

Immediate Context

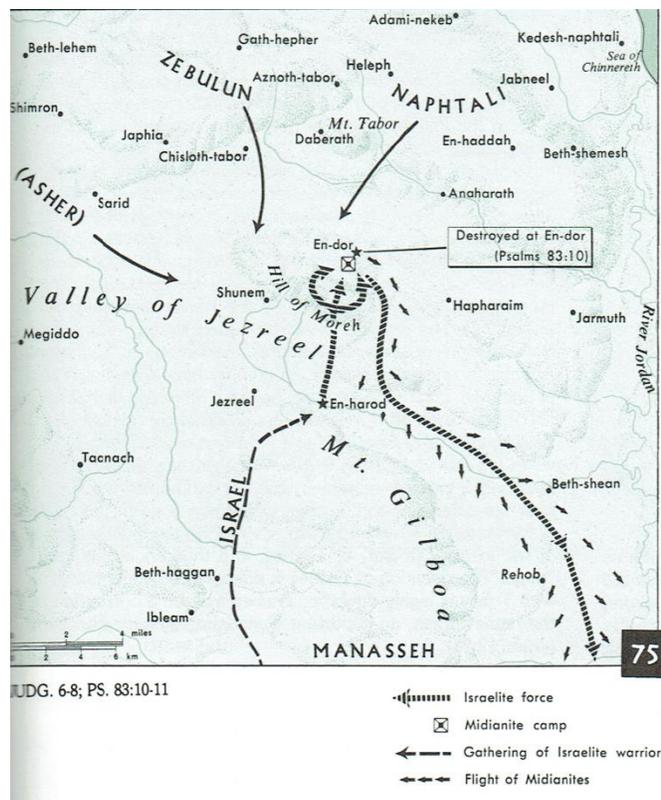
This chapter highlights why Judges is such a confusing and frustrating book to many people. The characters are used by God but are deeply flawed human beings. We want to paint them black or white, good or bad, but reality defies such a simple definition. In some ways, Judges is a necessary book because it highlights the way man responds to God's intervention in a sin-cursed world. No Christian can be simply defined as all good or all bad. When we lean upon the Lord, He can do amazing things through us... and then a few seconds later we can fall back into the flesh and be a tool of Satan.

Gideon has just routed the Midianites through the power of the Lord and the other local tribes have joined forces to help attack their army and capture the fords of the Jordan, to prevent all of them from escaping. It was after this victory that we pick up again with Gideon.

Judges 8:1-3 – A Battle of Egos

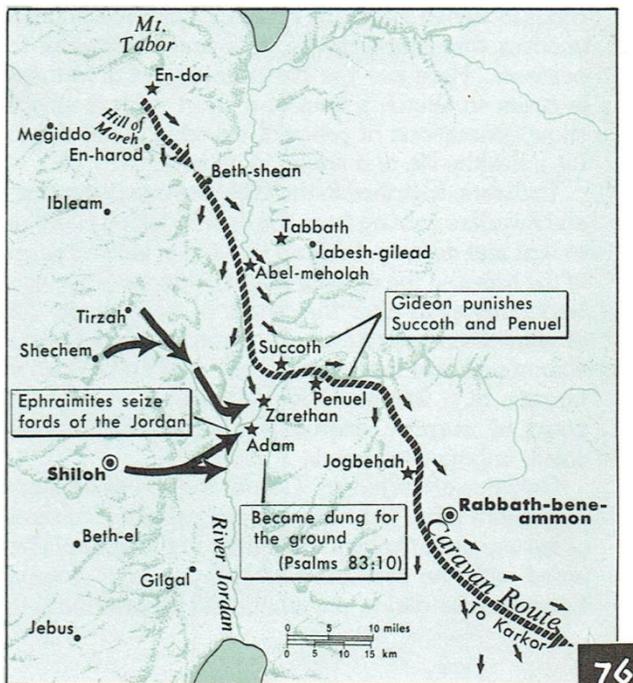
The tribe of Ephraim, previously unengaged by Gideon, was called upon to keep the Midianites from crossing the Jordan. Even though they were successful in their role, tempers flare because they were called to the battle after it had already begun.

