts, they will seek for a human leader instead

- Notice in v.24 we're told they are Ishmaelites
 - But earlier in v.22 we're told they are the men of Israel
 - How can they be both?
 - The answer is these are Jews, probably of Gad or Reuben
 - They have been living east of the Jordan for some time as nomads
 - And over time, they began to associate themselves with the Midianites rather than with the people of Israel
 - They are called Ishmaelites because the term was a general reference to any nomad living east of the Jordan
- When Gideon rides into town and defeats the Midianite kings, these estranged Jews have no country any longer
 - So naturally, they express devotion to the new kid in town
 - They are trying to appease Gideon by pledging their support to him as their new king
 - So they are Jews, but they have been living in Midianite lands and in a nomadic lifestyle like Ishmaelites
 - And they are bargaining to rejoin Israel under Gideon's authority
- Now to his credit, Gideon refuses the offer from the outset
 - He recognizes that the Lord desires to rule His people without an earthly monarch
 - Or perhaps Gideon knew that the Lord would appoint His own man for that role in a time to come
 - In any case, Gideon isn't interested in the power trip
 - Now, had Gideon stopped at this point, he would have done very well
 - But instead he takes the additional step of asking for payment
 - In other words, he won't accept the position of king, but he's still willing to consider the riches that accompany power
 - He asks them to each give one of their earrings, which was the common feature of nomads

- The men are ready to grant Gideon his request
 - They were probably worried about what Gideon would do to them for having lived among the Midianites
 - They probably saw (or at least heard about) what Gideon did to the two Jewish cities that refused him aid
 - So they're ready to appease Gideon with a single earring apiece
- Gideon's haul was as much as 75 lbs of gold, which is about \$1.4M today
 - Additionally, Gideon took the ornaments of the kings and their camels
 - These additional pieces could have added an additional 20-30 lbs of gold
 - For a total value of somewhere around \$1.8M
 - Not bad for a day's work
- Taking so much wealth isn't a problem in itself, and in fact Gideon doesn't appear to be a person driven by the wealth
 - The real problem is what his interest in this wealth says about his heart
 - We remember Jesus' words:

[Matt. 6:24](#) "No one can serve **two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.**

- Gideon is trying to serve two masters: himself and God
- On the one hand, he refused to be made king saying that God alone rules
- On the other hand, he believes he is due reward for defeating the enemy
- Yet we know the Lord won this battle, not Gideon
- If you want an example of a better way, consider how Abraham responded under similar circumstances
 - Abraham took a small force of 318 and defeated the kings of the north who came up against Sodom and took his nephew Lot

- After he won a miraculous victory, Abraham was offered war booty just like Gideon
- But here's what Abraham said

[Gen. 14:21](#) The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give the people to me and take the goods for yourself."

[Gen. 14:22](#) Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth,

[Gen. 14:23](#) that I will not take a thread or a sandal thong or anything that is yours, for fear you would say, 'I have made Abram rich.'

- That's the response of a man serving only God and not himself
- But Gideon's heart is divided, and as proof he wasn't serving God consider what he does next with the wealth he obtained

[Judg. 8:27](#) Gideon made it into an ephod, and placed it in his city, Ophrah, and all Israel played the harlot with it there, so that it became a snare to Gideon and his household.

[Judg. 8:28](#) So Midian was subdued before the sons of Israel, and they did not lift up their heads anymore. And the land was undisturbed for forty years in the days of Gideon.

- In v.27 we're told Gideon takes it (i.e., all the gold he obtained) and uses it to make an ephod
 - An ephod is long, sleeveless robe woven from fine linen and gold thread worn only by the High Priest of Israel
 - On top of the ephod the priest wore a jeweled breastplate over the shoulders
 - Gideon makes such a garment using nearly 100 lbs of gold
 - So it must have been large and incredibly ornate
- The garment is then displayed in Gideon's hometown of Ophrah
 - We're not sure how Gideon displayed it
 - Since it's a garment, some suppose that Gideon may have worn it from time to time
 - In a sense, Gideon was setting up an alternative priesthood and an alternative seat of worship to compete with the tabernacle

- Remember, the priest of Israel was the intercessor for God's people within the sacrificial system
- And yet here's Gideon taking that role upon himself, or so it would seem
- It's it ironic that Gideon didn't want to be king, but he aspires to an equally impressive role as priest
- As a result of drawing the people away from the true tabernacle and true priesthood of Israel, Gideon is guilty of leading the people back into idolatry
 - The ephod becomes an idol to the people of Israel and to Gideon himself and to his family
 - It becomes a relic that ensnares Israel into false worship
 - And though Gideon continues as a judge in the land of Israel, he's a severely compromised leader
- Gideon becomes only the second Jew in Israel's short history to encourage the people to worship an image
 - The first was Aaron in the desert and now we have Gideon
 - In both cases, an idol takes the place of reliance on God's word
 - Superstition replaces a relationship with the Lord
 - We can clearly see a new cycle of sin in Judges starting even as the Lord is freeing His people from the previous cycle
 - Gideon's return to idolatry also reflects his personal cycle of sin
 - Remember, he began his service to God by removing his father's personal altar to Baal
 - Now he's setting up a new altar
 - This altar isn't to a foreign god; it's to Yahweh
 - The people of Israel are so spiritually weak they are easily drawn away into worshipping physical representations of God in violation of the second commandment and the rest of the Law

- As we've said from the beginning, Gideon is a servant of God but a deeply flawed one
 - His spiritual weakness has never been far from the surface in every decision he makes
 - In many ways Gideon is a classic study of the danger of spiritual weakness and immaturity in a child of God
 - He is a saint, saved by His faith, but he is handicapped by his lack of familiarity with God's word and reliance on His power
 - He hesitates to move forward when he hears the word of God
 - And after he does move and finds success, he lets it go to his head, forgetting how he obtained his success
 - These behaviors are like canaries in a coal mine in our spiritual life, early warning signs that tell us we aren't as spiritually mature as we think
 - Everyone hesitates to follow the Lord from time to time
 - But if you live in a perpetual state of hesitation or doubt in God's word power, then you in need of greater spiritual maturity
 - And everyone sins from time to time
 - But if you stray from godliness into fleshly living in consistent or dramatic ways, then your spiritual allegiance is divided
 - You can't serve two masters, regardless of what that other master may be in your life
 - You've been saved by God's grace so you can serve Him alone
 - Perhaps the Lord is exposing these traits so He can scrape them off through trials
 - But it requires we recognize our needs and pursue the sanctification we need and scripture demands
- Despite Gideon's apostasy, the Lord remained faithful to His purposes in freeing Israel
 - We're told in v.28 that the nation was delivered from Midian for 40 years
 - The people of Israel lived in peace, not needing to lift their heads any longer

- Lifting their heads refers to the way someone who is fearful constantly watches the horizon for an attacker
- The people no longer feared such an attack
- This is the final mention of a period of peace in the time of Judges
- As the Judges' cycle of apostasy and repentance continues to deteriorate, the opportunities for peace disappear as well
- There's a degree of irony here
 - At the start of Gideon's story, we see the people of Israel hiding in caves
 - And Gideon was so fearful, he was hiding in a wine press
 - He couldn't thresh grain out in the open for fear of discovery
 - Now the people are secure and without fear
 - And yet they are still engaged in idolatry, albeit a different form than Baal worship
- Gideon's immaturity had consequences for others around him of course

[Judg. 8:29](#) Then Jerubbaal the son of Joash went and lived in his own house.

[Judg. 8:30](#) Now Gideon had seventy sons who were his direct descendants, for he had many wives.

[Judg. 8:31](#) His concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he named him Abimelech.

[Judg. 8:32](#) And Gideon the son of Joash died at a ripe old age and was buried in the tomb of his father Joash, in Ophrah of the Abiezrites.

[Judg. 8:33](#) Then it came about, as soon as Gideon was dead, that the sons of Israel again played the harlot with the Baals, and made Baal-berith their god.

[Judg. 8:34](#) Thus the sons of Israel did not remember the LORD their God, who had delivered them from the hands of all their enemies on every side;

[Judg. 8:35](#) nor did they show kindness to the household of Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) in accord with all the good that he had done to Israel.

- With the cycle of Gideon's judgeship now at an end, the writer explains how Gideon's reign sowed the seeds for the next cycle of sin among the people
 - Gideon was powerful and wealthy as a result of his victory

- And that wealth continued to weigh on him as it does for Solomon later
- He has enough wealth to afford many wives and concubines as well
- These additional sexual relationships were all sinful and evidence of a divided heart
- He fathered many offspring, including 70 sons
- He had multiple households, including a stable of concubines in Shechem, which was a Canaanite city at this time
- Gideon may have declined to be king, but in effect he lived as one anyway
 - In fact, you would be hard pressed to make much of a distinction between Gideon and Solomon
 - Both had wealth in gold taken from the people
 - Both displayed their wealth in ostentatious ways
 - Both led Israel into idolatry
 - Both enjoyed the fruits of power, including many wives and slave wives
 - And both men pass ruling power to a son, whom Gideon gives a name that means “My father is King”
 - In virtually every way possible, Gideon became the king he claimed not to be
- Sin has consequences, and we see the consequences of Gideon’s poor choices in the next chapter
 - We’re introduced to the next judge in the timeline of Judges, Abimelech, Gideon’s son by a concubine
 - The concubine is a Canaanite woman from Shechem
 - And the product of this sinful relationship is a man who will bring treachery, war and bloodshed to Israel
 - Gideon’s reign ends in peace, but it leads to a period of distress

- Meanwhile, the story of Gideon himself ends with his death and the rapid return to sin in Israel
 - After Gideon's burial, the people quick return to worshipping Baal
 - Notice specifically they did not remember that it was the Lord Who delivered them from their enemies
 - They followed Gideon's example and took it a step further
 - They wandered away from the Living God and back to mute idols
 - And this transition shouldn't surprise us. and not merely because Israel has been repeating this cycle for some time
 - Anytime we become comfortable with a physical manifestation of God, true idolatry is just right around the corner
 - Don't be tempted by superstition
- Even Christians can fall into this wrong thinking, becoming victims of thinking that moves to a man-centered view of our relationship with God
 - Our walk with Christ becomes more superstition than Spirit-led
 - We carry crosses, we pause for moment before a painting of "Jesus" on the church wall
 - We display ornate, unread Bibles on cloth-covered tables
 - We recite obscure prayers hidden deep in the Old Testament assuming they contain special power
 - We bake "Ezekiel bread" or keep Jewish certain feasts
 - We speak in certain ways, sing certain hymns, and only the King James Version, please...
 - In every case, we're reducing God to something we can control and manipulate to our own desires
 - Icons replace insight and relics replace relationship
 - God is reduced in our eyes and our experience into experiences we can see and touch
 - And when God becomes small in our experience, He becomes distant in our hearts