- Who is the tribe of Ephraim (see *Genesis 47:14-20*)? What is their claim to fame (see *Numbers 13:8*)? The tribe of Ephraim was one of the two tribes descended from Joseph, but a very powerful and influential one overall. Joshua was from Ephraim and they played a major role in the conquest of Canaan. This won't be the last time we hear from them.
- Did Gideon neglect to call Ephraim to battle (see *Judges 6:34-35*)? If so, why? They were not called, largely because the Midianites weren't in their land at that time. Gideon called all of the directly adjoining tribes.
- Why was Ephraim upset? Pride had to be part of this, because the conflict was only resolved when their egos were fed was their anger abated. It is interesting that Gideon no longer appears to be empowered by the Lord to hold sway over Israel as he did when he issued the call to battle (*Judges 6:34-35*).
- How did Gideon resolve this conflict? He played to their egos and gave a soft answer (see *Proverbs 15:1*) and credited them with the capture and death of two great Midianite commanders. He also said that Elohim (not Yahweh) had rewarded them.



- Why was Gideon so quick to be conciliatory? He may have been trying to keep peace in Israel, or perhaps he had other things on his mind and he didn't have time for a fight. As we keep reading, we will see that he didn't delay long with Ephraim.
- What do we take away from this?
 - Gideon didn't really bring this into the context of what the Lord had done. He gave Ephraim glory rather than God. **By failing to bring the victory into the context of God's call, no one was really helped by this solution.**
 - Gideon showed some skill as a smooth politician. The result was short-term gain, but long-term loss.
 - Israel was fractured. Some tribes were characterized by fear, others by pride.

Judges 8:4-17 – Succoth & Penuel



Gideon and the original 300 men chosen by the Lord hurriedly leave the Ephraimites and continue their pursuit of the remaining Midianites. Apparently, some were able to cross the Jordan and continue on. The Trans-Jordan tribes of Gad, Reuben, and the half-tribe of Manasseh were on the other side. As Gideon and his men continue after Midian “weary yet pursuing”, they come across two Gadite cities, Succoth and Penuel, in which they have some interesting interactions.

- What was the response of Succoth and Penuel? Why did they respond this way? These tribes were separated from Gideon and those who were chasing the Midianites by the Jordan River and these tribes were even more exposed to the Midianites than Gideon's tribe. They perhaps felt the danger of playing for the

wrong team more keenly than the tribes on the west of Jordan. To support Gideon would mean a likely payback from the Midianites if Gideon lost.

- Was their response a sin? All of the factors they considered their response leave God out of the equation. **It was a sin to neglect to help their brother fighting against a common adversary.**
- What happened to the spiritual influence Gideon had over the Israelites? It appears to have waned. Ephraim resisted Gideon because of pride and now the Gadites were resisting him out of fear for their safety.
- What do you think about Gideon's initial response to the people of these cities? Was it appropriate? Does it remind you of anything? You could say that since these men were siding with Israel's enemies, they should be treated as their enemies. However, this is not how he treated Ephraim when they resisted him. Scourging the elders of Succoth with briars and thorns

is reminiscent of the scourging Jesus endured at the hands of the Roman soldiers. This would be both humiliating and excruciatingly painful. Threatening to tear down the tower of Penuel would also be a disgrace to that city. **Sin on the part of these people does not justify a sinful response from Gideon.**

- Where is the Lord in this second engagement, in comparison to what we read in *Judges 7*? The Lord was mentioned frequently in *Judges 7*, but hardly at all in this chapter. It indicates that the ongoing campaign has gone beyond the Lord's intention.
- Does this victory over the Midianites fit God's promise in *Judges 6:16*? No, the victory God promised was to be easy. This victory was hard fought, driving Gideon and his men to the point of exhaustion. This is another indication that Gideon has gone beyond the Lord's will.
- If the Lord wasn't with Gideon, why did he succeed? What looks like success is not always success. As one commentator on Judges said, **"Beware of the gifts of the Spirit without the fruit of the Spirit!"**¹ We will see as we continue to read that while Gideon appeared to be victorious and gain the respect of Israel for the rest of his life, a tree is known by its fruit. While Israel is rid of its tormentor, they do not seem to be significantly or permanently moved towards the Lord by all these events. **Sometimes the worst thing that can happen to us is to get what we want!**

Judges 8:18-21 – The Blood Feud

We now learn what is really behind this second military campaign. It wasn't enough for the Midianites to be expelled from Israel. Gideon had to go after them. While at first this may seem noble, we learn that his motives were anything but.

- What do we learn about the Midianites and Zebah and Zalmunna in particular in this passage? Not only did the Midianites torment the Israelites, they also killed some of them... specifically Gideon's brothers.
- What do we make of the response of Zebah and Zalmunna to Gideon? They appear to be complimentary to Gideon, but referred to him as a prince rather than a king. This could be a hidden insult.
- How does Gideon's response to Zebah and Zalmunna compare to his response to the citizens of Succoth and Penuel? He swore by God's name that he would not have killed them if they had spared his brothers. Yet, he killed Israelites for not helping him. He was not equitable.
- Why does Gideon call upon his son to kill these men? Perhaps he knew he would be revered in Israel and was trying to establish a dynastic kind of reign by allowing his oldest son to be the one who killed the Midianite kings.
- How do we interpret Zebah and Zalmunna's response to Gideon when his son would not kill them? It was a clear insult to Gideon... if you are a man, you do it.
- Why does Gideon take the ornaments from the necks of their camels? We start to see where Gideon's desire is taking him. He began this campaign to get revenge, and he finds that it doesn't satisfy him so he begins to seek after wealth and prestige.

¹ Wilcock, Michael, *The Message of Judges*. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press. 1992. Page 86.

- At this point, how would you trace the arc of Gideon's character throughout these three chapters? It is definitely an inverted parabola. He goes from a fearful and doubting man to a faithful and worshipful soldier, to a smooth-talking politician, to a vengeful and covetous man.

The Christian life can discourage those who expect stairs rather than a Stairmaster. If you stop climbing on the stairs, you stay where you are. If you stop climbing on the Stairmaster, you go back down. The Christian life requires continual reliance upon the Lord, seeking His face at all times. When we fail to do that, we don't retain the ground we have gained. We can easily go backwards! Gideon is a prime example of this... and it doesn't stop there.

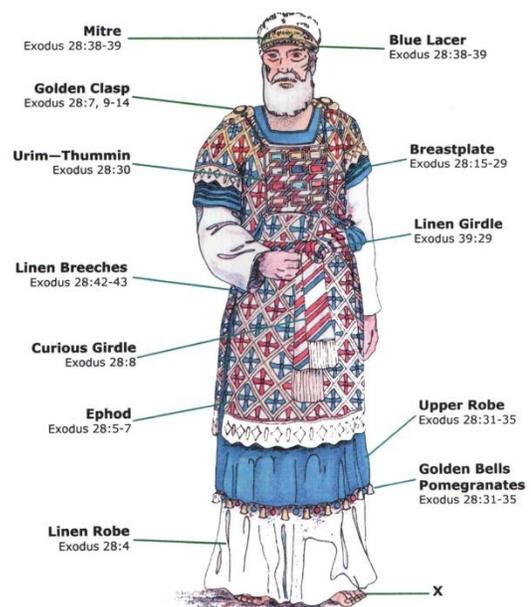
Judges 8:22-32 – An Offer Refused... Or Was It?

After Gideon defeated the Midianites, killing their kings, he was offered the opportunity to rule over Israel and establish a dynastic succession from his descendants.

- What is wrong with Israel's request? They were not recognizing the Lord as their deliverer, but rather Gideon.
- Why did Israel have this warped view of the victory? Perhaps Gideon's selfishly motivated blood feud with the Midianite kings, his "heroic" military exploits to capture and kill them, and his wrath toward Succoth and Penuel distracted them from what the Lord had done. **We obscure God's glory by seeking our own glory.**
- Evaluate Gideon's verbal response. Was it good? His words are good. He denies their request and points them toward the Lord as their divine ruler.
- Evaluate Gideon's non-verbal response. Was it good? His non-verbal response was not consistent with his words. We call this hypocrisy. He lived a life consistent with a ruler and seemed to hold sway over Israel in some manner until his death.

Gideon gathered 1,700 shekels (43 pounds) of gold from the earrings, in addition to the robes and jewelry of the kings and their camels. Gideon used these materials to fashion an ephod.

- What is an ephod? It is a garment worn by a priest over their clothes when they minister on special occasions. For Israel, the High Priest had a special ephod made according to God's prescription. It contained a golden breastplate with 12 stones representing the tribes of Israel and the Urim and Thumim, used to discern God's will. The illustration provides a description of the major components of the Jewish ephod.



- Why did Gideon make the ephod? One of the purposes of the ephod was to use the Urim and Thumim to seek direction from the Lord (see 1 Samuel 23:9-12). It is possible that because of the Lord speaking to him and using him as a deliverer in Israel, that he wanted to continue in the role of God's spokesman and fashioned a garment from the spoils of a war God won.
- How would this ephod become the object of Israel's harlotry and a trap to Gideon and his household? Seeking direction from the Lord apart from His ordained means (His Word, the prophets, and the true High Priest) would be a sin of unfaithfulness (harlotry) towards God. The attention of the people, listening to Gideon over the Lord, ensnared him spiritually and led towards a further descent of his character.

There appears to be a major disconnect between Gideon's words in verse 23 and his actions thereafter.

- Did Gideon establish himself as a type of ruler in Israel? What about his behavior could be interpreted as establishing himself as a ruler?
 - He requested a tribute from each man, indicating their submission to him as a leader.
 - He used the gold to build an ephod that became an object of idolatry that drew Israelites from all over the land and became a trap to his own family.
 - The Hebrew language of verse 29 indicates that Gideon ruled from his house.
 - He married many women and had 70 sons and an additional son from a concubine.
 - The name of the son from his concubine (Abimelech) can be interpreted as, "The king is my father". Note that the naming of this son is mentioned prominently and *Judges 9:1-2* implies that Gideon's sons ruled in his place after his death.
- If Gideon did become a sort of a king in Israel, how well did he reign according to God's standard? Read God's requirements of Israel's kings in *Deuteronomy 17:14-20*.
 - He was not chosen as a king by God.
 - He multiplied gold for himself.
 - He multiplied wives for himself.
 - He did not observe God's law.
 - He married a foreign woman (his concubine in Shechem, a Canaanite city). See *Deuteronomy 7:3-4*.

Even under a legitimate monarchy, there would never be a perfect ruler in Israel until Christ came. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Judges 8:33-35 – What We Leave Behind

It could be rightly said that our enduring impact on this world is more clearly realized after we are gone than while we are present. It appears that Gideon required Israel to worship the Lord during his life, even if it was twisted through the use of the competing ephod. However, the devotion was not sincere and Israel immediately went after the Canaanite gods after his death, even replacing Yahweh with "Baal-Berith" (Lord of the Covenant) as the official god of Israel. Apparently, their covenant with Yahweh wasn't sufficient and they made covenant with a false god.

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- Why did they depart from the Lord and go after Baal? They did not remember the Lord or the good that He had done for them. Is this our problem today? Have the cares and concerns of life caused you to forget the good the Lord has done for you? How does this affect you spiritually? **If we do not keep the blessings of the Lord before us, we will not be following Him for long.** Being thankful for His blessings is more than a proper response to His goodness, it is the primary way we prevent spiritual idolatry (see *Romans 1:21-23*).

In reflecting upon the aftermath of Gideon's battle, Israel offered to let Gideon rule and promised to follow him and his sons. Gideon turned down the offer verbally, but his life told a different story. Similarly, Israel did not stay true to their offer, and after Gideon's death they failed to show kindness to his household.